

*Erin Billing*

## **Navigating the Alternative Landscape: An Interview with Patricia Traxler**

*EB - You published poetry first, and then more recently published Blood, a novel which received a lot of critical attention. What led you to begin writing and publishing fiction? What is the difference in the approach you take toward writing these two genres?*

PT - Well, actually, I've always written both poetry and fiction, but many people didn't realize that, because until *Blood*, all my published books were poetry collections. When the novel came out, people seemed to think I'd "switched," but the truth is I was just always more comfortable sending out my poems for publication than my stories. My relative comfort with the idea of publishing poetry was probably due to the fact that my Irish grandmother, who lived with our family during my childhood, was a published poet whose work appeared in both Irish and American periodicals. Around our house on a daily basis, I saw Gran working on her poems in a green clothbound ledger, and I often heard her reciting "Thanatopsis" or "To a Skylark" while she did household chores, so poetry just seemed a part of ordinary life to me. I didn't know anyone who wrote fiction, though, and I was shy about sending out my stories. More than shy—terrified. Eventually, I found a way around that by entering fiction competitions in which the identity of the entrants was not known until after the judges had made their decision. I won some awards, and that gave me more confidence, which helped a bit.

I wrote one novel before *Blood*—that "cutting the teeth" novel everyone seems to need to write first. Then in 1999 I wrote *Blood*, and things began happening with a kind of alarming speed: *Blood* was taken on by a terrific literary agent who quickly sold it in the US, and then a number of foreign publishers bought it (it's currently out in the UK, and also in Swedish and Spanish translations; a German translation is scheduled for later this year). The sale of *Blood* gave me my first chance to stay home and write without holding down a "day job," and as a result, I've had the time to finish a new novel, *The Hunger Season*. Now I'm putting together a book of short stories and working on my fourth poetry collection. I'm a writing maniac! It's bliss.

As for differences of approach between poetry and fiction writing, I think any answer to that question would have to begin with provenance, because poetry and fiction seem to spring from two very different sources within the writer--separate wells of creative thought. It makes sense, then, that the processes would be different, too. Eugenio Montale wrote that in any work of art, there must be a "dominating idea" that drives the process. Whether you're writing poetry or fiction this is equally true, but I've found that my life is easier when I have a poem in the making than it is when I have a novel or short story in process. It's all about immersion: I mean, of course you become obsessed with a poem you're working on--you try out its phrases and

images in your head as you go through your day and you can feel its cadences in your step--but when you're writing a novel or a short story, you've created an alternative landscape that becomes real to you, and a sort of "total immersion mode" kicks in if the work is going well. Sometimes you even find yourself a bit punchy and disoriented when you step outside that fictive landscape to negotiate your way through the so-called "real world" after days of working on a story. I think that's especially true with a novel's sustained narrative. I write seven nights a week when I'm working on a novel if it's really cooking--usually from 9 PM until 4 or 5 AM. At the tail end of the process, work sessions can go round the clock. I realize that's nutty, stupid, foolhardy, rough on your body and brain, not to mention your relationships, but it just happens. You don't feel the movement of time, you often forget to eat (or pee) until that physical need asserts itself in the form of real discomfort or pain! All of that--for me anyway--is why starting a novel is a lot like falling in love: When you feel yourself heading into a new novel or seduced by an idea for one, you know it's going to take over your life for the foreseeable future, and simultaneously you want to run away and hide from it, *and* you want to leap "into bed" with it and let it swallow you up. It's awful, and it's sublime. It's what we all dread, *and* what we pray for.

*EB - In Blood, you visit some of the themes of what leads an artist to create, and the role of distance when attempting to write about "violent" or "chaotic" themes. You write, "Anyone who believes that an artist's best work springs directly from the belly of grief and trauma is just romanticizing the place of pain in art's creation....I've come to feel that the most lasting and affecting art probably grows out of constancy and order rather than out of violent emotions, and that violence should be saved for the work itself...time must pass after passion or emotional chaos before the experience becomes truly useful to art or informative to life because only time can give experience the necessary context and meaning." This is clearly Norrie's voice saying these things, but would you say that these are also your own conclusions concerning these themes? What led you to visit these themes in your writing? It seems that, historically, the poet and the artist have been seen, perhaps wrongly, as the kind of people who must live chaotic, unpredictable lives, then depict them for the rest of the world. What are your thoughts regarding this assumption of the poet's/ artist's life and work?*

