

## REBECCA MCCLANAHAN

### *Interview with Rebecca McClanahan*

In her new book, *In the Key of New York City: A Memoir in Essays*, slated for release on September 1, 2020, Rebecca McClanahan recounts the decade that she and her husband lived in New York City. Not only are these essays individually rich in texture, they are expertly woven together to create a vibrant and resonate tapestry about that experience. Her book's synopsis elaborates,

Rebecca McClanahan tracks the heartbeat of New York as only a stunned newcomer can: in overheard conversations on park benches, songs and cries sifted through apartment walls, and in encounters with street people dispensing unexpected wisdom. Having uprooted their settled lives in North Carolina to pursue a long-held dream of living in Manhattan, she and her husband struggle to find jobs, forge friendships, and create a home in a city of strangers. The 9/11 attacks and a serious cancer surgery complicate their story, merging the public with the private, the present with the past, to shape a journey richer than either could have imagined.

*Talking River Review* faculty advisor Jennifer Anderson recently had the opportunity to ask McClanahan some questions about her book, her writing process, and how to find truth as a writer.

The following interview was conducted by email.

**Jennifer Anderson:** The book opens with “Signs and Wonders,” an essay in which you reflect upon your move to New York City and note, “Our lives are sublets anyway, and too quickly gone at that” (15). Why did you choose to begin with this particular piece? In what way does it introduce readers to some of the ideas that course throughout the book?

**Rebecca McClanahan:** One of my earliest readers called this essay a “lyric panorama,” noting the musical threads that run through it. Her comment reinforced my instinct to place it at the beginning, since music (in various forms) plays an important part in the book. And opening the book in Central Park is a way to introduce the reader to the inimitable, mostly nameless characters who reappear, in different guises, in subsequent essays. The line you quote—about our lives being sublets—suggests another recurring element, the ephemeral nature of our lives, the knowledge that we cannot own our world. We merely sublet the world for a while and then, when our lease is up, release it.

**JA:** One of the central themes of the book revolves around the idea of seeking connection. Can you talk more about this?

**RM:** In the past few years I've begun to realize that almost all my writing, in every genre and over nearly four decades, comes down to this question: Where do I leave off and others begin? It seems I've always been obsessed with the myriad ways in which lives connect and with the constant push and pull of relationships. This obsession plays itself out in numerous ways. In my nonfiction book *The Tribal Knot*, the relationships were ancestral. In my poetry and in *In the Key of New York City*, those relationships are sometimes transitory and anonymous, at other times long term and intimate. Most writers, I believe, continue to work and rework their elemental obsessions throughout most of their writing lives. My obsession just happens to be human connection.

**JA:** Even though the book comprises a series of essays, many which have been previously published in literary journals, it reads like a cohesive work, a memoir. What was your process in putting together the book? Did you have a memoir in mind when you began, or did that come later?

**RM:** Thank you, Jennifer. I'm glad that you feel the essays create a whole. That was my intent as I began to shape the book—once I felt that it could become a book, I mean. Each of the essays was written as a stand-alone piece, and since they were written over a long span of time—more than a decade—they represent different stages of my relationship with the New York years. As I mention in the Author Note, life interrupts the memoir and the memoir interrupts the life. So the process of shaping the book was at times a violent process, as it often is when I am taking independent essays and revising them to serve the larger book. (In my suite of essays, *The Riddle Song and Other Rememberings*, I went through a similar process.) For this new book, I interrogated every essay, asking it why it belonged and how it could be reshaped to deserve its place in the book. That meant, in some cases, cutting whole sections out of previously published essays, writing new sections, and even, at one point, cutting apart a segmented essay and sprinkling the segments into various parts of the book. I love revising and reshaping, I always have. It's an exciting opportunity to see the work with new eyes.

**JA:** The book contains both flash pieces as well as longer ones. For instance, “Eighth Avenue Moment” is just half a page long; it is sandwiched between two longer essays about 9/11. Can you talk about the connections between these short and long pieces, and how small moments can have as just as much impact as larger ones?

