

The News From Joan: An Interview with Joan Wickersham by Amy Yelin

Joan Wickersham is the author of the groundbreaking memoir, *The Suicide Index: Putting My Father's Death in Order* (Harcourt 2008), a National Book Award Finalist. Her first novel, *The Paper Anniversary*, was published by Viking, and her fiction has appeared in magazines including *Agni*, *Glimmer Train*, the *Hudson Review*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Story*, as well as in *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and other anthologies. She has published essays and reviews in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*; and her op-ed column appears regularly in the *Boston Globe*. She has contributed and read on-air essays for National Public Radio's "On Point" and "Morning Edition." Joan received the *Ploughshares* Cohen Award for Best Short Story, and she has been awarded grants by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the MacDowell Colony, and Yaddo.

Joan's most recent book, *The News from Spain: Seven Variations on a Love Story* (Knopf, 2012), is "a wise and courageous and often brilliant collection of stories, written in clean, precise prose," according to Roberta Silman in her *Boston Globe* review. "It is not only a pleasure to read, but also breaks new ground in our perceptions of what a short story can be." The book was named one of 2012's best fiction picks by National Public Radio, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle*.

Amy Yelin: It's not every day an author publishes a collection of stories where every story has the same title, which also happens to be the same title as the book itself. Can you talk a moment about your book *The News from Spain*? How did this idea come about?

Joan Wickersham: The evolution of the book goes back years, to when I was a frazzled mother of two young children. I got this story idea in my head about the news from Spain and of course I didn't get a chance to write it down, so I forgot about it. A few days later, the line came back to me, but I couldn't remember what the initial story idea was, so I brainstormed a bunch of story ideas that could all be called the "News from Spain." Fast forward to 2006, and I was at the MacDowell Colony. I had just sold the *Suicide Index* and was working on a new novel and hating it. I thought *What am I going to do now?* So I went back to the news from Spain idea and wrote three love stories that all hung on this line.

Yelin: But what does the line mean? In the book description on Amazon.com, it says, "With uncanny emotional exactitude, Joan Wickersham shows how we never really know what's in someone else's heart, or in our own; how we continually try to explain each other and console ourselves; and how love, like storytelling, is ultimately a work of the imagination." How does this tie into the news from Spain?

Wickersham: Two stories in the finished book include literal news from Spain, and the rest use the title metaphorically. What I mean is that there's something about the news from Spain phrase that feels like this out of reach, elusive thing, and the stories in the book reflect that. I think of them as asymmetrical, thwarted love stories—not traditional ones. They are all about yearning for something you can't really have... something you can't even quite articulate. We think that love belongs in these neat little rooms, but in truth people have passionate, messy feelings that are secret and don't fit into any categories and don't get talked about much less written about, and I wanted to write about that kind of love. The kind that doesn't fit into any of the boxes.

Yelin: Can you give me an example?

Wickersham: One piece, which takes place in the 1960s, tells the story of a dancer married to a choreographer, but it's really about the relationship she has with a home health aide. I happen to love Mozart's operas, so in another story, I take the main character from *The Marriage of Figaro* and main character from *Don Giovanni* and explore what would happen if these two people met. What I was aiming for with the new book was a sort of ballet—where each section is its own entity, yet all the sections dance together. I think of it as highly choreographed. These are separate pieces that are meant to talk to each other, so there are elements in each story that resonate with things in other stories.

Yelin: I think it's safe to say that you like to push the literary envelope. In *The Suicide Index*, you break the rules of traditional memoir—like using an index structure instead of a traditional narrative arc. You also move readers back and forth in time and emotional territory with chapter titles such as: Suicide: Act of, Attempt to Imagine; Suicide: Numbness and, Bullwinkle; and Suicide: Romances of Mother in Years Following. And you switch point of view a lot, moving from first to second to third so intuitively and appropriately that you rarely if ever jar the reader—at least not this reader. So where'd you get your writing chutzpah?

