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Interview with Desirae Matherly

Celine Taylor
Brigham Young University

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From the Archives Interview

Interview with Desirae Matherly

Dr. Matherly's doctoral area is creative nonfiction and she is a former Harper Fellow at The University of Chicago. Her recent writing appears in Hotel Amerika, Assay, and Fourth Genre. Matherly is the winner of the 2018 Curt Johnson Prose Award in Nonfiction sponsored by December Magazine and in 2019 her short fiction won the Owl Canyon Press Hackathon. Matherly is the author of Echo's Fugue, a collection of personal essays published by Mad Creek Books (OSU Press) in 2019.

Interviewed by Céline Taylor

Inscape Journal: What is your typical process for writing essays?

Desirae Matherly: I think it's changed through the years. It used to be, of course, that I would open Word and then just sit there and stare at the page, or I would already have a line, often a line or a concept in my head, more like how a poet works. I think as long as I had some sort of originating idea or a phrase that was stuck in my mind or a sentence, that opening, whatever it was, would lead me right into my topic, and then from there, it was really just following out my associations.

I think it's different when you are writing in a different kind of medium. If you're thinking about trying something radically different in terms of form, then it might be that you start to maybe make some notes or you create some kind of a form there, and I think that has definitely altered my approach, because after writing *Echo's Fugue*, I realized that it was more productive for me to go ahead and have a sense of what I wanted to create and then to draw up the frame or the boundaries or the rules and then to work inside of those rules. It creates a challenge, sort of like playing a game does. So that's probably the main difference, is that it used to be the case that I would work more from an intuitional viewpoint; I would have an intuition of what I wanted to write, but I would figure out things along the way. But now I think the discovery comes in terms of how I respond to whatever problem I've created for myself.

IJ: As you said, those self-appointed structures and patterns play a huge and intrinsic part in your work and really make them distinctive and stand out from other literature. Why do you gravitate toward inventing and using a pattern of specific syllables or words and, like you said, rules in your writing?

DM: In the beginning, I think I had a more traditional approach to writing: I had a concept, I had an idea, I'm going to write this and then I'm going to make it better, and then when it's at a point where I think it's doing all the things I want it to do and it's done, I'm going to submit it for publication. But I think as you get older, the ways that you want to digress into more and more and more ideas, after a point, it becomes unsustainable. You cannot write one essay that's going to hit all of the notes that you think you want to. So I think it's really about the impossibility of completion or being comprehensive that has forced me to want these structures, because without the structures, I feel overwhelmed.

It feels like I can do anything and that feeling of complete and absolute freedom of writing about anything that's on my mind and digressing in any direction that I want to go in feels like too much. Freedom turns out to be an invitation to be careless or sloppy or to write more than what I need. But if I have a word count or some kind of a structure there, it forces me to make difficult choices. Maybe I don't need five sentences to say something that takes only one. So structure makes me a better editor, and I think it forces me to think about the quality of what I'm writing over the quantity.

IJ: Does your writing process change depending on if you're writing poetry, fiction, or nonfiction? And if you're writing essays, short stories, or books?

DM: Absolutely. So when I write poetry, it's very much like what it used to be for my essays in the very beginning, which is: I hear something, I feel a phrase, I want to write it down. In that case, it's usually the pencil and paper. I want to get it down immediately. And sometimes it's just all over the place and I don't even know if it's going to stack into an actual poem. With a fiction story, I find that I do tend to work the way that I used to with opening up a Word document, Scrivener, or whatever kind of writing tool that

I've found that helps. I think it also helps sometimes to use a distraction-free writing tool like Sprinter; Freewrite is a company that makes smart typewriters, but they have this free online tool called Sprinter where it just shows you how many words you've written and you can't really edit. So sometimes I'll use a writing tool that will take away that impulse to edit so that I can stay in that zone of writing a story. I feel like I'm freer when I write fiction to do that kind of thing. Then I move it into Word or whatever I'm editing in.

