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Interview with Alyson Hagy

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Interview with Alyson Hagy

Alyson Hagy grew up on a farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. She is a graduate of Williams College ('82) where she twice won the Benjamin Wainwright Prize for her fiction and completed an Honors thesis under the direction of Richard Ford. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan ('85) working with George Garrett, Alan Cheuse, and Janet Kauffman. While at Michigan, she was awarded a Hopwood Prize in Short Fiction and a Roy Cowden Fellowship. Early stories were published in Sewanee Review, Crescent Review, and Virginia Quarterly Review. In 1986, Stuart Wright published her first collection of fiction, Madonna On Her Back.

Interviewed by Ian Curtis

Inscape: In your novel *Scribe*, I felt like there was a unity between the setting and the characters, like the characters were almost a product of the fallen world they lived in. I was wondering if you could just kind of speak to the creation of the characters and then the setting.

Alyson Hagy: I had this vision of a woman sitting in a dilapidated house writing letters. That happens to me on occasion, and it often means it will lead to a short story, so I just sort of put it in my back pocket. As I thought about this woman in a dilapidated house, I thought "What if she were there because people were coming to ask her to write letters because she's literate?" It was quickly clear to me that I could set this in the place where I'd grown up and that the characters were also going to be from the Appalachian subculture that I'm from. I thought it might be a historical novel. I thought it might be set post-Civil War, 1870s, the sort of ugliness of Reconstruction, but then I thought to myself, "This is my chance to go back to the world I grew up in when the Civil War felt close and soak myself in those voices."

I think one of the prime reasons I am a writer is I grew up in a really oral storytelling tradition, so people built community and communicated through story. So I thought, "I don't know who this woman is, and I don't know who these people are coming to, but they can be the kinds of people that I know in my bones." I hadn't done a project like that set in Virginia since my second set of stories in a while, 20 years.

[G]eography influences character for sure in the Blue Ridge Mountains, because people can have privacy. You can get into these hollows and these small, sustainable farms. You can be off to yourself and independent. So, geography influences the community. I am a writer who's interested in places where it's hard for human beings to live; where it's not easy.

What I was trying to do in *Scribe* was to tell a story (or a series of stories) and have a character who needed to go on a journey where then there would be these stories told around her. I went back and read a lot of Appalachian folklore, which gave me [the] license to do crazy things, like the scene with Billy Kingery giving her the bowl.

I loved writing about Hendricks. I love the sort of stranger who shows up, and you don't really know who he is. I didn't know who he was for a while, but I didn't care. I just knew I was going to find out, and I really enjoyed figuring that out.

One thing I will say is, don't harness yourself to fashion or what you think should happen. If you've got stories to tell, and they seem to be out of the box or unusual or not what other people are doing, tell them. Because it might be necessary for you as a storyteller to go [into] that space. You must follow it. You must follow the stuff you're committed to. Otherwise, your writing is not going to be interesting. It won't be your passion. I spent a lot of time trying to talk myself out of some of the moves I was making in *Scribe*, but in the end, I just had to follow her.

Inscape: How do you know which stories are worth writing?

AH: That's a great question. One of my early mentors, the writer Richard Ford, said to me, "Before you start writing a novel, try to talk yourself out of it because it's going to be a three or four-year commitment." So, ask yourself, take some time. Keep some notes but think about it. "Is this important enough to you?" I have had some false starts. I'm not a natural novelist. I love writing short stories so

much. I came to the novelist game relatively late.

[T]here are always other writers out there who know more about Appalachian folk tales, or more about training horses, or about the Korean War—whatever these things that I’ve tried to write about. But there was always a character I just felt like I could live with for a while, and I really wanted to understand them. Some of them have been easier to live with than others, I have to say. Will Testerman in *Boleto* was a lot of fun. He has a sad life, but he’s a good person. I also had a lot of fun with the *Scribe* protagonist. She’s hard, but I had a lot of fun with her because I was able to go back to this Appalachia.

I’ve been writing hard for 40 years and the doubt is still powerful. I know it’s not fun to hear. I have to be willing to write poorly and then just keep the faith.

Inscape: How do you hold off the doubt in writing?

AH: I’m good at tuning it out, and I’m a good compartmentalizer. I read and I tend to write short stories on the side while I’m working on novels and that gives me a lot of pleasure. These things help me get out of my head. That helps.

My students were reminding me this week, how scary it can be to be in an MFA program, but also how scary it is to work on a first novel. I failed many times. What picked me up, I think, was that I love books—lots of different kinds of books—so much. I wanted to sing with that choir. There’s just something about writing alongside the books you love that feels really good.

