

Contemporary Fiction Interview:
Aurelie Sheehan

Aurelie Sheehan (aureliesheehan.com) is not only the judge of this year's PR fiction contest—she's also the author of two novels and four collections, most recently *Once into the Night* (FC2/U. Alabama Press). Her short fiction has appeared in journals including *Conjunctions*, *Fence*, *The Mississippi Review*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Southern Review*. She's received a Pushcart Prize, a Camargo Fellowship, and the Jack Kerouac Literary Award. She is a professor of fiction and head of the Department of English at the University of Arizona.

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More personally: I first heard Aurelie's name spoken in Tucson by Marvin Diogenes, a faculty member at the University of Arizona who happened to also be my undergraduate thesis advisor. One day Marvin told me that the university's new creative writing hire was Aurelie, and he was thrilled, saying she was great people and that she'd be a fantastic addition to the faculty.

This was in spring 1999, and the timing was bittersweet: after living in Tucson since 1983, I was about to graduate from college. The creative writing program at UofA was at the time in a minor state of flux—in four years, I didn't get the chance to take a class with any of the full-time fiction faculty. Now they'd hired someone new, someone exciting, but—after sixteen years in Tucson—I was on my way out of town, ready to head off to graduate school.

Since I've been gone, Aurelie Sheehan has been in Tucson—and I think the city is better for the trade. A few years ago, I was lucky to be on a panel with Aurelie at the Tucson Festival of Books; both her prior collection (*Demigods on Speedway*) and my own were set in and around Tucson. At the panel, we answered some questions from locals who were probably disappointed that both our works weren't more Zane Grey-ish. Aurelie did a better and more cheerful job answering these questions. Marvin was right: she is great people. Also: she's a great writer. Her most

recent collection, *Once Into the Night*, was in 2018 awarded the Catherine Doctorow Prize by FC2, a prize that I'd argue is in many ways more meaningfully prestigious than either the National Book Award or the Pulitzer. The collection is ambitious in its investment in the self: it's a long series of brief fictionally autobiographical stories, stories that swirl around complex themes. It's a beautiful book, one we can't recommend more highly, and Aurelie was kind enough to discuss it with us over the course of several emails this past winter.

PR: *Once Into the Night is a collection that's very playful with language. The examples are legion: "In the capacious blank rooms, winding lines of books—whole paragraphs of them" ("Wolf in the Basement.") and "She suggested I dialogue with my back." ("My Mother's Ideas"). Can you talk about your process and/or intuition in terms of being playful with language? Or why you like to see playful language at work in fiction?*

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AS: Let's see, was it by reading some august thinker or watching a cheesy TV show lately that I heard something relevant to this—about how metaphor is our great accomplishment, it is what separates humans from stones? I liked this cheesy and/or august thought, because I often think in metaphors, perhaps to a fault, making it hard for me to take an algebra exam, for example, or even cotton to the direct commands of a crossword puzzle. So, I know this is how I think, sort of like being good with a rope. But I also know that if all I did was run around with my rope I'd get tangled in it. I think playful language is great, I get so bored if I read prose that is working on only one level. But as a writer I'm also aware of the need to countervail my tendencies—to say something straight for a change!

PR: *This makes me think of a writer like Noy Holland, someone very much emphasizing language (and I suppose telling stories from a point of view that can be difficult for a reader to negotiate). Are there writers who lean into language (and*

perhaps away from clarity, for better or worse), writers that you admire and might nudge authors with similar interests toward?

AS: A book that I love and is very language-centric is *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban, and another early love was *Far Tortuga* by Peter Matthiessen. I learned from Gertrude Stein and from Virginia Woolf, and these days I am learning from Renee Gladman. Poetry in general helps me stay in touch with language and unfailingly inspires me.

Basically, I like to use language in as straightforward a way as possible, but sometimes that results in play. It comes down to some of what I was talking about in question #1. I want to communicate. I also feel ethically responsible for saying something as close to how I imagine it as possible. I'd never want to toss in a little playful language as garnish. This gets back to one's relationship to one's readers—the idea that you want to only tell them the truth of the story. That their time is valuable. At the same time as holding true to your own instincts. If you don't follow your instincts in writing, there's nothing left to guide you.

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PR: *That's great—we're planning to use Stein to show the possibilities of playful language in a freshman writing class. (In teaching creative writing, we find it too easy to forget to dwell on the word, on the sentence—when really all we're doing is stringing these things together.)*

Another thing we love about your collection is the humor. These are very, very funny stories. Much of the humor comes from structural choices, as you often mercilessly undercut a just-begun premise: "Sex Worker" begins with, "I am a sex worker, and it's a good gig, because the bandy room is everywhere." Paragraph ends, next paragraph begins: "I slice pickles for sandwiches...." This happens again later in the story, too: "But let me start at the beginning."

