What We Talk About

INTERVIEW WITH ERICA PLOUFFE LAZURE

This year, Erica's story won the Editor's Choice award for its energy, endearing characters, and sense of self. In her interview, Erica talks about music, travel, form, and teaching.

This interview was conducted by Anna Zumbahlen on August 9, 2019. It has been edited and condensed for publication.

NASHVILLE ENERGY

I love the way "The Ghost Rider" has a particular voice and energy that move the momentum of the storytelling forward. The narrative doesn't draw a lot of attention to itself but tells a satisfying story. What was the seed of this story?

The literal seed of the story begins in Nashville. I was on a road trip last summer with my boyfriend. We were driving to California and I said, let's stop in Nashville along the way. It had been on my list of places I'd love to visit. As we were rolling into town I got a text from my mom that said, "Hey, did you know that the Country Music Awards is happening tonight?" The whole of downtown Nashville was an explosion of people and activity and all sorts of craziness. It was wild. And then we heard that Marty Stewart, who's this famous old-time country singer, has for the past twenty years hosted this annual "songs in the round" at the Ryman Auditorium the same night as the CMA. I thought, well we should go to that instead. It seemed to embody this old Nashville, new Nashville clash that you hear about, and that you can pick up on immediately downtown. We eventually found ourselves down at Robert's Western World, which is one of the bars on the strip. We—my boyfriend and I—were just taken by this band that was playing—I don't know, there was this energy in the air that I felt caught up in. And truth be told, I was on my way to Squaw Valley to do a workshop and I needed to write a story.

I'm a teacher full-time, so a lot of my energy gets pushed into what I teach and the kids and all that. I thought I'd spend all of June trying to write a longer short story for the workshop. For the past few years, I've been writing more flash pieces—it's kind of all my brain can handle when I'm teaching. But the energy of Nashville and my previous personal experience being in a honky tonk band about ten or so years ago—all of that culminated into this story.

Sometimes when you're writing, the person that you become when you're writing takes on a life of its own. I found myself floating on this voice, Quentin's voice. It just kind of pulled me along,

and I was like, what is he going to do next? And what does he really care about? To figure out what he really wants, and how he is going to be an adult. He's very much a boy, still, with this adult possibility of having something real with his girlfriend, and it just doesn't pan out for him. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. I think Quentin loses, in the end.

The way you told this story about visiting Nashville—you caught yourself a little bit, but you were telling it in the first person plural. "The Ghost Rider" is not entirely filtered through the first person plural, but there are moments where Quentin is talking about his band in the first person plural and they become this entity that moves through this music scene together. How were you thinking about the perspective of this piece?

It's definitely Quentin's story, but the "we" that I shifted into—there's a "we" that I think that is necessary to be in a band. You know? Even if you're the front person in that band, the band is a "we." You have to work together. There has to be a natural chemistry for you to sound right. If someone in the band raises their hand just slightly, or gives you a look, you need to know that it means to go to the next verse or to let this guitar solo play out for another measure, or something like that. That inner silent communication—an understanding of "we"—that has to happen for the band to work.

I think Quentin's very much a part of that pack of men that is his crew. He understands every person in his sphere when he's performing, but he doesn't quite understand what's going on with him and his girlfriend at all. He has no clue.

I love the way you talk about being pulled along by Quentin and his voice and finding out what he's going to do over the course of the narrative. How much information do you know about your character beyond what's in the story?

Quentin kept revealing himself to me in stages. I sense Quentin is from the South, but not from Nashville. I think he's a transplant to the area. I don't know much more about Quentin than what's on the page. He's in this band, playing old country covers, and they play the same thing nearly every night. I don't sense he's much of a risk-taker. As cool of a persona that he conveys, he's pretty much playing it safe musically. Let's say, he's not doing his own thing with his music, and my sense is that he's not fully sure of what's next for him.

I think that comes through in the tone of the story. There's an objective intimacy in the way Quentin leads the reader through his own narrative, and that feels really particular to him as a character. And that's what drives the change that we see Quentin undergo through the narrative, even though he doesn't have a lot of resolution by the end of the story.

