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“Leaving Normal: Writing a New Path” Interview with Deanna Elaine Piowaty (questions omitted: general theme of women writing)

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“When I think of how women are portraying ourselves, I tend to think in terms of memoir, which is my primary focus as a writer now, although I have also stayed connected to poetry in which we also often portray ourselves, or a version of ourselves, on the page. There’s a case to be made that we have been leaders in terms of self-examination and self-revelation—at least in the last 100 years. I say that because of course Montaigne in memoir and Catullus, as well as Sappho, in lyric, personal poetry, paved the way. But in our era, Plath and Sexton as poets, Virginia Woolf in her short memoirs, and the early memoirists of the current wave—writers like Vivian Gornick, Mary Gordon, Lucy Grealy, Lorna Sage, Patricia Hampl, Annie Dillard, and so on, strike me as pioneers in the art of the emotionally, as well as factually, true story. Of course there were men who also wrote to the heart of the matter—and I think immediately of the painful honesty and brilliant writing of Paul Monette—but I think women have taken on the genre bravely. There were more women in the field twenty years ago—which may account for how disparaged by critics the memoir genre became during the so-called ‘memoir boom.’

In terms of how women portray other women, I can’t really generalize, but I think immediately of Alexandra Fuller, whose narrator in the memoir, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, speaks honestly about her damaged mother—by anyone’s standards a nightmare of a parent. And yet, the way Fuller manages to combine the brutal facts with a sense of still loving that mother always struck me as being the achievement of a particularly female sensibility—and perhaps a female ethic too. Again judging from memoirs and poems, I’d say that there have been certain subjects that were dealt with in particular generations. When I was teaching at the summer workshop my partner and I ran for eighteen years—The Flight of the Mind—in the late 80’s and early 90’s many women were writing about being sexually abused in childhood. For a while there was an overwhelming number of these stories from women who had arrived at an age where they could bear to look at it, and at a time when feminism was helping to open up that dialogue. It seemed like a flowering of what the poets have called ‘confession,’—though I dislike that term because it smacks of admitting to sin. Of course, there still are stories of abuse and violence, but it seems that the hard truths (I mean truths that are hard to reveal for different reasons) have broadened out to include many other topics such as spirituality, relationships with partners and children, the natural world, politics, and so on. And more recently, death.

As a radical feminist who was active in political work for women, both in London in the 70’s and in Oregon after that, improvements never come as fast as I would like. People often talk as if feminism has done its work, but there are still enormous improvements to be made in terms of legal rights and social mores. Abortion rights are definitely going backwards in the USA, and in

these hard economic times, women are suffering disproportionately. As a lesbian, I've seen huge changes and personally hurtled from the long, dark closet I inhabited growing up into openness. My poetry certainly reflects the journey, and the memoir I am working on now tries to trace its development in my own life and the communities I've been part of.

The girly-girls thing seems to me just another manifestation of how hard it is to embrace a new image of femaleness—one that doesn't rely on old stereotypes. The consumer culture bears a lot of blame in grooming little girls to adore that awful shade of pink many of them wear from their jackets to their shoes.

I think that any way in which men try to emulate the best qualities we think of as female is to be encouraged! No one gender should 'own' the admirable human traits. Women have certainly been open to acquiring some of the better 'masculine' ones. Actually, in reading about earlier women's lives, both writers and artists, it seems there were always a number of men in those circles who embodied femaleness in some form, and not all were gay. I think nowadays, because of the feminist movement, men have more language in which to discuss their gender aspirations, but the phenomenon may not be new.

From my memoir-in-progress:

For as long as I could remember, I hadn't felt like a proper girl. It wasn't that I'd wanted to be a boy: how could I? I had no idea what boys were like. Until I was in my mid teens I'd known only two: Graham Potter had taught me to ride a bicycle by the simple method of running along holding my saddle until one day he launched me down a steep hill and let go. I worshiped him for a year. Later, I'd corresponded with Tony Farmer, who lived next door and left me notes under a rock between our two gardens. I worshiped him too until the day we went bike riding together, locked spokes on a steep, gravelly hill, and both fell off. I broke my arm in two places and scraped my face bloody; Tony got up unscathed. When he jumped on his battered black Raleigh and rode off into the afternoon, I assumed he was going to fetch help, but it turned out he was merely leaving to avoid getting into trouble. I didn't blame him: I might have done the same myself.

*My childhood careened through days of roller skating, horse riding, tree climbing, kick-the-can, swimming, tennis, and the construction of forts, grass huts, tree houses, miniature stables, and show-jumping courses for the two family dachshunds. On winter days in my bedroom with rain beating against the windows, time slowed down as I recounted in red exercise books the adventures of my stuffed horse, Peter. While water gurgled in the gutters and the house froze, I wrapped myself in a blanket and transformed Peter from a stubborn colt into a world-class show jumper. Along the way, he encountered cruel masters like the villains in *Black Beauty* and tender girls who recognized his innate brilliance and restored him to health. Cheap blue biro ink smudged the pages and stained my fingers as I scribbled at breakneck speed, but I kept going until I'd filled four notebooks and Peter achieved a utopian retirement in a lush meadow. The great thing about those hours with the red notebooks was that I didn't have to be a girl. I didn't have to be anything at all. There was genderlessness, as well as timelessness, to the act of writing.*

Writing was the way I gradually acquired a sense of being a person, a separate individual, and I was very slow. I always wrote, but didn't understand how important writing was to me until I was in my twenties. It was difficult to find myself in the culture; I tended to identify with the boys, though there were some good girl models in the Enid Blyton childrens' adventure stories that I

read. The first record I bought was 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' by The Platters. My taste ran to blighted love, probably because I sensed that I was a lesbian but couldn't grasp it for a long time. I just felt all wrong as a woman, but didn't know why, which was terribly sad. Of course I write to fulfill an urge to write, and in that sense I do it for myself, but I don't think of it that way while I'm writing. I think of it as speaking to the readers, who might be more or less anyone. I like it when unlikely readers appreciate my work or get some insight from it. Early on, I wrote feminist and lesbian poems aimed, I think, at the younger generation of women, in an attempt to encourage them to identify with feminist attitudes. But I moved away from that a long time ago, wanting to expand into a wider community of both readers and writers. 'Poetry and Prejudice,' an essay that is included in [*The Stories that Shape Us: Contemporary Women Write about The West*](#), was rewarding in that it took a lot of work to dig honestly into the situation it recounts. I had to find, and take responsibility for, my own part in what happened to me then. It deals with an incident of homophobic prejudice I encountered in rural Oregon, and I've felt that reading it in public, especially in the geographic area in which it is set, has done a good job of bringing a new awareness to people who hadn't previously thought about the issue. I rarely write to educate, and didn't in this instance, but it is very gratifying when something does contribute to changing attitudes. I had feedback from literature teachers who used it in their classrooms and reported getting heated responses, although I never had to deal with anything too wild myself.

Essential tools for a writer: a deep and thorough understanding of the language in which you write including how a sentence works; a joy in stringing words together; a good ear for rhythm; a brazen honesty; an ability to shrug off rejection, and persistence.

Destructive: writing about real people who have hurt you before you are ready to step aside from the hurt and be the writer who shapes the story. Also, treating your life partner as if s/he were Alice B. Toklas.

Don't do it for fame or fortune (most likely there won't be any). Don't do it because you fancy telling people at parties that you're a writer. Do it only if you must and then learn from whomever you admire, in a classroom or in the pages of a book. Read constantly.

I don't pray to the universe because I don't believe in god, but I praise the universe and hope that my words contain shadows of that praise even when the world seems hostile."