*Many for lack of a better word "general" readers might be a little wary when encountering fiction like this, that subverts expectations. Can you tell us about your concerns (if any) about readers, about reader expectations, and how the stories in *Once Into the Night* exhibit and/or push against any such concerns? (And a*

follow-up: what advice might you have for other writers, especially student writers, regarding “reader” expectations?)

AS: Thanks, Sean. My intent is to track a way of experiencing the world, one that feels sure even if the track has loops and turns. It is a kind of reckless reliance on intuition. I do it in part as testimony or evidence of how much is going on in such a small space (the small spaces of everyday life). How lonely am I, or should I say, how alone? I’m not sure. I imagine in the privacy of my living room that others also experience their own dualities and absurdities in *their* living rooms, and if I reach them we might share a chuckle or two.

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Right now, there is some kind of fusion between my way-of-being-human and my writing. I don’t write because I decide to, I write because if I don’t the whole mechanism starts going out of whack. This doesn’t happen quickly. I mean, I can’t and don’t write every day, and sometimes I will even go weeks without any sustained writing, but then it catches up to me and I have to. It’s like keeping the pH levels correct in a fish tank.

It began, though, as a choice. I started writing because I wanted to express myself—that sounds so simple, but there was an urgency to it (especially when I began seeing the places in my life where I wasn’t expressing myself as fully as I wanted to be).

In the first drafting of this book, though, I did not take reader expectations into account. That’s because I’d just spent about five years writing a novel that did not get published, a novel that I’d labored and labored and *labored* over, in part to create a reader-friendly, accessible narrative—but then it went in a drawer! I was totally mad about that and

said f-it the next time around. It was a pleasure to let loose in a way I hadn't in the project before.

PR: *Five years! Do you know of other writers who have experienced this—the time, effort, passion of writing a book all locked away in a drawer/on a hard drive? (And, too, I wonder how writers feel about their published works vs. these unseen works—can you speak to ‘liking’ one more than the other, or any other shifts in attachment?)*

AS: There is the outer world, the idea that a writer's reputation is built by the works that are published. That's what other people see. And there are some writers out there who maybe publish most of what they write. I have a couple of critical projects that I've cared about deeply that are not published. For different reasons, both the projects I'm thinking about have shaped my life as a writer, for the aesthetic and psychological journeys/battles that took place within them. That I made those journeys inherently changed the next project I worked on, no matter if they were not read widely.

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If something does not come out, get published, and it has to go in a drawer and it feels thus somehow annulled, a bit of its spirit sneaks out and enters into a next project. The lifeblood of a project will not die in a drawer. At best, when it has to, out of urgency, it will find a way to survive and be embodied.

On the other (third) hand, I write for readers—I write to be read, I write to be heard. I'm not alone in this. This is what I would suggest, to think about reader expectations as a “restraint” in the best way. Restraints can require you to shore up your resources, to find powerful

ways to let your own ideas/characters/visions out. It's not so much writer vs. reader, but the writer using the idea of a reader for good, to serve the writer's process of creation. It seems to me that if, at some point in the process, you or I think about what, too, makes it pleasant for a reader (pleasant=satisfying and more), we are invited to be that kind of writer/companion—the ones that tickle funny bones, or give foot massages, or cups of tea upon entering, or whatever.

PR: *Fiction as foot massage sounds about right!*

We read Once Into the Night chronologically; while it's all great, it was "Sara Applewood," the fourth story, that first made us literally laugh out loud—"her bitchy braids"! Do you have any personal favorites in the collection?

AS: I'm so glad you liked "Sara Applewood"! That one is important to me, as I am interested in the idea of cruelty and agency. In my own life, I've dealt with the malady of femininity, been seduced by Emily Post's *Etiquette*, masqueraded behind some version of pinafores and lace. That story touches upon some of that for me.

As for favorites otherwise... "The Mauve Notebook" is I'd say one of the foundational stories in the book. "Yellow Bird" is also foundational. But I think my favorites are the two fellows, "The Dark Underlord" and "Iceman." I feel really close to those guys. The Dark Underlord is very lonely and proud. I think he may have started with my childhood viewing of *Dark Shadows*, a TV show my neighbor Mrs. Cuff used to watch, and I would go visit her and stare wide-eyed as the vampire menaced with his be-gloved, be-ringed hand. He is a little childlike himself, in my story, filled with his own stories of himself, and easily hurt. "Iceman" is a protest against death, I'd say, an assertion of all that lives on. Death is an affront, among other things, and my Iceman is buried in flowers and worlds, the sheer evidence of all that lives, breathes, bleeds. I like to imagine eternity in him, for him—for all of us.