Wickersham: I tried to be a good girl for a long time, and it didn't really get me anywhere. Eventually I got angry; I thought OK, screw it. I'm invisible, so I may as well just be invisible and do what I really want to do. This shift began when I was in my forties working on *The Suicide Index*. Before that, I used to think of the phrase "paying your dues" in terms of the rewards you would get; pay your dues and then the door opens. But now I wonder if paying your dues actually means the door in your head opens. The door opens in your head, and you start being able to do a different, freer kind of writing. Maybe that's the apprenticeship. So it's less about the profession, and more about what you can access in yourself.

Yelin: Did you always know you wanted to be a writer?

Wickersham: I had a fifth grade teacher who was passionate about Newbery Award-winning books, which she encouraged us to read. She'd keep track of what books we each read, to the point that she fostered in us, well in me at least, a competitive impulse to read a lot of great books. She also had us write stories, which we would then stand up and read in front of the class. I just loved it.

When I was fifteen, my parents heard about the Phillips Academy summer session in Andover, Massachusetts. They sent me there because I was the kind of kid who loved school... and they thought I'd meet interesting people, which I did. I wanted to take a theater course, but it was full. So my second choice was the writing course. The teacher was a poet who had us reading poetry and very solemnly discussing Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and embarrassingly, Richard Brautigan. We were so earnest. But it was really the first time I ran into other people who took themselves seriously in that writerly way, and it made me think *oh I can do this*.

Yelin: And then you went to Yale, right? Where you majored in Art History?

Wickersham: Yes, but I started as an English major. What I discovered was that the way English was being taught and the way they were discussing books at Yale didn't make any sense to me. I don't know if it was the University, or the times, but I decided that I'd rather major in art history because I'd probably never get a chance to look at and talk about paintings again in my life. I did, however, take a couple of writing classes at Yale; one with John Hersey, an absolutely extraordinary teacher. He set up a rhythm

where you wrote a story every other week, and in the weeks in between, you revised. He also spent a lot of time with individual students. And he really, really emphasized revision. At the time, I was too young to know how to revise. I would write my story and it either worked or it didn't work, and I didn't know what to do about it if it didn't work. So I couldn't really get very far in his class. But I understood enough about what he was saying that as I got older, I was able to put into practice some of his teachings on revision. I still think of him when I edit; he taught me to be patient and rigorous.

Yelin: So would you say John Hersey was a mentor for you? Do you have other mentors?

Wickersham: For me, books have been my mentors. It's always been about reading books that were daring in some way and thinking, *oh, I can do this*. And it didn't mean I would do exactly what that writer did. But it made me realize I'm such a good girl, and I don't have to be. I can take some risks. I've also been inspired by people I've met at artist colonies. Not just writers, but also composers, painters, and people in other disciplines who helped me really understand what artists' lives are like. I had a very unrealistic understanding of what a writer's life was like for a long time.

Yelin: What did you think it was like?

Wickersham: I thought you sat down and you started typing at page one and you kept going until you got to the end and you wrote "The End" and then you sent it to your publisher and your publisher published it. It seems ridiculous, but I really thought I was doing it wrong because my life wasn't looking that way. In high school and college I had this facility for staying up all night and banging out a story, and it worked. But as I got older and my writing became more complicated and ambitious, I couldn't pull it off any more. So I thought *oh I guess I'm really not meant to be a writer after all...* although I kept going.

One of the best things that ever happened to me was during my first residency at an artist's colony, at MacDowell in 2004. I remember the first day was horrible. I didn't get anything done. And I thought... *Oh great. Here I am. I'm in this writer's colony, and I've got all this wonderful free time, and I'm a COMPLETE fraud. I'm going to be here for a month, and nothing is going to happen.* Then, at dinner that night, I sat down next to a composer and he asked me, "How was your day?" I was so upset I couldn't even fake it. I blurted out, "I had a horrible day." And he said, "I had a horrible day too. Tomorrow we'll both have good days." I found that so comforting.

That's one of the things that I think is a real gift when you go to these artist colonies, or an MFA program, or a place like Grub Street in Boston. There's a kind of macho that writers have, I think, where they don't tell the truth. They don't tell the truth about how awful it is, how many rejections there are, how hard it is. But when you go to the colonies, people drop that nonsense; there's more vulnerability and more honesty about a day's work. You start to see that people have good days and bad days. Maybe they heard from their gallery owner, and the owner said something crushing, and yet they are going to work tomorrow anyway. You get a sense of how much buffeting people go through.

