

Contemporary Fiction interview:

Prism Review talks with Meagan Cass

Meagan Cass is the author *ActivAmerica*, awarded the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction and published in November 2017 by UNT Press. An Associate Professor of English at the University of Illinois Springfield, Meagan is co-curator of the Shelterbelt Reading Series, faculty advisor for *Uproot literary journal*, and assistant editor and board member for Sundress Publications.

In our spring fiction class, *ActivAmerica* was one of the books we focused on. Students were impressed by several elements in the collection, elements that we find too rarely in contemporary fiction: rich passages of extended summary studded with vivid detail, passages that read like evocative pastorals of the fading late twentieth century American dream; stories that venture into the slipstream, as aspects of magic and the fantastic casually appear in otherwise ordinary upstate New York suburbs; and, maybe most of all, a sense of musicality that brings a haunting beauty to stories of solemn and quiet despair.

Meagan was kind enough to visit ULV in April of 2018, speaking with fiction students and the general campus community and reading from her collection. This was actually Meagan's second visit to La Verne; in 2011, the same year her story "The Night Game" was published in PR #13, Meagan happened to live in the LA-area, and she came out for our launch that year, reading from her work. We were thrilled at her return, and we're thrilled by her continued success. We wrapped her April visit with the following interview, conducted by staff members of *Prism Review*.

PR: We *loved* *ActivAmerica* and aren't at all surprised it was chosen as winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize. Can you talk to us about your process in gathering, titling, and ordering the collection?

MC: First, thanks for the kind words about my book! The collection went through lots of different variations in terms of content, ordering and titling. In the earliest versions, I pulled up all the stories I had with a sports/games/fitness component—put away the ones that felt stale—and started thinking about the connections. Weaving them together, I started

seeing more specific thematic and imagistic connections between them and that got me really excited.

In the first version I sent out, I opened the book with the more “realist” stories. I’d gotten some advice that this would help me get editors’ attention and then I’d get to play around with the ordering later. The book was a finalist for a few contests, which was exhilarating and also frustrating. Then I wrote “All-Mutant Soccer Team,” one of the most recent stories in the book, and I figured, eh, a press is either going to be on board with my weirdness or not, I can’t hide it, so I might as well lead with it. I reordered the stories with more of an arc in mind and was much happier with how it resonated.

One earlier title was *Night Games*, which sounded too much like a bad classic rock song. *A More Active You* was also a previous title. It seemed too self-helpy—I worried readers might actually mistake it for self-help on the shelf—and it also focuses on the individual when I see the stories as interested in community. I liked *ActivAmerica* best because it suggests a connection between sports and fitness and the social and political.

PR: *It is a great title – evocative, strange, appropriate. Could you tell us what the editorial process was like after you learned you’d won?*

I realized that my characters’ favorite booze is whiskey.

Not shocking.

Mostly sentence level edits. They didn’t want me to mess with the order too much, or make big revisions, and I was okay with that. By that time, I’d read the stories so many times, with the earliest one going back to 2010, played with the order so many times, and gotten a lot of feedback from writer friends.

Before I sent in the final version, I read every story out loud again, with a pen in hand, listening for tone, rhythm, assonance, repetition. I noticed some really interesting imagistic echoes I hadn’t picked up on

before. For instance—there are so many astrological images I this book! Also, I realized that my characters’ favorite booze is whiskey. Not shocking.

PR: We’d like to comment on the whiskey thing, but half of us aren’t legally old enough. So moving along: Throughout ActivAmerica, you use a wide variety of points-of-view, from collective to ‘normal’ first, second-person, and certainly third-person. Can you discuss how you arrived at using such a variety?

MC: I should first say that point of view feels more intuitive to me than anything else. Many of my stories begin with a voice, and it’s rare that I change a story’s point of view in revision. Plot, character, structure, conflict, dialogue, pacing—yes, yes, yes. Point of view: usually it’s the right one from the get-go or I need to put the story in a drawer and work on something else.

So, none of this was really conscious while I was doing it, but looking back I can see why I made some decisions. When you play a team sport, you often feel like you’re moving back and forth between “we” and “I”, figuring out your own identity while you participate in this larger form of cultural expression. Often, within a single story, the “I” shifts into the “we” for stretches, or the “we” changes into a “you,” or (I hope!) they both exist simultaneously.