Right, and that's a little bit of a frustration for me. How do you get your characters to take a chance and dive into the abyss, explore what really matters to them? I get a little frustrated because Quentin's not ready yet developmentally, and I sometimes go back to the story and think, what else could I have him do? But every time I'm kind of like, no, he's not ready yet. He walks through the broken glass at the bar and continues to ignore the reality that he's created for himself. He knows he has a *chance* to change, but he doesn't. You know, it's one of those things, where you have to be a little bit mean to your characters. I think I'm still being mean to Quentin in the end.

"I think that we all need a healthy dose of uncertainty about what we think we know."

A MONTH OF FLASH

You mentioned your relationship with flash fiction. I saw you have a flash fiction collection, *Heard Around Town*, and another chapbook, *Dry Dock*. Is that work also flash fiction?

No, it's a longer short story. *Dry Dock* is from a very small press called Red Bird Press, and the story's set in New Bedford, Massachusetts. It's about a couple who used to live and work on a trawler together, and when they couldn't pay the taxes, they had to dry dock the boat in the husband's father's backyard. The father had been a big sailing captain and a mariner, and the couple has to deal with a lot of disappointment from the father and their own disappointment with each other and their relationship and how things turned out.

What was your process compiling *Heard Around Town* like?

Gosh, that was a lot of fun. My partner, Luke, and I, we are both writers, and we have a long-distance relationship. February is a short month, but in my school cycle it feels very long, waiting for March break. So I challenged him to swap writing prompts with me every day for twenty-eight days in February, and we would send each other a word or a picture or a little phrase—"lawn chair" or "caribou," something like that. Then we would have to produce a flash fiction draft using the prompt and send it to each other by bedtime.

By day twelve or fifteen, I felt like I had something. I thought, all these people I'm writing about seem to live in the same place and some of them might know each other. At the end of the twenty-eight days, I was able to piece together about twenty of those stories. Some pieces were garbage. But some were pretty good.

I spent my spring break polishing and organizing them and making them into a little collection that won the 2014 Arcadia Press Flash Fiction Chapbook award. Arcadia is now, sadly, defunct.

How is this process of creating a flash piece from an image or some minor prompt similar to or different from your process writing longer pieces?

I struggle very much with getting a longer piece together and having it sustain the momentum and energy of a flash piece. With flash pieces, for some reason, I'm able to just dip into a type of consciousness, tell a story, and get out. There's a kind of confessional element to my flash pieces. With "The Ghost Rider," I remember being in Arkansas, at a hot spring, and trying to think about what I needed Quentin to do next. I needed to think about these little moments in the story as mini flash pieces to try to maintain that level of revelation, that level of really detailed description. Then I thought about how to link them all together. But for me, it's about figuring out how to get that longer piece, 5,000 words or so, without losing the spirit and energy of a flash piece.

The image in my mind that came to me is a mushroom—a small mushroom—and then imagining that mushroom blooming out, like after a rainfall. It doesn't break, but it expands. And it's still the same mushroom. As I wrote, I kept going back to that visual aid every time I lost a little bit of steam. I kept thinking about how to get this mushroom to get bigger but still stay whole as an entity.

That image is a really interesting way to think about how a flash piece and a short story might be doing the same thing but on a different scale.

I think so. And I think what you want in a flash piece is to get that little glimmer of truth or a glimpse of something revelatory—something meaningful that shifts in the person's life. Or maybe it's a little truth that gets revealed, accidentally or not. And with a short story, a longer short story, you still want that. But you have to have a lot more moving parts to make it happen. With a flash piece, you're not responsible for all those other details that a reader might get hung up on. My dad reads my flash pieces and he's like, "But you didn't account for this. You didn't resolve this." I told him, well, that's just not what I'm going for in the flash form. I think he's more satisfied by the longer pieces because there's more of a story arc. Something happens. There's an obvious consequence.

Sure, the expectations of the form might be different. In recent projects, what form have you been working with? Longer, shorter?

Actually, this summer I switched over to essays and flash essays, just to try it. I teach a lot of essay-writing, especially travel-writing. I was traveling this summer and challenged myself to write little flash essays about the places I was visiting. And I wrote one longer essay about my love of driving the Fiat Panda, and how it shaped the year I lived in Italy.

I also have four longer short stories in the works that I keep going back to. I'm hedging toward longer short stories, but every time I look at them, I put the "mushroom" on them and say, okay, how do I expand you? I stall because I'm not sure what's going to happen next—I'm not sure yet how to link up some of the ideas that I have about the characters and the situations I've been putting them in.