It's not really an obstacle, but I sometimes like to write for contests because there's a word count. Then the challenge is about keeping it under the word count or keeping it at the length that it needs to be, because fiction can be restrictive. There is a limit on a story. The movement of the story has to proceed in a certain way. So there's definitely more structure than just an essay. And essays, I mean, as I've already explained, it runs the gamut. I really do tend to get bogged down in associations and digressions wildly everywhere, unless I have some kind of a structure. And when you think about the structure of a longer project, like a book, like a novel, or a collection of essays, I think it's even more incumbent on the author to have an idea of what they're doing before they go into it. Because you're ultimately going to have to explain that in a book proposal or a query to an agent. However you're going about the publishing of the work, you're going to have to be able to talk about this thing you've written. And it can't just be this loose collection. It has to have some kind of an arc. It has to have an intention. I think form always matters. Are you using small chapters or are they stories? If you're not thinking about form, you should be. Especially at the point when you're trying to put together a book.

IJ: I'm curious about your specific creative process. Does the inspiration behind your essays usually originate from your day-to-day life events, past events, or a combination of both?

DM: I think the day-to-day. You've probably heard the term *occasion*. The occasion is that reason for writing an essay. And sometimes that reason is not something you've been thinking about for days and days, but something that sort of strikes you or occurs to you because someone said something in a conversation that made your mind start to turn on an idea. It could be that you're obsessing about something and you're realizing that whatever this thing is that maybe didn't seem that significant at first, you keep dwelling on it. Maybe you have a dream about it. Maybe you get a phone call that sort of shifts your perspective or reminds you of something in the past. But I think that a lot of essays originate in our day-to-day lives in some kind of a moment that we don't expect that then causes us to reflect on something in the past or to speculate on something in the future, but it's originating in the present moment.

IJ: Your latest collection of essays, your book, *Echo's Fugue*, is an honest collection of essay paragraphs, fictional interviews, sentence diagramming, and dictionary definitions that combine to make a completed book. How did you go about deciding how to structure that?

DM: I looked rather carefully at the structure of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Art of Fugue* and I knew that I wanted to work with his composition, so I found a website that discussed each contrapunctus. It's such an unwieldy name for a song, but each contrapunctus is a fugue that is taking that one melody and sort of rearranging it or doing something different with it. So I took the number of those, I believe it's fourteen. Depending on the scholar, some scholars may argue about actually how many there are or what order they came in, but I just went with this one source that I'd found and I thought about the way each particular song was described and I knew that I also wanted to do some different kind of prose structure in each and every case; just like he changed the fugue structure, I want to do something in prose that does the same thing. I also wanted to cover as many of the different varieties of non-fictional forms that I could imagine.

We're all the time immersed in nonfiction in terms of the informative texts that we see on the backs of cereal boxes, in letters, interviews, tests that we take, our exams, or surveys. All of this amounted to something worth exploring in the same manner that Bach did. I think the *Art of Fugue* was really composed as a project for him to explore what he already knew about a topic that he loved, so it was largely for himself. Perhaps it also had a pedagogical purpose, to teach a younger musician how to write or compose in fugue. I wanted to try to cover as many structures as I could and also demonstrate to myself that I was thinking about all of the different things that you would need to think about in each case.

It was an added fun bonus that I would do something with the measures or the number of measures in each of those fugues. I wanted to employ that number in some kind of a structural way in each one of those. As far as the narrative arc of all the essays, it was kind of being written at the same time life was happening. I didn't anticipate getting involved with someone who was polyamorous, which is, of course, the relationship that the later essays really deal with. The earlier essays are about a more obsessive relationship I was working on with some kind of a crush, I guess, on a friend, and so in some ways that's how one relationship that wasn't very satisfying led into another one, which was for a while, but then ultimately made me ask other questions about what a relationship is.

IJ: Do you feel like other modern nonfiction authors should take chances and change up their traditional writing form and approaches like you have?

DM: Well, I think that there's far, far more variety in terms of what is potentially out there for everyone to explore. I mean, I don't necessarily think that everybody needs to do what I did, but it's more about how people should always be exploring the ends of their own comfort with the way that they write. If you're continuously writing the same kind of essay, you're not having as much fun as you can, and I believe it has to be engaging on that level for the writer. I think sometimes we can explore a topic and find solutions or ways of looking at something that satisfies us in the moment, but then there's always something kind of driving us to keep asking questions. I think by exploring with form, you're coming to answers that you could have never have come to before if you had just kept employing the same strategy. So I definitely think trying different things is what every writer should want, at least at some point in their life, after they've done the basic essay or story. I think exploring other ways is just going to enliven their work more.

