

A Conversation with Rebecca McClanahan

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with Nancy Zafris



NZ: You're one of the few writers who can write well in all genres: poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction (which I know you prefer to call literary nonfiction).

RM: Thank you.

NZ: Do you think you write equally well in each genre – or, if that is too direct a question, do you have a favorite genre?

RM: It's not too direct a question, not at all. It's just one that I am incapable of answering. Long ago I stopped focusing on how well I'm writing or, more specifically, how my writing would be perceived by others—readers, editors, critics. First off, I tend to agree with Marvin Bell's notion that a writer should try to "write badly"; he illuminates this concept in "Three Propositions: Hooey, Dewey, and Loony," one of my favorite essays about writing. Second, it takes all my energies to focus on the task at hand—the writing itself and all it requires. If I also had to stop and think, "Am I a better poet than a fiction writer? A better

essayist than a poet?" I'd never get anything done.

I don't have a genre that is my all-time favorite; my favorite varies depending on what I'm most drawn to write at any particular time. Usually ideas work themselves into essays, language play is the beginning of poems, and character- or plot-driven scenarios end up as fiction. But not always. One thing I do know: whatever genre I'm working in is definitely not my favorite at the moment I am writing. Mostly, writing is hard work even when it engenders joy. So, for instance, after spending three months revising a long, braided essay, I'm thinking, wow, the haiku form looks mighty good to me right now. Or when I'm mired in a formal poetic structure, I start longing for a wild and crazy dramatic monologue spoken by some made-up character. It's the "grass is greener" syndrome, I guess.

Your question interests me a great deal, partly because I feel that even though we encourage students—well, at least I encourage my students—to cross genres, such crossing may not always be the best move in the eyes of some literary communities. For the most part, we're a very specialized bunch. The label "man of letters" or "woman of letters" hardly exists anymore, at least not in MFA circles or in most undergraduate programs or writing conferences, for that matter. My personal experience has been that if you write and publish in more than one genre, especially equally, you might not be fully trusted in any particular camp. If you are a poet who writes essays—aside from academic or critical essays about poetry—certain poets might consider you suspect. Ditto, an essayist who writes poems. Crossing genres, or, worse, never having declared your country of origin in the first place, is seen as suspect by some readers, critics, and fellow writers.

And on a practical basis, if you teach in a writing program, your chairperson or director may not know where to place you, how to describe you, or how to count (or discount) your publications toward promotion or tenure. You may even have trouble deciding which blank to check on applications for grants, fellowships and membership into writers' organizations.

But most disconcerting of all, you may find that you are compared not only to other writers, but—horror of horrors—to yourself. If you write in only one genre, you may be compared to other writers in that genre, or even to your earlier writer-selves, but at least your poems will not be competing against your essays, or vice versa. You won't have to hear, as multi-genre writers often hear (or overhear) "Sure, she's a great critic. But I prefer her novels." Or "His poems are wonderful. He should stick to them and quit writing those essays." Or, "She finally found her genre. All those poems were just warm-ups for the novel." Still, it's a good problem to have, if you have to have a problem. I love writing in multiple genres. It's like cross-training. That's the way I think of it: a way not only to eliminate boredom with the normal routine but also to increase performance in our predominant sport (well, assuming we have a predominant sport) by training in other sports. Genre-crossing exercises our writing muscles in different ways.

NZ: Tell me a little bit about the book that is just coming out.

RM: [Deep Light: New and Selected Poems](#) is, as the title suggests, a book of poems drawn not only from previously published books (I've published four other books of poetry) but also from my more recent body of work. I don't consider it a collection in the way you usually think of that word: a gathering of like objects. I worked hard to shape it as a book, not a collection. All of the poems—there are 87 in all—were chosen not only because I still claim them as my own but also because they are all, in some way, part of what Stanley Kunitz calls a "constellation of images." In this particular book, that constellation of images forms an alternating dance of light and shade. Or so I imagine the structure. The poems are not organized chronologically or according to the book in which they appeared but rather in how they talk to the other poems, especially the poems that "touch" them, that are ordered so that they are in direct contact. My goal was to create a book that could be read almost as one continuous poem, the end line of one poem leading into the first line of the next. Well, of course I failed to achieve this feeling of a single utterance, for the making of a book is a human endeavor and there are always those wild sections that just won't cooperate.

And, as it turns out, these are some of my favorite sections of the book. Go figure.

NZ: How do you think creative nonfiction and fiction have influenced your poetry? Is your poetry more narrative, for example?

RM: I'm never sure how to chart influences, except in hindsight. But I definitely feel that my prose has influenced my poetry and vice versa, though perhaps not in the ways you might imagine. From the beginning, I was—by interest and nature, perhaps—a narrative poet. My poems told stories. Almost always. But I find that as time goes on, the more I write essays and stories, the less I tend to tell stories in my poems. More and more, my poems are doing almost everything except tell stories. Maybe it's that cross-training concept working again, I don't know. I do know that the writing of fiction—the shaping of character- or plot-driven stories, stories with a recognizable arc—has greatly affected the storytelling quality of many of my essays. At one point, partly because I was still searching for the right structure for the long, segmented essay “The Riddle Song: A Twelve-Part Lullaby” (which appeared in *The Kenyon Review* and later became the central essay in [The Riddle Song and Other Rememberings](#)) and partly as a way to revise in the most violent way I could (sometimes violence is necessary in the revision stage) I rewrote the essay as a novel. Not a novella, mind you. A full-length novel. Crazy thing to do with one's time, right? But it helped so much. In writing the novel—a very flawed novel, I might add—I learned how to manage the narrative timeline, how to keep characters present even when they weren't onstage, and how to shape the emotional arc of the essay. Then I could return to the essay draft and re-see it. Revision by crossing-the-genre is one of the most helpful things I discovered along the way.