So it's really a mishmash, but I've written some essays that I feel really good about. And some good short story starts, and a few flash pieces tucked in along the way, that's turned into a chapbook manuscript, *Sugar Mountain*. I also have a collection of short fiction, *Proof of Me*, which is still looking for a publisher. And there's a novel somewhere in the wings. I have a few drawer novels that probably won't see the light of day.

It sounds like "The Ghost Rider" came out of drawing on an experience traveling, so it's interesting to know you've been thinking about essays and travel-writing. Between writing a short story that's based on a personal experience versus essay- or flash essay-writing versus flash fiction—what is the difference in your approach or your thinking?

I had been a reporter at one point in my life, and for a while I really had a hard time writing fiction because I would say, "Well, I don't know what the character did." I didn't want to make it up for them. Now I'm very comfortable with making up things based on little seeds of things that have happened, and certainly some of it comes from my reporting days. I had a piece taken by *McSweeney's* that got its seed from a story that a man told me when I was interviewing him about a gas tank explosion. That whole thing became an intense piece that I did not expect to be born. But there it was.

I would say the challenge I found through writing essays this summer was a need to operate on *happening* truth, as well as emotional truths or story truths—the Tim O'Brien idea of "what happened" versus "the truth I'm trying to convey through the story I'm trying to tell." Part of me thinks my life is not actually all that interesting. With Quentin, in his story, I can make up stuff. But with essay writing, instead of thinking about what Quentin would do next, I have to think about what I *actually* did next. I struggled a little bit with getting under the surface, finding that trap door that I think we all want with any kind of writing that we do—to find the deeper undercurrent of ideas. For example, with the Fiat Panda story, there is this playful essay about my love of a car. But I tied it in with the fact that my father was a mechanic, and how it shaped my attitude about cars, and it gave the essay a little more depth. There were some other deeper elements that I don't think I've explored just yet. I think my calling is truly in fiction, but you never know.

It sounds like a generative experiment, though.

Yeah, it was fun to write and I enjoyed it. But I think I'm more of a fiction writer.

OPEN THESE WINDOWS

You mentioned that you're a teacher, too. What do you teach?

I teach creative writing and literature to high school students at a boarding school, Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. I'm entering my tenth year, and it's been great. The boarding school life, as a teacher, is kind of a constant job. You never really stop working when you're in session. But I get to work with a lot of kids who really love to write. Our emphasis is on personal narrative and creative writing and storytelling, and I'm super lucky that I have a lot of freedom in my classroom. I can try out ideas. I can teach what I want, more or less. There are certain books that we all like to teach and want to teach, but it's been really exciting to be able to teach, for example, Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. I teach a Zadie Smith elective too, and my seniors just ate up *Feel Free*. It's a pleasure to be able to teach contemporary writers, living writers, who are really

making a difference in the literary scene today. And to say, "Hey, you can do this. You can be the next Zadie Smith, who wrote her first novel when she was twenty-one years old." I'm hoping I'm giving some inspiration to the next generation of writers by exposing them to this generation of writers.

What's the relationship between what you teach and what you like to read?

I try to teach a mix of authors from the canon and more contemporary authors. And I try to read similarly. For example, the last book I finished reading for school was *The Prince of Los Cocuyos* by Richard Blanco. But I'm also reading *Love in the Time of Cholera*. I've been going back and forth between those two books. One story I love teaching is "Strays" by Mark Richard. That's a story that I love to read and I can steal from, idea-wise and energy-wise. And I can teach it to my students, and it's wonderful to watch them make connections and see how the frames return and how everything in that story is connected. Honestly, as a writer, I'm so lucky that I'm able to teach literature, because Exeter's pedagogy is founded on student-centered discussion. The kids show me, again and again, through our conversations, new elements of writing and patterns. It's wonderful to hear them discover reading Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, for the first time and then perhaps connect it to Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. They may see the connections in there and realize that, as creative writers, we can retell stories. There's value in the canon and there's value in these new stories. Ward's in particular—it's amazing to see her retell the story in such a completely different way, and yet you can see the underpinnings and the bones of Faulkner moving through the novel. There's a lot of correlation and correspondence between what I like to teach and what I like to read.

I've been holding off on teaching *There There* by Tommy Orange—I read it last summer and I've really wanted to teach it, and then one of my colleagues was trying to get him to come to campus. And now that his career has taken off, I'm not sure if we can get him. But if I'm reading something and am moved, as I was with his novel, I want to share that with my kids, as soon as possible.