IJ: While writing, how do you tap into your personal voice each time?

DM: Essayists, we're always fashioning personas, so we may be one version of ourselves in one essay, and maybe another version of ourselves in another. As far as voice goes, it's underneath how any writer writes. It's their own personal place where everything comes from. It may be that this time it's behind this mask, and another time it's behind a different mask or persona, but it's still that author's unique way of going about saying anything about the world at all, or about the way that their mind might skip from one thing to the next, or the kinds of things that that author tends to be preoccupied with. So I don't think it's a conscious thing. I think voice is much more unconscious, but it's something that you settle into. I would say by the time you're in your mid-20s, or your late 20s, you're probably beginning to write in a distinctive style, not to put an age on it. It seemed like it was really the end of my 20s when I started to feel like the essays I wrote all began to sound like they were written by me. So I just think it's about continuing to explore and try different things, but then at some point, anything you write is going to sound like you.

So I don't really have a way of sounding like me. I can tell when I'm not sounding like me, when I'm inauthentic, and that's a problem. Because that's when, especially as an essayist, I find myself being inauthentic. It's like I'm trying for something artificial, and it's so obviously not the actual direction that the essay wants to go in, but one that I'm trying to force on it. Maybe I'm trying to sound smart because I want to write about something I know about, and then I'll read it, and it sounds pretentious, or untrue. It's not as much about the voice of the individual writer, as it is about what the essay wants to be. If the essay is about something that you haven't hit upon yet, and you're trying all these different things, and it's just not feeling like it's coming together, it's not feeling like it's gelling, I think it might look on the surface like the writer's voice is failing, or not working out, but I think the writer hasn't really connected with what the piece wants to be. So voice then would be more about when the writer, and whatever it is that they're writing, are both meeting in a harmonious way.

IJ: What are some of your inspirations, and do you have deliberate hobbies or practices that you do to spark creativity?

DM: Right now it's video games. I just started *Mass Effect 3*, I'm beginning to have nightmares about it currently. I had a nightmare last night where, oh my gosh, it was horrible. Is that an inspiration? Maybe, because when I got up and I thought about it, I was like, "I don't like scary things. Why am I playing this game that is clearly giving me nightmares?" The other day, I was thinking, "Why did I even go down this road? I don't like shooter games. I don't like games with guns. Why have I gone from *Red Dead*

Redemption 2 to *Mass Effect* and dealing with assault rifles? This is not my style. What's going on?" But then again, what is it doing? It's inspiring me to think about how my tastes in games have broadened or widened. What is it about the experience of that game that I like that connects with the other games that I like that were more fantasy-based or something along those lines? Sometimes the inspiration is definitely a hobby. I'm playing these games, and I'm trying to figure out what it is I like about them.

Often, I'm doing something already and I'm like, "Why do I like this thing?" Which is not that much different than when we're writing essays about gardening or our great Aunt Matilda. We're trying to get to the bottom of a feeling or an association that we have with that person or that experience. I would like to say that books inspire me, but I'm a professor, so all the time, I'm reading stuff. I'm reading a lot of things that I wouldn't choose to read on a day-to-day basis. But when I am inspired, it's because someone's telling the story in a different way. Someone's telling a story that is interesting to me because, again, I've never seen this particular kind of story or I'm curious about how it's going to end up. Same with poems. Poems can really, I think, inspire me sometimes just on the level of language. If an author makes me feel something really intense and I'm like, "Whoa, what just happened? I read those words and it made me feel this intensely." I think we're all the time getting inspiration from the things that affect us.

Generally, the things that affect us emotionally, are the things that make us feel good about ourselves. Like getting an achievement in a video game. A lot of it is just our response to the world and whatever that world for us might be. In my case, I might read a student essay and it inspires me to think about my own life in a different way. That happens more frequently than I've ever acknowledged. Oftentimes, my students say things in papers, or I'll learn something about their lives, or something will happen in class and it will urge me to think about this life I've been leading that seems like it's in isolation, but I'm really connected with all of these other people all around me. So other people are endless sources of inspiration.