I used the second person a lot after I read Lorrie Moore’s *Self-Help* in undergrad (probably like a lot of people!). I love how Moore uses 2nd to play with and critique the self-help genre, that guide-booky voice telling women what to care about and how to live. Sports and fitness, of course, have their own guidebooks rich with (often problematic) cultural values. I think that association was what drew me back to 2nd while I was working on this book.

What I love in these kinds of risks is the potential for disruption, for change.

PR: *Beyond point of view, many of the stories in the collection feature exaggerated realities. (We're thinking of "Calling all Soloflex Men" and "The All-Mutant Soccer Team," among many more.) When did you see yourself begin to write these types of stories, and what do you enjoy about the way they shift our reality?*

MC: Growing up, I loved ghost stories and horror stories, and would try to imitate writers like Christopher Pike and R.L. Stine. In undergrad and MFA school I didn't encounter much non-realist work, it seemed tacitly defined as less-than, and so I basically stopped writing it. Then in Ph.D. school I fell in love with work recommended by my friends and professors, work by Kevin Brockmeir, Rikki Ducornet, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Aimee Bender, Angela Carter, Stuart Dybek, Tessa Mellas, Toni Morrison, and George Saunders. These writers emboldened me to take my own non-realist risks.

What I love in these kinds of risks is the potential for disruption, for change. When I pair something I have some preconceived ideas about—the people in fitness infomercials, competitive boys' soccer in the NYC suburbs—with an exaggerated reality, the contrast leads me to fresh images, new metaphors, more critical ways of thinking. I hope it does so for the reader, too.

PR: *Absolutely it does! Another interesting aspect of the collection is that many stories present (impeccably detailed) summarized passages more than they focus on scenes that exist in 'real-time.' We're wondering if that comes naturally as you're writing, or if it's something you're doing intentionally doing as you shape your stories.*

MC: Ah, I love this question!

You know, I used to be really afraid to use summary narrative. Somewhere along the line, I misinterpreted "show don't tell" to mean "for a story to be good, most of it should happen in scene, in real time." I mean, the fact that we call it 'real-time', right?! I'd also heard this rule that if a scene wasn't at least four pages, it wasn't doing enough for the story and needed to be cut or made longer. So odd and arbitrary!

Anyway, in MFA school, I obsessed about whether my scenes were long enough, whether my stories were scene-driven enough. I'd usually hit this wall in the drafting process where I'd lose track of the tension or weirdness that got me writing in the first place and everything would feel too predetermined, airless, neat.

Then, in Ph.D. school, my boyfriend at the time pointed me to Stuart Dybek, whose work was hugely permission giving for me. His stories, especially in *I Sailed with Magellan*, are associative, digressive, recursive, which is more how my imagination works. And he uses a lot of perpetual time. I studied his work to learn how he could get away with so much 'telling,' and what I realized, among other things, was that the summary parts were all deeply image driven. Almost every sentence had that high level of specificity we want in fiction. So I learned to incorporate that more in my own work, to follow and trust my images. Now I find summary sections so pleasurable to write, and intuitive.

PR: *Works for us! A lot of the stories have echoes of one another: playing soccer, being set in Hawthorne, New York, the crumbling of the American nuclear family (husband and wife falling out of love, brother and sister struggling as they come of age). Can we ask: if ActivAmerica is at all autobiographical?*

MC: It's 40% autobiographical. (j/k lol.)

But yes, it does draw in part from autobiography, and from the stories of other people I knew growing up. I had to figure out how to un-know what I thought I knew so I could understand the subject matter differently, more critically.

PR: *Were you concerned with how your family members might react to seeing the pieces in print, and did that impact what you included (or not) in the stories?*

I became a writer because of my family, because my parents and siblings were always reading and engaging with language in some brilliant way, whether through journalism, or storytelling, or being funny as hell, or teaching.