Kirsten Valdez Quade, too—her short story collection, *Night at the Fiestas*. I ran into her at Squaw Valley last summer and she had a reading, and she gave this wonderful talk about avoiding sentimentality in writing. I read her whole collection that week and finally got the courage to introduce myself and have her sign my book. It turns out that she's an Exeter alum, and now she's coming to our school this winter, I think, as a result of that. A whole new generation of Exeter kids will be able to see her good work as a writer and as an alum and be like, "Hey, that could be me someday."

It sounds like you derive so much joy from conversation and this exchange of reading and writing and teaching. Considering the way you want to inspire your kids to learn how to express themselves and to have the courage to engage with the canon and contemporary writers and write their own stories, how do you imagine the role of storytelling in the contemporary world? Why do you think this is important?

I think any opportunity we can give young people to step outside of the worldview of their lives, their family lives, or their social lives—any window we can offer to the experience of someone who might have a different experience from them—that's a true gift of literature. I think, more than ever, we need to open these windows to help keep bigotry and bias out of our next generation.

I can remember growing up in the '80s and early '90s and thinking things are going to get better—politically, culturally, socially—that everything's going to be fine. And then, look at where we are. As I get older and see the political climate changing in a way that I had not ever anticipated, I think the call, more than ever, as storytellers, as writers, as artists, is to bring forward more voices and to bring forward more perspectives, as many as we can, to help our kids understand the importance of being empathetic. We need to stress the importance of listening, the importance of saying, "I might be wrong about this, and I need to learn more." People rely too much on certainties and I think that we all need

a healthy dose of uncertainty about what we think we know.

That's why we need teachers like you, and teachers who emphasize creative writing. And all of that being said, where or how do you hope your work will land?

I hope a reader would see a playfulness in my work, a love of language. And a sense that the reader also has a story to tell and that, while their story may be different, that each of us has a revelation or a little bit of truth to offer the world. What I hope is that someone might read my work and see a little bit of themselves, or their experience, in my writing. And even if they don't, I hope they'll enjoy the story, enjoy going along for the ride.

Is that what you look for when you come to a short story or a novel?

You mentioned before the way the voice works in fiction. I really love a strong voice. And the first person voice really gets me. I'm thinking about Barry Hannah's voice and that rumbling casualness with which he's able to capture so much heartache, but, you know, making jokes the whole way through. You can almost hear him smoking the cigarette as you read. You can feel that in the language. And Amy Hempel, who'd been one of my teachers at Bennington. She's so attuned to the way words work and the way words sound and how they connect to each other, and I just love the many levels on which you can read her writing. Or William Faulkner. I can remember reading *Absalom, Absalom!* and being like, what is this? Just shocked and angry and frustrated at how abstruse his language is. And then I finished the book and I was like, that was brilliant. I reread it and I was able to go back, and notice the body of imagery he was working with, and how he used language to convey character. I realized, wow, there's so much more here, and I have so much more to learn about this novel.

I'm very much a language person. I read the opening of *Sula* by Toni Morrison, and there's just so much that she's able to do, zig-zagging through her sentences, etching the description of a space. And yet she's telling the story and the history and the beauty of this place, the Bottom. A whole story just in one opening paragraph. That attention to language just blows my mind.

Or Tommy Orange—that intensity of voice. Every single one of his characters has this intensity. They *need* to tell you what they're telling you. I love that urgency. I get blown away by it.

Is it through these writers and narratives that you're continuing to learn, rethinking your craft through the lens of these narratives?

For sure. Wasn't it Gabriel García Márquez who wrote out, sentence by sentence, all of Faulkner's work? I think that's right. I'm not sure if that's an urban legend. But even so, he was able to teach himself writing through paying close attention to the sentences of people he considered masters. And while I don't do that, exactly, I do pay close attention. I tell my students this, too: If you see something, if you feel something as you're reading, stop, go back. What made you feel that way? Track through what's going on in that paragraph and pay attention to the mechanics. You're looking for that end result, that sensation of opening or feeling or "Wow, I'm so moved by this." That's what you get as your response as a reader. But as a writer, your job is to go back and say, "How did I get here?" And read through sentence by sentence, word by word, and figure out what effect those sentences had and how the writer was able to bring you to that feeling. It's one small strategy, reading like a reader, and then reading like a writer.