Now, I’m lucky. Right? I have a job. I have a partner who has a job. For some, economic security is so important, and it should be. Being in the arts is triply scary. You may have a family, and that might be a worry. This was true for me when I was raising my kid. I had to find a balance and I did the best I could.

Inscape: *Scribe*’s characters were masterfully layered. Everyone was morally gray and everyone had more in their story to tell. Why did you choose to write about these types of characters?

AH: In Hendrick’s case, I think it has always seemed to me that characters who are very physically competent, maybe they’re warrior-type figures, often have more complicated interior lives than we might guess. Not always Hendricks is kind of a pirate figure or a highwayman, but he’s a good person. I knew he had been forced to learn to behave and act in certain ways to survive.

I think this also goes back to the way I grew up. [T]he brand of Christianity I was raised in was very interested in that kind of layering. That’s not true for all brands of Christians. It is for me. There would just be people every week who would be digging into the complexity of Saul or King Solomon. Reading the Bible like you’d read literary characters, and I think that that had a huge influence on me.

I believe there are very few human beings who are unredeemable.

Inscape: We’ve touched on this, but what role mentors have played in your writing career?

AH: My mentors have been very important, and they seem to have been there when I needed them the most. I went to a small liberal arts college. Their creative writing was a very, very tiny piece of the English major and I loved being an English major, but I went to college to be pre-med. Then there was a professor who read my essay on Robert Frost and called me into their office. I was so scared, and he walked me through my essay and where it was not logical, but he said, “Look what you’re doing here. You’re responding to Frost’s metaphors with metaphors of your own. Have you ever thought about taking a creative writing class?” It would never have occurred to me. The professor was a very fine poet and just plucked me out of a freshman class to kind of say “You’re maybe not the greatest analyst in the world, but you love language and I think you should have permission to play with language.” That was the first.

Then at Williams as a senior, Richard Ford, who was one of America’s finest writers, happened to be the visiting writer and he happened to agree, probably because we’re both from the South, to direct my thesis project. He took me on. He didn’t take other people on. I was a hard worker, so I didn’t disappoint him in that way, but he was hard on me because he wanted to see if it really mattered. He wasn’t hard, like cruel, but he asked me, “Why are you writing when you leave here? Nobody’s going to care. It’s easy to be an artist at a college because there’s a lot of privilege. But once you get out in the real world, really, nobody’s going to care about your stories. They aren’t going to. So why are you doing this and how much do you want to do?”

Richard also told me, “I will not write you a letter of recommendation for graduate school until you go

out in the real world and live for a while. If you go out in the real world and you're doing a job and you're still writing stories at night and on the weekend, you call me up and I'll write you a letter." After I graded all those high school papers, I was still writing my stories. Even I was surprised by that, and I did take it as a sign, so MFA.

In my MFA, I thought they were going to say to me, "You're good enough, but here's how to even get better. Do this." That was not what they did. I was actually frustrated because I kind of like to get A's in class or whatever. My professors really built it more like, how is writing working in your life? Here are all these books you need to read, like, yes, you've read George Eliot, you've read the classics, but here are all these writers you've never heard of and all these writers in translation you never heard of. You've got to read like a crazy person.

When I would ask a question about a story, they would just flip it right back to me, trying to train me. I had to work and understand myself so that when I was cast beyond the MFA, I would have some tools.

I've also had other mid-career people. I mean, Charles Baxter, one of our greatest story writers, was on the faculty at Michigan when I was a young faculty member, just a generous, kind person. Annie Proulx was out here in Wyoming when I moved here, just a tough and brilliant writer. Super, super kind to me. Also, Joy Williams, who's also hanging out in Wyoming now. I've been really lucky.

Inscape: What would be your advice for new writers?

AH: Play with language. Play with whatever drove you to want to write at first. So, it could be sound, it could be really at the level of syllable and sentence, or it could be the character. Your imagination is filled with these personalities you want to get down. It could be setting, it could be ideas. Some people are idea-driven writers. I'm not. But play [with] whatever draws you there, don't forget the joy, don't forget the play because that's the thing that carries us through.

You also read. Read like a crazy person. And not just the things you think you're supposed to read. Read what you like. I read so many comics as a kid. If they'd had graphic novels when I was a kid, I might be a graphic novelist. I loved those so much. If you love TV and video games, those can also be a part of your narrative practice. Film, music, there are a lot of ways that you can work on your craft. Some of the finest writers I've worked with were trained seriously in the sciences. They're both analytical and super curious. I would say to give yourself permission to make of language what you want to make of it, because we only have three or four key human impulses, and storytelling is one of them. So, join.