**RM:** Yes, I agree that sometimes it is the small moments that break our hearts. “Eighth Avenue Moment” (which was first published as a segment in a long essay) represents one of those moments. The street person I met on the street, holding the

dying pigeon out to me, was connecting on a deep level. I ended up putting that brief piece between the two long 9/11 essays because it was such a small moment—of caring, dying, grief. I imagined it as the chance for the reader to bring her own experience of 9/11 to the page. In the book, I don't address the attacks directly. The first 9/11 essay deals with the days leading up to the attacks and the second one deals with its aftermath. "Eighth Avenue Moment," coming between the two, is what I see as a quiet, intimate space, a breathing space for the reader. All grief—even grief arising from a national horror like 9/11—is finally quite personal. I always trust the reader to supply her own emotion and to complete the transaction that we've begun together on the page.

**JA:** In "Present Tense" you contemplate the notion of truth: "Getting at the truth," we say, but why say it that way if truth is so obvious, so easy to uncover? Layer upon layer has grown over it. This has taken years. What is truth hiding from? And why is it so difficult to find its soft center? Sometimes to get at the truth, you must poke it with something sharp—a stick, a memory—until the stories spill out, each with its own lexicon. (91)

How, as writers, do we "get at the truth?"

**RM:** Gosh, Jennifer, now I'm wondering myself. Maybe we really can't ever get at the truth. Maybe it must get to us. (Your skill as a writer is evident in that great question!) Maybe, as I was saying in regards to the "Eighth Avenue Moment" question, it's the small things that surprise us, that in some ways ambush us. In "Present Tense," that small thing was the hand towel the narrator accidentally discovered while she was looking for something else, a small thing that called up an unwelcome memory, a truth that she had folded away. (I call myself narrator even though of course I was the one who found the towel! Such are the contortions memoirists find themselves in when discussing their work.)

**JA:** In what ways does your work as a poet inform your creative nonfiction in this book?

**RM:** One of my hobbies is memorizing poems, and I open almost every workshop—in nonfiction as well as fiction or poetry—by reciting a poem I admire. Especially in nonfiction workshops, I feel it is important to be reminded that literary nonfiction, including memoir, aspires to the condition of art. We aren't simply transcribing experience. We are allowing language to shape the soundtrack of that experience. The sounds of individual words, the rhythm of sentences, the variation in pitch and pace—these elements are as important to the memoirist's text as the events that happened.

**JA:** Since much of the book occurs prior to the emergence of social media and smart devices, I'm wondering what your thoughts are on these technologies and how they affect how we live and how we connect with others.

**RM:** Oh my, I'm afraid I am not a big fan of so-called smart devices. I believe that people are pretty darned smart devices and I enjoy talking to them face to face rather than through a little screen, though of course sometimes that connection is better than nothing. One of the reasons I wanted to move to New York in the first place was so I could encounter a variety of people on the sidewalk, hear the broth of languages and sometimes, yes, even make eye contact! Of course often it drove me crazy—the noise, the crowds, the cacophony—but at least it felt more real, more connected, than the experience of driving on suburban streets, protected in my bubble of privacy. I'm glad that our years in New York were pre-cell phone, for the most part, and pre-social media. Social media, for me, happened on park benches, in theaters, in Grand Central, in the public library, on the subway, and on the street.

**JA:** Recently, there has been scrutiny of the Giuliani/Bloomberg eras of New York City. Is there a political aspect to your book?

**RM:** Perhaps there is, in small moments sprinkled throughout the book—for instance, in the post 9/11 park scene where I witnessed the Muslim woman running toward a child who was in trouble. Or in the encounter on the subway involving the two sleeping children. Or when I imagined what New York—or, indeed, our nation—might look like if we all, horror of horrors, went “back where we came from.” I am a politically active citizen; I attend rallies, march in protests, and write letters to public officials and politicians. But in my literary nonfiction and my poetry, my political stances take other forms. Perhaps the stories, the images, the human encounters that I struggle to bring to the page could be seen as political. That is up to my readers to decide. Thank you, Jennifer, for the opportunity to think about these issues.