PR: *Both of those stories are so wonderful—your description of “Iceman” as being a protest as against the affront that is death is perfect. In three pages, the story is so sad, comic, and loving, a weary growl of being stuck in nothing even as everything all around is beautiful, even as it’s all going, going, gone. Permit us a quote: “And here comes a mountain to lie upon me. Oh, wait: this is a little heavy.” Indeed.*

And that’s a great segue: thematically, Once Into the Night considers mortality and aging, awareness of the physical self, nostalgia (a lovely sad, non-sentimental one), and a gentle snarkiness toward the bourgeois life. As this collection began to “take shape,” were you aware of these or any other themes—and if so, did you consciously try to build around them, or anything thematic?

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Or should be.*

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AS: I was trying to write a fictional autobiography, to write all that lives within me. Of course, what a person writes on any given day is shaped by that period’s own themes and shadows. When I wrote that book, I had recently lost two loved ones, and so there was that. And as my daughter was getting older, I was beginning to experience the failure of my ability, as a mother, to keep her safe and swaddled for all time. I was also rebuilding my identity after that novel was not published. I don’t think the novel failed, quite, but it took the stuffing out of me for a while to reckon with its muffling. I was a bit depressed about that, actually, and so that’s where the, at times, hyper-awareness of time passing comes from. As they say, though, anger is an energy, and so the book itself is the archive of my survival. Dramatic sounding! But I suppose every book we write is all or nothing.

Or: should be.

PR: *How did you know when this book was complete? Could you discuss how you ordered the stories? Could you also talk about how tone played a role (if any) in the book’s final structure?*

AS: One of the ways the book is fictional is that it takes place over the span of a life, birth to death, and that trajectory was in my mind from the beginning. The I's are all one I, even as they are all separate (and often contradictory). It is loosely shaped also—in that this is the life of the imagination, there are dips and swings into expansive time or out-of-time. I wrote at least twenty or so other stories that could have gone in the collection, and it was in part questions of tone that helped me select what would finally stay in. I wanted some degree of consistency, but I didn't want to hit the same notes over and over again.

In terms of ordering, I also took into account the impact of certain sequences. The edges needed to stay distinct between pieces, and so you couldn't put like next to like, with two similar consciousnesses, say, too close together. Nor did you want to dishonor a sadder piece by putting a bawdy one next to it, necessarily, unless you could do it with well, I guess, a modicum of discretion or grace.

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PR: That's interesting—making sure, in a way, that consecutive stories don't step on each other's toes. In classes lately we've been discussing the importance of various elements having dynamism—characters, tensions, even settings and key details. It's interesting to see that a full collection might itself, in the manner it's structured, apply that shiftiness, especially in terms of tone and style: keep the reader moving.

Here's a selfish question: You've taught creative writing for a bit. Many enrolled creative writing students, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, hope to go on to become teachers of creative writing. That you're aware of, how has teaching creative writing had an impact, for better or worse, on your own writing?

AS: It is inspiring to talk to other people about writing and about stories, and so in that way I am always learning from my students. The most satisfying classes are those where our mutual experience transcends the boundaries of teacher/student, in that we are all looking at something that is exciting and bigger than any of us. This could be the Joy Williams'

story we will be looking at in my class this week, or it could be in the identification of a true new voice or a stunning scene, or even a challenge that is worth taking.

I'd say that writing powerful stories is more important now than it has been at any other point in my lifetime.

Teaching also consistently asks you to identify what you value, what you deem important. Those choices are not static, they keep changing over time, and it is a relationship between how the world is changing and how you are changing, and how students are changing, over time.

As I am in my third decade of teaching now (yikes!), I have seen the stories that move me change, and I have seen the urgency of why I teach also clarify. I am more than ever committed to creating spaces where other people can find their voices, where writers can find space and strength to tell the truth as they see it (even if this is in an imagined world). I'd say that writing powerful stories is more important now than it has been at any other point in my lifetime.

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PR: This notion, of "writing powerful stories," reminds of a time a professor warmly chided me to not forget the works that originally made me so passionate that I turned to writing. It was a simple remark, but one that I've been coming back to lately, especially as a teacher. There are so many small successes to be found in contemporary writing, especially for emerging writers (a story in this journal, getting into this program) that sometimes I worry that the forest—that original passion—gets lost in the trees.

Do you have literary polestars? Books, authors, individual stories or writers that are always "there" for you, as challenge, as inspiration, as the thing you're writing with or toward?

AS: Ah, yes, a big question, and one that is probably at the center of it for writers.

“In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” by Delmore Schwartz, was an inspiration for the kind of work I am doing in *Once into the Night*. I look to Oscar Wilde for the line between the comic and the tragic. I look to Virginia Woolf for the beauty of the intellect. I look to Deborah Eisenberg for the construction of radical new shapes in the short story. I look to Edward P. Jones for the power of the meticulously observed. And there are more—and even writing this short list makes me want to pull a book off my shelves and read the rest of this gray afternoon away.

PR: We can think of no better way to end this interview! Off we go to read!