MC: Oh, yeah, I was definitely concerned. I'm lucky, though, in that my family has so much respect for the craft of writing, and for the way autobiographical elements are necessarily transformed and resituated through imaginative process. I became a writer because of my family, because my parents and siblings were always reading and engaging with language in some brilliant way, whether through journalism, or storytelling, or being funny as hell, or teaching. In the wake of the book, they've supported me even if some of the stories make them uncomfortable. Also, you know, I promised them all of those sweet short fiction royalties.

PR: Yes, we keep hearing that being literary short story writers is the path toward riches ... right?

Earlier you mentioned how literature itself can be inspirational, in terms of style and/or craft. Could you suggest a short-list of great 'inspiration' books for undergraduate fiction writers, and maybe explain why the books are good resources?

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MC: Ooooh, I love this question too! I think any list like this is always going to be changing as folx are continuously reworking the short story. And for every writer this list will be different. Some books that have inspired me and have seemed helpful to my students are:

- Aimee Bender's *Willful Creatures*: characters with pumpkins for heads, a woman who sells words made of out what they signify, and a whole host of non-realist elements that expand what stories can do.

- Etgar Keret's *Nimrod Flipout*. reminds me that magical realism can be grotesque and grungy. Keret's stories also show me a way to be really playful in my fiction while also pursuing emotional complexity.

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. This is a rich collection of feminist fairy tales which draws from earlier versions of stories that have been sanitized by Disney and Perrault. It's a great resource for thinking about the possibilities of the fairy tale form within literary fiction.

- Stuart Dybek's *The Coast of Chicago*. This book shows how you can create a rich, mysterious, deeply strange fictional universe within a single

city, (and really within a specific neighborhood). The collection also intersperses longer stories with flash fiction pieces to create this multilayered portrait of a set of characters and of a place.

- Edwidge Danticat's *The Dewbreaker* This novel-in-stories set in Haiti and the US teaches us a lot about how to write empathetically about a character who has done horrible things. Also, gorgeous prose.

- Anthologies like the *Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction After 1970* and *Anti-Story* are also excellent resources because they can lead you to writers who you'll become obsessed with.

PR: Thanks! As mentioned in the intro, we also loved the attention to language in the stories; there's a musicality in your fiction that we don't see as much as we'd like to. Could you talk about that more?

MC: Thank you again for your kindness and careful reading! I think I really needed music for, say, a story like "Tampax Pearl Active Girl" because the inspiration for that story was so visual. (If you do a Google image search for "Pearl Active Tampax," you'll see the nonsense I was responding to.) Before I started writing, I had so many ideas about the image and why it stuck in my craw. The early drafts felt predetermined, dogmatic, inert. Attending to musicality allowed me a way into the main character's emotional experience, her history, griefs, regrets, and desires, in other words, a way into story.

I can't imagine writing without musicality. It's kind of a cliché book to reference at this point, but I still love and return to Richard Hugo's *Triggering Town*, and where he talks about putting music before truth. It took me awhile to figure out that this could apply to prose as well as poetry. If I follow the music of words, rather than starting with a predetermined "truth" or plan or structure, the process is so much more rich and uncomfortable and pleasurable and alive for me.

PR: Do you have any suggestions or warnings for writers re: writing routines?

MC: I'm a very routine-oriented writer. I try to write for two hours or so every morning. The only rules I set for myself are I can't check email, be on my phone, or use social media. But I recognize that it's an enormous privilege for me to be able to cultivate this routine. Writing practice is of course harder in this country for anyone from a marginalized group. This is not news to folk paying the slightest bit of attention. Still, I think it's important to reiterate, when we have these conversations about process: if you struggle to find the time and space to write; if care giving or community work or trauma or some combination of these has made it impossible for you to write for long stretches of time; if you came to the art form later in life because you didn't have the resources to start sooner, you are not less of a writer.

My only real advice is to be both gentle and honest with yourself as you reflect on your process. You get to define what writing work looks like at different points in your life. It might sometimes mean staring off into space, or listening to a song, or going for a walk, or rereading a story by someone else. Be as attentive as you can to what nourishes you as a person and as a writer, to what conditions will allow you to create.

PR: Perfect! We'll do our best - thanks, Meagan! And readers: go read ActivAmerica right now! It's a great collection by a thoughtful, generous, and talented author.