PT – I think that's a great question. When I was younger, I guess I bought into the idea that a crazy, painful life can make for richer art—or anyway, I comforted myself with the thought that something good might come out of the chaos and struggle I seemed to be encountering in my own life and times. So many kinds of pain or chaos, observed or experienced, have made their way into my writing, as they do anyone's--that's what it is to be alive in the world as a writer. No one can avoid chaos, pain, or conflict, but there's a crucial difference between *using* these elements to inform your writing and *needing* them in your life in order to be a writer! Eventually, I decided that Flaubert was probably right when he admonished writers to "Be quiet and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work." That's what I aim for, what I aspire to. I'm not saying I avoid passion, joy, or necessary confrontation—only that I function very consciously from a secure base, within a quiet and solitary

sort of work regimen—and life—that will allow all hell to break loose on the page if I'm fortunate enough to find the inspiration for it! It's like controlled burning, I think—those crop fires we see around Kansas in late summer. I'm well aware that my Kansas life probably seems quiet, boring, and even *small* to some people, but it's what works for me. If it's not pompous to give advice, then here's what I'd tell any young writer today: Write regularly—find out what sort of routine and setting works best for you, and then stay with it, even when others think it's crazy. Ignore them! Only you can live your life, and no one else can understand how it feels from the inside.

There's another part of your question that particularly interests me as a novelist: The issue of an artist using his/her own life within a work of fiction. I think it's a given that every writer brings actual emotional experience, personal philosophies, and real locales into a work of fiction, but I like to invent my characters and the specific circumstances of the plot. I enjoy the challenge of transmuting real-life emotional experience into a realm of fictional particulars. When *Blood* came out, maybe because it's written in the first person, some people assumed it was about me, and they spoke of the story as if it were my diary. One woman said, "I had no idea your father was a Jewish psychiatrist!" Norrie, *Blood's* protagonist, is a never-married, childless woman; the only daughter of a Jewish psychiatrist and a retired home ec teacher. I'm one of eight children of a Methodist auto-body repairman and an oil-painting, Shakespeare-reading, Irish-Catholic high school dropout! I've been divorced and remarried, and I have two children. Norrie has had many casual love affairs; I haven't. Still, I won't deny that, like the protagonist in *Blood*, I once fell in love with someone who was married, and I know how that feels; I know the moral, ethical, and personal conflicts that arise from it. In writing *Blood*, I was interested in making a story that depicted such a struggle—an artist wrestling with creative, erotic/romantic, and spiritual conflicts and desires. Personally, I don't admire fictional works that are strict portrayals of real-life characters and events. I find them lacking in imaginative energy.

*EB - Both your poetry and your fiction deal with themes of love and romantic relationships, often gone awry. How does your approach toward writing about these things in particular differ from one genre to the next?*

PT – Well, I wouldn't put it exactly that way. If I had to isolate dominant themes in my writing, I'd say my work deals with three particular threads of human desire, and *Blood* portrays all three: artistic desire, romantic or erotic desire, and spiritual desire. I was raised a Catholic, and was taught in childhood (or so it seemed to me) that nearly everything a person really longed for was, under a variety of circumstances, a sin. My childhood religious training made me very curious about desire, about all sorts of passion, and although I'm no longer an observant Catholic, that has become a constant theme in my work—the struggle with desire in opposition to one's social, religious, or moral frame of reference. It's certainly not a unique theme, but I find it compelling and it makes its way into a lot of my work. The difference between those thematic representations in my poetry and my fiction can be explained according to

the differences between the two forms: in poetry, everything is codified in images, lineation, language, and form; in fiction, such themes are incarnate, embodied in characters who walk and talk their way through a narrative landscape. Each form is interesting to me in its own way, and I couldn't bear to live without one or the other.

*EB - The character of Norrie in Blood is a visual artist, a painter, but many of her realizations concerning her own approach to art seem very applicable to writing as well. What do you see as the similarities and differences in working as a visual artist vs. writing?*

PT – I should preface my answer with the proviso that although I've always been a student of visual art—especially painting—and though it's true I sometimes paint, and have some facility for drawing, I'm *not* a visual artist myself; just a dabbler. But I believe artistic expression is similar for artists of all persuasions, in the sense that certain elements exist within the creative process itself, regardless of the discipline: Inspiration (when we're lucky); that “dominating idea” Montale spoke of; immersion and often obsession; a crafting of the chaotic or passionate impulse, the esoteric or abstruse idea, into a coherent, persuasive, and engaging form; and of course, behind everything and driving it, *desire*—the desire to *make*, and to communicate.