Yelin: I think as a writer, or any artist, you need to be reminded of that over and over again, because you get stuck.

Wickersham: Yes, you get stuck. I think for writers, or any kind of artist, to be honest with each other is a gift. Because the fear is that you're going to say "I had a horrible day," and the person is going to say, "I never have horrible days."

Yelin: So I'm curious about that time between your very early days as a writer, and then 2004, when you went to your first colony. You have two sons who are grown now. What was it like when you were

raising a family... were you writing then? Were you dreaming about going to writer's colonies?

Wickersham: No, I wasn't thinking about writer's colonies, but I was trying to get published. There was one story, "Commuter Marriage," which I think I sent out for five years. Over time, I got very discouraged so my husband rented a PO Box and that's where the rejections would go. They wouldn't come to the house; he would collect them, and I would never know about it. Then he finally came to me one day and said "Guess what? The *Hudson Review* accepted your piece!" After "Commuter Marriage" got published in the *Hudson Review*, it was chosen for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories*. What I love about this experience is it says "you just never know." That story got rejected so many times. I think people new to writing have to understand how tough the publishing part is, and accept that there are people who are lucky and find success right off the bat. Yet if it doesn't happen that way, it's still possible. Eventually that same story also became the first chapter of my first novel, *The Paper Anniversary*, although I didn't know I was writing a novel at the time.

Yelin: Did your career pretty much take off after you published that first story?

Wickersham: Not really. And it's still hard. I've certainly had times where I thought, "Oh now I've made it." And then the next thing is you get a form rejection letter. There's never a feeling that you can let your breath out and from now on it's going to be easy. There are always new kinds of rejections and humiliations. I think writing is a bottomless pit of potential humiliation. Well, writing isn't, but trying to get published certainly can be.

Yelin: Can you talk more about the process of writing your first book, the *Paper Anniversary*?

Wickersham: After the story "Commuter Marriage" was published, I was hugely encouraged. And I needed that encouragement. I wrote some more stories about the same characters, and I wondered if I could connect those stories. Eventually I sent out four stories to a couple of agents, and one of them took me on. I wrote six more pieces, and she was able to sell them all as the first ten chapters of a book. I was thrilled.

Yelin: But then did you map it out? You know that famous quote by E.L. Doctorow about writing fiction? He compares it to driving a car at night. "You never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

Wickersham: What I knew was this: I had this young couple Maisie and Jack. I knew the arc of the book was they break up, they get back together, they try to make it work and it does eventually work but ...I knew that getting back together was bumpy, but I didn't know what those bumps were. So in that way, I had a very basic arc of the book, but I'm not someone who maps things out beforehand. I really have to fumble my way along.

Yelin: This book was about love... as is the new one. Is this what you are most drawn to as a writer? Is love your obsession thematically?

Wickersham: I think it is. I'm really interested in relationships. I'm curious both in what happens between people, and what happens in your own head about a relationship, which are usually two different things.

Yelin: Where did the inspiration for *The Paper Anniversary* come from? Was it from real life?

Wickersham: I don't know if this is the same for you, but often the inspiration comes from something that doesn't even end up in the book. For me it was walking down the street one day, and I saw a couple unloading a bed from a U-Haul truck. In my head I started coming up with a whole story about this bed... and then it ended up that I didn't even write about the bed and the U-Haul, but somehow that was the germ. And then I think all kinds of things from your own life find their way into fiction. In some ways you might be aware of this, thinking *uh oh I hope nobody catches me*. A friend said to me after she read *The Paper Anniversary*, "I liked your book and it was so interesting to see my apartment in the book!" and I was thinking "What?" Subconsciously I had taken the physical details of her apartment and put them in the book.

Yelin: I was wondering how much of the book was true when I was reading it. For instance, you choose to have Jack inherit and work for a French fry company. So I wondered if you ever worked for a French fry company.