NZ: You teach the creative nonfiction class in the Kenyon Review Summer Writer's Workshop. A lot of your participants must arrive either with a memoir or a memoir in mind. Why is that not as simple as it sounds? How do you help them with either expanding or structuring their work, or finding their voice or theme?

RM: Memoir (be it essay-length or book-length) is the most difficult genre I've ever worked in, probably because it requires the most destruction, particularly in the early stages of the draft. One has to destroy—or at least deconstruct—what happened before one can make a text out of that happening. Steven Harvey says it better in his essay “The Art of Self” : “Only the text, shed of ourselves and hammered into shape, can redeem us. The enemy of the text, then, is what happened....What happened may matter to us, but it is lost on us if we do not transform it into art.”

This transforming part is where memoirists, especially beginning memoirists, run into problems. Lately I've been thinking of a structure that might be helpful to beginning memoirists, or to any of us attempting to make a shapely text, a meaningful text, out of what life hands us in the form of raw material. At this point, I've got it down to a four-part structure: memory, dismember, remember, memoir. So, to get from memory to memoir, you have to go through dismembering and remembering. Let's say you have a memory—of a place, a time, a character, an event—that you want to shape into a memoir. Once you have that memory, the first thing you need to do is to dismember it. Any way you can. Force yourself to see it in another way—from a different viewpoint, for instance, or with a different time frame, or in a different voice or rhythm, or by smacking it up against something that seems totally opposed to it. After you've done that, live with the dismembered draft for a while until you can see how it could be remembered. That's “re-membered,” as in “put the broken pieces back, the broken members.” Once you are able to do that, you will have made something new out of your experience. Then, maybe, you have the beginnings of the memoir.

NZ: What kind of contemporary cultural signposts do you pay attention to? Tattoos, for example? I could see you doing a whole study of them. (Readers might like to check out your book marginalia essay “Book Marks,” which was first published in [The Southern Review](#), then chosen for Best American Essays 2001 and also reprinted in The Best American Essays College Edition)

RM: I'm always noticing the small things around me—I hadn't thought of these

things as cultural signposts. It's a form of collecting, I suppose, of gathering up the little pieces and then wondering how they all might fit together in a meaningful context. "Book Marks" includes references to a collection of actual bookmarks that my friend Carolyn, a librarian, had retrieved from library books. I also published an essay called "Children Writing Grief" that uses the texts of children's poems as a way of looking at their grief processes. And lately I've been taking notes about the inscriptions on the park bench plaques in Central Park. There are thousands of them, so there's no way I'll get to all of them. But several of them, if taken together, might tell a story or suggest an underlying idea about how we memorialize spaces. I hadn't thought about tattoos. Gee, thanks a lot, Nancy. One more thing for me to lie awake nights thinking about. Why don't you write the tattoo essay so that I don't have to?

NZ: Do you like music? Do you write to music?

RM: I love music. Music and dancing. I'd rather sing or dance than do almost anything else. Music was my first major, my first love, and some form of music has always been part of my life. But I never write to music, never. It takes all my concentration to hear the music of the poem or the essay or the story. If I were listening to another rhythm or instrument or voice, the static would be too much for me. Music has never been a form of background noise for me: it takes all my attention, if it's good music. If it's not good, I turn it off.

NZ: I attended your panel at AWP that was titled: "Joy: The Last Taboo?" (FULL TITLE was JOY: THE LAST TABOO IN CREATIVE NONFICTION) One of the points the panel made was that editors seem to prefer very heavy pieces about damaged lives. You said something very interesting: that whenever someone in a creative writing class writes a confessional piece about something horrible, that writer is commended for being "brave." You said you'd never heard anyone write about love or joy and be commended for "bravery." Could you explain this a bit?

RM: Yes, this is something that I've always noticed in writing workshops, this tendency to applaud the "courage" it takes for a writer to expose the darkest parts of his life or the life of someone he knows. Now I can think of instances in

which it does require courage to tell the truth, however dark that truth might be. But, for the most part, I don't necessarily feel it takes courage to expose the darkness. Not emotional courage, and definitely not intellectual courage. After all, darkness is all around us. It's not hard to find. Finding the crack of light in the darkness is harder, I think. Both parts must be present—the dark and the light—if one is trying to tell the truth about one's existence. I've had readers tell me how "brave" I am for having written about difficulties in my life: separation and divorce, extramarital affairs, mental illness, my father's experience as a fighter pilot, my own cancer diagnosis and surgery. In truth, the hardest things I've ever said—on the page or face-to-face—are "I love you" and "Thank you" and "I'm grateful." To say them straightforwardly, without wit or sarcasm. For the writer, I think, darkness is almost never as hard to express as light. And you're right that many publishers and editors are only interested in the darkest subject matter. If that's the case, maybe it actually takes more courage—professional courage, anyway—to write from an attitude of joy or light.