*EB - Many of your poems deal with the speechlessness of women, of their inability to communicate what might be considered “secret” things. I'm thinking particularly of “Night Bloom,” and “The Widow's Words.” As a writer, you certainly have a voice that many women may not feel that they have? How does that affect your choice of subject matter? Do you feel you have an obligation to be a voice for others? Does it ever feel overwhelming?*

PT – I'm very interested in this idea of muteness, which I've observed in both men and women. I've addressed it mostly from a female point of view because I'm female, but I do believe men in our culture have been deprived of emotional equality in their upbringing and their acculturation, which is very sad. I think the muteness I've observed in women arises from a feeling of powerlessness that was more prevalent in previous generations than it is in today's young women. I can't bring myself to feel I've a right to speak for others except in imaginary ways, but I've made it sort of a mission to try to help women find their *own* voices. For two decades, I've taught creative writing workshops for many groups of “senior” women, for example, and have collected two books of their reflections and reminiscences dating back to World War I. It's tragic to see the pervasive and deep-seated muteness that's found so often in older women. Many of those I've worked with had never written anything at all beyond a grocery list or a letter, and at first they were uneasy with the very idea of expressing their feelings or writing about their lives, their pasts. To see the budding awareness in such women, the realization that their feelings, memories, and observations *do* matter and may be of vital interest to someone else, has been one of the greatest satisfactions of my teaching life. And yes, as a writer I feel very fortunate to have this means of expressing myself. Even many years ago, when I was married

to a man who was abusive and violent, I had the page to retreat to, the solace and silence of writing, and I learned how the anger, the longing, and the grief, as well as a burgeoning sense of personal power and determination can grow there, can give a woman--or a man--a path to follow, even in the hardest of times.

*EB - I've also noticed that much of your writing deals with the conflict women feel between duty and personal desire. How does that issue affect you as a woman working as an artist?*

PT – That’s an interesting observation. As a California woman who married very young and in her early 30s ended up raising two children alone in a small Kansas town 2,000 miles away from family and lifelong friends, I had no support system near at hand, so I often had to put aside my writing impulse for the sake of family needs. I had no independent means beyond a modest savings account, and thus I had to make choices as to how I allocated both money and time. There wasn’t much wiggle room: obviously I couldn’t opt out of motherhood, nor would I have wished to; neither could I forego having a paying job that would support the three of us; I never considered stopping my writing, either. The one thing I could give up—and did, for quite a long time—was the career aspect of my writing life: working at getting my writing published, going to AWP or MLA functions, doing out-of-state poetry readings to promote my books. I couldn’t do those kinds of things because my kids had only me, and while I realize this probably held back my writing career quite a lot, in another sense it allowed the writer in me to focus on what really mattered: the writing itself. Yes, the issue does affect me, because I often meet women who still have to make these choices. I encourage them to write something, however short, every single day, and to read everything they can get their hands on, in the belief that eventually their time will come, if they’re steadfast and stubborn as hell. The issue also remains personal to me because I often struggle to stay afloat now that I’m supporting myself through my writing. It’s not the most secure life—especially in such uncertain economic times--but it’s a rich life in other, more important ways. I have no regrets.

*EB - It's obvious that you're concerned with women's issues in your writing. You've been published in Ms. Magazine, and have edited a compilation of women's voices over the age of sixty. How do you see the role of women in the writing world? How has that changed over the course of your life as a writer?*

PT – Our world has become a much better place for women writers within my lifetime. I remember in the early ‘70s, when I was very young and just beginning to send out my poems, you could check the contents page of, say, *Poetry* magazine and find maybe 50 male poets and only 2 or 3 female poets represented in any one issue. This was the norm then. I used to make a habit of going to the San Diego Public Library each month and counting the male-to-female ratio in all the current literary journals, and it was pretty discouraging. (It’s important to point out, I think, that female editors were often as guilty of this bias against women poets as male editors were.) I remember once in 1972 I sent three poems to *Chelsea* magazine, and a male

editor there wrote back to say they'd liked my poems very much, and he ended with the request, "Please send us more of your woman-poems!" *Woman-poems*. What the hell was that? In those days it often seemed as if a woman's biologically-determined subjects were home, family, and relationships, while a male poet could address the universals, the grand themes. It was ridiculous and reductive, but that's largely how it was. Sometimes I wonder what some of our better known female poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might have accomplished, what subjects they might've addressed, if they were writing today. It was in the mid-'70s that the tide began to turn, and I'd say the burgeoning interest in women's writing made its way to the NY publishing houses well before it filtered down to the established literary magazines. I wrote my first book of poetry when I was in my 20s, and it was taken by the first publisher I sent it to (*Blood Calendar*, William Morrow, 1975). If I'm honest, I have to acknowledge what part the women's movement probably played in that publication. It was considered edgy and courageous to publish a feminist writer then, a woman writing in a strong voice about those issues. Suddenly a woman had opportunities *because* she was a woman. You can't speak about one side of this subject without acknowledging the other.

