2021

Interview with Cathy Ulrich

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Recommended Citation

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Being the Interviewer, You Set the Plot in Motion: An Interview with Cathy Ulrich

Katherine Byers, Madelyn Gentile, and Madison Knoll for *Floodwall*

Introduction: This spring, the students in UND's ENGL 414 workshop (The Art of Writing Fiction) read a collection of micro and flash fictions titled *Ghosts of You*, by Cathy Ulrich. With its use of second person and a penchant for turning tropes of crime fiction on their heads, this book is a must read. Three ENGL 414 students had the opportunity to interview the author via email to discuss Cathy Ulrich's intentions in *Ghosts of You*, as well as her own personal writing techniques. To borrow from how each story in *Ghosts of You* begins, "The thing about being the [interviewer] is you set the plot in motion."

Floodwall Magazine (F): Thank you again for interviewing with us! *Ghosts of You* was the first collection of short stories we had read that were all in second person. We enjoyed how you built each character into the "you." It wasn't like the blank slate where the reader is asked to put themselves into it, but rather you invited the reader to put themselves into the character. To start off our interview, we want to know what inspired you to write *Ghosts of You*? How did you decide to write it in second person?

Cathy Ulrich (C): This collection didn't actually start as a collection. I didn't even realize I would have more than one story of this nature until I wrote the third piece in this collection, "Being the Murdered Lover." The first story was "Murdered Girl," and I was inspired to write it after I read a story about a girl's body being found and how this discovery affected the town/neighborhood where she was discovered. I can't remember the piece that inspired me (I wish I could! It was a very good story), but I remember

thinking something like, "oh, yeah, being the murdered girl means you set the plot in motion." And a couple of days later, I had the story. After that, I didn't write another "murdered lady" story for a couple of years. Then I read an article about Joan Vollmer (the late wife of William S. Burroughs), and it was so upsetting to me that here was this amazing, talented writer who got "accidentally" shot to death by her husband, and she becomes just a piece of *his* story, and her own story, her own self, is lost in his fame. So that was "Being the Murdered Wife." And after that, the series just gathered steam and I ended up with enough stories that, when I was approached by Okay Donkey about a possible book, we were able to proceed with a collection!

As far as how I "decided" to write the stories in second person, it wasn't really a decision for me. My writing process is like this: I hear the "voice" of a story in my head. Usually it's the first line (I often get stuck if I don't have a first line), this little voice saying, for example, "The thing about being the murdered girl is you set the plot in motion." This could be in response to something I've been stewing over, it could be a completely subconscious thing, but once I hear that first line, the story begins to flow. I have found that, if I change something from how I "heard" that first line (whether it be tense or perspective), then I lose the story's naturalness and truth. So, for me, once I "heard" the first story in second person, it was settled.

F: Thank you for sharing some of your process with us! It's amazing how a smaller piece can snowball into an entire collection of pieces. For many beginning writers like us, it can feel like our writing needs to be perfect and complete the first time we write it. Seeing how much time you spent between the different pieces in *Ghosts of You* is eye opening. Is this gap in time common for your writing process? What benefits do you think this has for writing (both personally and in general)?

As for you hearing the voice of your stories, has it always been this way for you? Or is it something you have developed over your writing career? We thought this part of your process was particularly compelling.

C: I'm not sure I'm following what you mean by a gap in time—all my stories are written within a couple of days. If you mean the gap in time between the first story being written and the second story, then, it might or might not be common. There was about a two-year gap between the first and second story, then maybe a couple of months, then it ended up being maybe a couple of days. It just depended on what inspired me to write a story.

As I was writing these stories, they were never intentionally written to be a collection, they just had features in common. So I can't speak to whether this process would work for someone who is trying to put together a collection, I'm sorry!

And, yes, I have always "heard" stories. When I was younger, I heard very bad stories! As I've developed my writer voice over time, the voice I "hear" has become stronger as well.

F: We apologize if our question was confusing! We wanted to know about the gaps you had between your different stories for this collection, so you did answer our question. As for your writing process, we understand. Thank you for giving us as much information as you could. Looking back to our previous email, we were fascinated with the fact that "Murdered Girl" and "Murdered Wife" were based on specific women. Did you have other characters in this collection that were inspired by specific women?

Coming back to your writing process, how do you separate your work life from your writing life? Do you have a specific schedule you follow, or do you set aside time?

Finally, is there anything you would like to share with the readers of *Floodwall* about *Ghosts of You* or about writing/the writing process in general?

C: A lot of the stories, if not the majority of them, were inspired by real women, whether they were murdered or not (though a lot of them were). "Murdered Actress" was inspired by Marilyn Monroe, whom I find to be such an interesting person—she was so desperately afraid of attention, yet she so desperately sought it. "Murdered Clerk," is dedicated to M.F., the initials of a girl who was murdered in a nearby town when I was younger. In the story, I say her killer is never found, but he was actually caught this last summer, and it was such a relief. I hope it brings her family some closure as well. "Murdered Girlfriend" is based on another local murder, and "Murdered Teacher" and "Murdered Jogger" are both loosely inspired by an area murder as well. So I took a lot of inspiration from real life and how these women were treated in the media after their deaths.

My writing schedule is something like this: Get an idea/hear the "voice" in my head and jot it down in one of the notebooks I always carry around with me.

Then, on my lunch break at work, flesh out the story. Later, when I have time, input the story into a computer, print it out. Next lunch break, work on edits. For me, I *have* to write something by hand first. I used to be able to type stories on a computer when I was younger, but now I need that physical connection to pen and paper to really focus on what I'm doing. I rarely write at home or on weekends; almost all of my writing is done during my lunch break.

I suppose I should mention that I work at a funeral home and the notebooks I carry with me were a present from the local casket company—they are the perfect size for writing flash fiction!

I would like for folks to know that my writing process isn't the best process for everyone. I see so many people say "this is what you need to do to be a real writer" or "you need to write so many words a day to be a real writer," and that's not true at all. That writing process works for them; it might not work for someone else. So if you are a writer and you are struggling with feeling like a "real writer" because you aren't creating the way you've been *told* to create, don't worry! Everyone has a process that works for them.

As far as *Ghosts of You*, I hope the stories will speak for themselves. And I hope to someday visit a mermaid bar.

F: Thank you again for interviewing with us. We appreciate your time and we had a lot of fun talking with you! We are excited to share this email interview in *Floodwall* and believe many others will enjoy reading it.

About Cathy Ulrich

Cathy Ulrich is the founding editor of *Milk Candy Review*, a journal of flash fiction. Her work has been published in various journals, including *Black Warrior Review*, *Passages North*, and *Wigleaf,* and it can be found in *Best Microfiction 2019*, *Best Small Fictions 2019*, and Wigleaf's Top 50 Very Short Fictions 2017 and 2019. She lives in Montana with her daughter and various small animals.

About Katherine Byers, Madelyn Gentile, and Madison Knoll

Katherine, Maddie, and Madison are English majors working at the UND Writing Center. Having met two years ago, they've been inseparable and have gained the nickname The Three Musketeers by those who know them around the English Department. Keeping the tradition of being an inseparable trio, the three copy edited *Floodwall* together.