Wickersham: No. But I did work in advertising as a copywriter and did some writing for a French fry company. But on some level, I think what was "true" of Jack's character and situation had to do with my father, who had been president of a company that made pins and needles, sewing notions. What resonated was the idea of trying to sell a product that was not terribly desired. So as I was writing the book, I drew on some of my own history. It's interesting, though. This book was written before my father killed himself. Yet here was this character, Jack, having to deal with his father's failure in a way. So there was some stuff that I may have been picking up on with my father then that I didn't even realize.

Yelin: When did your father kill himself?

Wickersham: In February of 1991, when I was in the middle of writing *The Paper Anniversary*. I had this book contract with a deadline, and then this horrible thing happened. The publisher gave me an extension of about six weeks, but it was really hard. I feel that as a writer, you need to be able to get very quiet and listen, and I couldn't hear anything. I felt like I had to fake my way through the rest of the book. But I finished it.

Yelin: That must have been a really difficult time for you. How soon after your father's suicide did you begin writing about it?

Wickersham: I wrote the first piece about it in 1995. I tried to write it as a novel first. I finished that book in 2003, and my agent tried to sell it, but no one was interested. This was heartbreaking for me at the time. Now I look back on this failure as a blessing. I'm so glad it didn't sell because it would have been only a so-so novel.

Yelin: So then how did your memoir, that extraordinary work of art titled *The Suicide Index, Putting My Father's Death in Order*, come to be?

Wickersham: It was a long process. Remember that I had young children at the time. My older son was born in '87; my younger in '93. Alice Walker has an essay about being a writer with children, in which she cautions writers to have only one child, "because with one you can move; with more than one you are a sitting duck." I'm glad I had two, but you know that cliché about doing it all? I think you can do it all, but you just have to do it sequentially. I wish I had understood that when I was younger. I spent a lot of time beating myself up about not writing. I wish I had just accepted that that's how it is right now. It won't always be that way.

Anyway, after the book didn't sell, I put it aside. I was very depressed for a long time. Eventually, however, I went back to the book to try and revise it. But even then, I was still envisioning the work as some sort of continuous narrative. It wasn't until I went to the MacDowell Colony in 2004 that something shifted.

Yelin: I went to your workshop about breaking rules at Grub Street's The Muse and the Marketplace, and I heard you tell a story about throwing away a 400-page manuscript at MacDowell. I think everyone in the audience gasped when you said that.

Wickersham: I brought the original draft of *The Suicide Index* with me to MacDowell where I thought I could rewrite it. Well, my revision process consisted of throwing the manuscript out, except for a few pieces that I kept, which I thought were pretty good. I hung those pieces on the wall, and I had this wonderful epiphany: *what if, instead of trying to write about this experience year by year or chronologically, which wasn't working, I write about it thing by thing?* What if I write about my parents' relationship with my husband's family; then I write about my mother's relationship with Ted, a client of hers, which turned into a complicated relationship? And on and on. So I wrote up these fragments for a while and felt pretty good about it. I then sent a manuscript out to a new agent who basically said, "there's something really great here, I really respond to this material but it doesn't have the arc of a book."

Yelin: And what was your response to that?

Wickersham: Initially I was pissed. I thought: you can't make me make this all neat and tidy! I felt strongly that there was something about suicide that resisted a traditional narrative arc. Eventually, however, I realized she wasn't really telling me to make the book neat and tidy. She was just telling me that the reader needed some kind of handrail or guide through the material, and it just wasn't there. In the end, I thought what she had pointed out to me was right. I knew I had to address the problem. I sent the manuscript out to a couple of friends who had similar reactions. One said she needed a place to stand through the blitzkrieg; another said the reader needs some emotional relief, but he also used an architectural analogy. He compared it to a relief carving on a building, which provides a different texture. So I had all this pattering around in my head when a friend loaned me his house in the Berkshires for a month to do some writing.

Yelin: I'm guessing this is where it all came together for you?