IJ: You're a person who's devoted a great deal to the writing, studying, and teaching of creative nonfiction, nonfiction, and writing in general. What is the value of nonfiction and creative nonfiction?

DM: Well, you know, nobody really asks for a defense of informative general nonfiction because we all know you need people to inform you about things and clear writing helps you understand the world better. But with literary nonfiction, it is an opportunity to actually hear someone else's thoughts on any given subject, high or low. It's not academic. It doesn't have to be, or it shouldn't be, academic. It shouldn't be an argument. It should really be, if it's going to be literary nonfiction, it's going to be more open, more about discovery, more like a poem in that it's about feeling. And I think all of this leads to the same thing that literature does best, which is to inspire greater empathy for others. I've always loved what Philip Lopate says in his introduction to *The Art of Personal Essay*. He says something about how reading essays helps the reader feel "less lonely and freakish." I've always loved that because we do often feel quite alienated from other people, whether we recognize it or not. Now, we may be on social media and we may have a million followers and we may be well-liked and popular and even extroverted. We may even have a sense of ourselves as being fully present and in the world with others. But when it comes right down to it, we are often intellectually and emotionally quite alone in a lot of our thoughts, our most private thoughts. Private thoughts may be explored when an essayist is willing to share private things about their thoughts, especially on subjects that people don't normally talk about.

Let's say that you're going through a loss or someone is sick, maybe they have cancer. It's not really something you can just talk about widely with a lot of different people and hear what they're going through, their experiences. It might be something you kind of keep to yourself because it's really painful, right? But you might read an essayist who is writing about that same subject and they're telling you things that ring true with your own experience. Again, these are not conversations you would have sought out with other people. I think that is a special aspect of nonfiction when you can connect with an author. Montaigne wrote in a way so that a lot of later writers saw him as a friend. They read him as a friend, more than just this guy, rather someone they know that they can count on to make them feel better about themselves and the way that they see the world. That's ultimately what the most beautiful aspect of literary nonfiction is: is that you can read someone's life like they're a friend.

IJ: What advice and words of wisdom would you give to aspiring writers and essayists who are just starting out?

DM: I do believe it's important to read and to read widely, read a variety of things, not just the kinds of things that you know you already like. I think it's good to look at the *Best American Essay* collections once in a while and see what's being published. Not that those are always the best essays, but why were they chosen?

Also, I think it's never a bad idea to start exploring literary journals and think about the places you might like to see your work appear and read some of the pieces that are being published and try to actually submit some work. And keep a journal. I'm beginning to see that is the most reliably advised thing that someone should do as a writer. Reserve a place for your thoughts that don't have to go anywhere so that you can be messy and sloppy and say things that you normally wouldn't have in your essays. Don't be afraid to digress. I think digression is super important. Sometimes we just feel like we have to stay on topic a little too much. I think that it's good to go off-topic and think about why. Why are we being led in this direction instead of what we wanted to write about? So listen to your digressions and allow your mind to, at least in that drafting stage, take you where the essay wants to go and not where you thought you were going. Be open to that process.

IJ: You've created impactful works like your "On the Power of the Imagination" essay, your *Echo's Fugue* collection, and most recently you're working on an inventive online Choose Your Own Adventure essay project, as mentioned during your English Reading Series visit. Will you keep creating varied projects and nonfiction and fiction pieces for the foreseeable future as the inspiration to do so strikes you?

DM: Yeah, and lately I'm thinking about for the first time ever playing around with NaNoWriMo. I thought, "You know what? This is completely impossible. I'm gonna write over 1,600 words every day. That's ridiculous. Okay, I'm gonna try it." So I think it's fun to say, alright, maybe it's not gonna be a conventional novel. Maybe I won't actually make it a full week. Maybe I won't make it three days, but let's give it a shot. And yes, I do want to explore more interactive types of fiction. Maybe not fiction particularly, but writing in general. I'm very curious about nonfiction, how nonfiction can employ branching narratives and interactive choice and that kind of thing. That's still...I think there's a lot out there that I haven't discovered yet in terms of reading, and what other people have done. So I think that's making me excited, and it's inspiring me to learn more and go outside of what's familiar.