*EB - You live in Kansas—an area of the country of which many people struggle to find redeeming qualities. Why this choice of home? How does living in Kansas affect your writing—themes, subject matter, perceptions you and others have as yourself as a writer?*

PT – Whew, that's a loaded question, considering that I do have to live here after I answer it! I'll try to be frank: If a writer is looking for publication and networking opportunities and has no contacts already, this is not the place to be—unless you make liberal use of the local airport! And no matter how much you travel, living here will still hold you back in certain ways—including teaching opportunities. However, this is the greatest place in the world to *make* art, to work seriously as a writer! It's quiet, and you can focus on your work without distraction; it's not expensive to live here; people are genuine, and they seem to understand when you stay to yourself for long periods to work on a book. Even so, whenever I've stayed on the East Coast for any period of time—for example, when I was Radcliffe's Bunting Poet and lived in Cambridge for two years in the early '90s—I've found myself absolutely staggered by the opportunities that present themselves there without being sought! If you give a public reading in Boston or New York, afterwards two or three magazine editors are waiting to ask for a poem or story you read that night. Editors will phone to tell you about an upcoming special issue of their magazine, and ask you to send something. You'll run into other writers everywhere you go. As Norrie comments in *Blood*, "Everyone in Cambridge is a writer. If you see some guy walking down Mass Ave with a bad look on his face, it just means his book isn't getting reviewed." Here in Kansas, so far from all that stir, as a writer you begin to feel you've disappeared. Disappearing can work *for* you in a creative sense, but it works *against* you in terms of publication opportunities and name recognition. And of course, if you live here when you publish a book, you have to travel a lot more just to get word of it out there. I love giving readings, but too much travel can be a pain in the ass. I'm always

relieved when I get back here to the quiet of the prairie. When I wonder why I stay here, I often think of a fragment from Roethke's "The Far Field," about his having come to a welcome stillness in his life, "a point outside the glittering current." That's how life feels to me here on the plains, and though it has its distinct disadvantages, I've accepted that because it nourishes my craft.

No, I don't think living here affects subject matter at all—nor should it, really. People in the Midwest feel isolated in a number of ways, but it's important to remember that no matter where we live, no matter how far "outside the glittering current," we're still citizens of the world. Our frame of reference is only as small as we make it.

*EB - I have heard that you often visit schools, sharing your writing and writing life with students. Do you think that the current school system encourages children to write creatively? What kind of reaction are you getting from the students you visit with? What kind of writers are our schools churning out right now?*

PT – I did a lot more of that in the '80s and '90s than I do now, but yes, in the last couple of decades, I've worked as a visiting writer at all levels of the public school system, K-12, as well as in creative writing programs at universities around the US. In working with younger students, I've found a tremendous hunger for expression, an enthusiasm and energy that moves and inspires me. But I've spent an equal amount of time working with adults outside of academe—often aged, disenfranchised, or disabled adults—and I've found that very compelling, too. I've developed creative writing programs for the deaf and hearing impaired, for homeless women in a shelter, for victims of domestic violence, and for mental health patients and stroke patients, and I've loved every single one of those jobs and have felt honored to be allowed to do them. Now, though, I'm teaching less and hoping to spend a few years devoting myself mostly to writing. I've never had the opportunity to do that before, and I'm increasingly aware that my time is finite.

I think teachers are focusing more on creative writing now than they were 10 or 15 years ago, but I do often worry about literacy standards in public schools around the country, and about the people being turned out of our university systems to teach English when they're not particularly functional in the language themselves. So many supposedly educated people today simply do not know how to write or speak proper English, how to spell or punctuate, or how to structure a sentence. It's worrying, I think, especially when one encounters people with English degrees who think "a lot" is one word! That's pretty scary. I think technology plays into this quite a bit—and there just isn't much value placed on reading and creative writing in the homes and extracurricular activities of lots of kids who are growing up right now. It's a shame.

Still, I meet many astonishingly talented young writers, and I believe this will never change. If the writing impulse is alive in a person, it will find its way out eventually, even without the proper encouragement, the way a seed will germinate underground in the most arid conditions and come bursting through the surface and into the light of day.