Wickersham: Yes. I was at this house in the Berkshires, and I was reviewing a chapter in the newest draft called "Numbness, an Index" where I had written about the sensation of numbness, which was such an important part of how I felt after my father died. The chapter was broken up into these alphabetized sections about numbness and I thought *what if I made the whole book an index?* So I started to do that, and after one day I decided it was too gimmicky, and it was never going to work. But when I called my husband and told him what I was trying to do, he told me something that really helped me then; something he had learned about in architectural school called a *parti*, or an initial scheme for a building. The hardest part in designing a building is often the beginning—so an architect creates a *parti*, a schematic design of the building. Whether or not the *parti* actually shows up in the finished building, it allows the architect to begin and get through the design process. So my husband said, "Why not just use the index as your *parti*? Either it will work and be your book, or at the very least it will help you generate a bunch of new material." That gave me the courage to try the index structure because I didn't have to decide in advance if it was going to work. But over the next few days I realized it was going to work.

Yelin: And the rest, as they say, is history?

Wickersham: Well, it wasn't perfect. After a year I went back to that same agent, and even at that point she didn't take the book. She thought the ending was a problem—so I took it back. I worked on the ending for a few more months, sent it back to her, and she said "OK we're ready to go." But it's interesting... Here I was: I had already published a book, I had published stories in literary magazines and elsewhere, and it still took me such a long time to get this agent and get her to take my book. Earlier you asked me... *do you ever feel like you get to a point where you've paid your dues and the door just opens?* And I think the answer is no. I feel like this agent really helped me—even if in the end she hadn't taken me on as a client, she pushed me to create a much better book. Sometimes young writers want so badly the validation of an agent or a publisher, but what they really need to do is take their piece out of the publishing arena altogether and make it a better work.

Yelin: I want to talk for a moment about how you change point of view so effectively in the *Suicide Index*. How did you know when which point of view was going to work best? I'm in a writer's group, and sometimes a couple of the other writers have a knee-jerk reaction when I try to change POV, as though it's a hard and fast rule that you have to stay in the same POV.

Wickersham: I believe it's intuitive... I do think you need to know the rules, and then you can break the rules. The only way you can know is your own intuition or the response you get from readers.

Yelin: You mentioned when you were at MacDowell that you hung a few excerpts from your old manuscript up on the wall. People have suggested that to me before. Is there really something to looking at your work in another visual way?

Wickersham: I find it very reassuring to tack up my pages—to see where I am in a story. I think of the image you brought up earlier about the headlights; the thing that's so hard about any kind of longer work is that you have to be thinking about the immediate next step of the story, like what's the next image, or incident. I get very scared. It's like being in deep water—you can't tell how far away you are from the surface. There's something about mapping it out that way—even with a short story. By having it up on the wall, I can examine the pace and see if it's uneven. With a book, it's not about having a map of the whole book, necessarily, but of the whole region I'm working on. I find it very comforting.

Yelin: In your talk on breaking rules, you advised writers to "listen to their books or stories and discover and maintain the internal logic of the piece." How does one do that exactly?

Wickersham: My way is to just get it wrong and be honest with myself about it. That's the real paradox of writing; you have to write something, anything, so you have something to react to. You rarely get it right in the first draft; once in a while you do, but most of the time, at least in my experience, you have to fumble around and get it wrong for a while. Yet it's so hard to write badly—to let yourself write badly I mean—I just can't stand it! But I think that's the way you listen, because the piece says *no no no that's not me. You're getting it wrong.*

Yelin: So you need to remember to be patient as a writer.

Wickersham: Yes, and have a healthy tolerance for discomfort.

Yelin: There are a lot of lines in the *Suicide Index* that I just love... especially the ones that hit

emotional truths on the head. I'm going to give one example, which comes from the chapter "Life Summarized in an Attempt to Illuminate," where you are pretending to be a biographer and you write, "Life is harder and sadder on the other side of the photographs." How did you arrive at this epiphany?

Wickersham: You'll notice when you read a biography, in the beginning it's so optimistic and so exciting. Somebody's going somewhere, and all this marvelous stuff happens until they reach the pinnacle. And then the second half of the biography, which is typically after the photographs, is always the decline. I first had that image in relation to my father when I was writing the failed novel about his suicide. It didn't work in that version, but when I was revising at MacDowell, that idea of the biography and the photographs just popped up again. Sometimes these things come up, and you don't know where they go exactly or what to do with them, but you keep them filed in your head, and at the right time, they come back to you.

Yelin: Do you do any journaling? There's a great line in an essay by Rebecca McClanahan about when you write something in your journal, it's like dropping a letter in the mailbox to your subconscious. Sometimes, when I write something in my journal and I completely forget that I ever wrote it, it pops up again in my writing... so similar to your "filing away" idea, except on paper.