I was reading the *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss this summer on the airplane, and would at intervals burst into tears. Luke would look at me like, what is going on with you? So I would try to explain the story, and of course my words about it failed to evoke any tearful emotion in him. So, Krauss managed that pretty well, and after my tears subsided, I had to pause and figure out how she did it.

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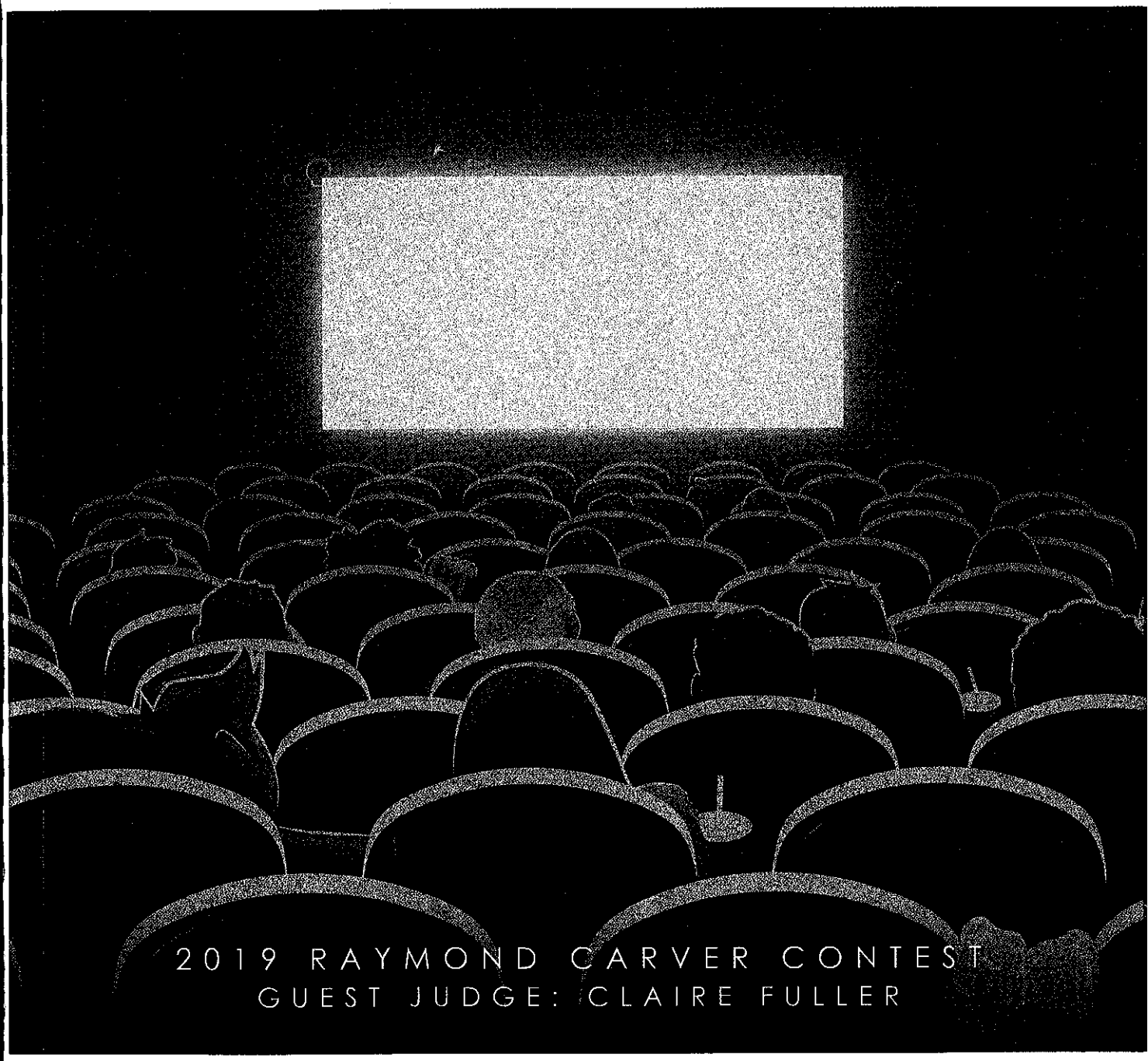
HONEST FICTION



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