Wickersham: When I was younger, I had the "good girl" journal, which was just *yuck*. It wasn't until I was in my mid-forties that I could really write honestly. So I do keep a journal now, though when I'm at home, I find it very hard to be alone with myself and write honestly... I just don't want to know what's in there. But when I'm at a writer's colony, it's different.

Yelin: I teach a class on essay writing and talk about Phillip Lopate's belief that as an essayist, you must be willing to "think on the page." In *The Suicide Index*, although it's a book, I felt like I was completely following somebody who was "thinking on the page." I know other readers had the same reaction. Nancy Pearl, of NPR's Morning Edition, said of your book, "Honest, brave, incredibly moving and completely unflinching in its honesty." Can you talk about how you are able to write so honestly, and if that was hard for you at first?

Wickersham: Yes, it was hard. That's what those eight years before I got to MacDowell were about: Writing dishonestly. After a suicide, you do have something you are trying to work out—Why? It took me a long time to realize that wrestling with the story *was* the story.

Yelin: You also come off sounding very wise. And I don't mean wise in the rude sense... I mean as someone with wisdom to impart. I sometimes struggle with that when I'm writing, like who am I to say *that*?

Wickersham: I think if you are going to impart some kind of wisdom or truth, and have it resonate with the reader, it has to be very, very specific. When I'm teaching memoir, one of the things people worry a lot about is *who is going to care about my story?* Ironically, the advice given by a lot of people is that you have to make it universal. But the advice I would give is the exact opposite of that. Make it really, really specific, because that specificity is what makes your story universal. If you try too hard to sound smart and profound, it's just going to be porridge.

Yelin: I was reading somewhere that you have read *Great Expectations* four times. Do you do that with a lot of books? And what do you look for when you reread? Are you trying to learn something from the book?

Wickersham: I think I reread because I miss a certain voice. Right now I'm reading *Middlemarch* again for the fourth or fifth time... there's a way that you read the first few pages and you let your breath out and say "Oh my god, I'm home."

Yelin: So you're not really focusing on craft or structure when you're rereading?

Wickersham: No, I don't think so. I think my understanding of craft is very intuitive. I've never been attracted to any kind of formal writing program, but I learn a lot from reading. My learning hasn't been conscious learning. It's been utterly intuitive. And it's not just from reading good books and stories and essays. It's also about reading bad things and being appalled.

Yelin: As someone who is self-taught, then, what are your thoughts on MFA in Creative Writing programs?

Wickersham: The good thing about MFA programs is that they encourage people to take writing seriously. It's good that people get to spend time devoted to writing and reading and making friendships that will help sustain them in their writing lives. What I don't like about these programs is how they professionalize writing. Meaning, in order to get a teaching job at a university these days, you need to have an MFA, or a PhD, which is really crazy because a lot of the best writers I know don't have an MFA and they are wonderful teachers. I think you need to have professionalism around architecture or medicine because public safety is a concern. But writing is an art. And I just think the idea of professionalizing an art is creepy. Now, someone who is entering an MFA program because they want to spend a lot of time reading and writing and making writer friends is choosing it for the right reasons... but someone who is doing it because they think that an MFA is preparing them for a profession should maybe think twice. The only reason to write is for the love of it. And the only reason to go into an MFA program is for the love of it. I have a friend at Bennington right now...and he's just in love. His whole life is reading and writing. So how can anyone say that's not good? That's great.

Yelin: I'm curious—who gives you feedback on your writing. Do you have a writers' group?

Wickersham: You know, I tend to be a very private person, and I don't like to show a lot of my stuff, especially in the early stages. I have a very thin skin. When the work is really fresh, I can't bear hearing what anyone has to say about it, so I have to let it cool off a bit first. But I do think writers' groups can be helpful for some people, and there were times in my life they were more helpful than other times. My husband, Jay, is a really good reader. He wasn't always. Early in our marriage, I'd show him something that was raw in the writing process, and he wouldn't understand it. He'd just say, "It's good," and I'd yell, "What do you mean 'it's good?!'" But I feel like we have become better. Now I wait longer. I don't just show him three words. And he has become very good at formulating a response—he is one of my best readers.

Yelin: I was recently talking with a writer who said he needs to have a wall behind him when he's writing. Do you have certain rituals or superstitions? Do you have to write with a specific pen? Or have a cup of coffee? Or be in a certain place? What works for you?

Wickersham: I have to have a cup of tea. That's BIG. But really, I do my best writing only when I get away from home. That's why I love artist colonies so much. When I'm home, I have a lot of social guilt. I don't know if you're this way, but when someone asks me "can you have lunch" and I don't really want to because I'm working but they keep asking, there are only so many times I can say no. In the same way, when people ask "can you do this for me, write this evaluation for me," I'm happy

to do it, but at the same time, all of these obligations just eat away at my days and then my weeks. Now, when you go to a colony, there's no telephone, no email, no obligations. You can say to everybody in your life, "hey, I'm out of commission for the month of September." There's just something very ruthless about the colony experience; it's like they put a Doberman pinscher at the door, and it barks at everyone who comes near. I don't have the guts to do that for myself, but having it done for me is great.

It could also be that since my time is limited when I'm at a colony, I'm ferocious about how I use it. The quantity that I am able to produce when I am at a colony is extraordinary compared to what I can do at home. I write a bi-weekly column for the *Boston Globe*, and that kind of deadline is really nice... an essay every two weeks. But I can't seem to get deep down into a longer piece at home. I wish I could. If I had one wish as a writer, it would be to be able to set up that sort of regimen on my own; to get into that state of trance and maintain it on my own. I said to a painter at one of the colonies that I wish I could be more ruthless about my work when I'm home and she said "that's kind of a harsh word. What if you just said you wanted to be faithful to it?" I thought that was a nice way to put it. You just show up every day and be faithful to your writing. But I have enormous self-doubt, and it's hard for me to defend that writing time when it may be that nothing happens during those hours. At colonies, you can have a good day and a bad day all in the same day. Even a bad day is a good day. But when I'm home, it just feels like *oh I didn't have lunch with so and so and I didn't return these phone calls and I never got to the store to shop for dinner... AND I didn't get any writing done.*

Yelin: Let's talk a little about your teaching. Aside from the occasional Grub Street workshop, do you teach elsewhere? Do you like teaching?

Wickersham: I haven't done that much teaching, but when I do it, I just love it. For the last few years I've taught at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center. One of my biggest concerns as a teacher is how we talk about each other's work. I have heard so many stories about people who felt brutalized in workshops or writing groups. I try to help students in my workshops understand what constitutes a respectful and constructive response.

Yelin: What tips for critiquing do you give to your students?

Wickersham: I suggest the kind of critique I like to receive. For instance, I love when I give people my work to read, and they tell me what questions they have. When somebody says "I want to know more about such and such," or someone says "you went on a long time about the sister," that's helpful feedback. What I don't like is when people tell me what to do with a piece, like "I think you should do XYZ." I suppose you could say I prefer a respectful response to a prescriptive one. Fortunately, the people I've taught so far have been respectful to each other... there is something very lovely about the energy that can happen in groups.

I also like to give writing exercises so students can generate new material. I've found this part of teaching to be really useful for people, including me, as I often do the exercises too. One exercise I assigned at a Grub Street workshop was to write a vivid portrait of someone using just a few telling details. What I wrote during that class turned into one of the pieces in *The News from Spain*. So you never know where a simple writing exercise can lead.

Yelin: I loved that piece/story—about a girl who is only one of two female students at an all-boys school. I particularly loved the surprise, twist ending, which I won't give away here. But again, I apologize... I must know if you were writing from personal experience in that story?

Wickersham: Yes, partly. I actually went to a lot of boys' schools. I spent the seventh and eighth grade in an all-boys school with one other girl. Then I went to another school that was 250 boys and fifteen girls... then Exeter, which was 900 boys and 200 girls, and then Yale, which had only recently become co-ed. That's the world I was growing up in. Oh, and one other autobiographical detail from that story: I did play the string bass... *badly*. The rest is fiction.

Amy Yelin, a Pushcart nominee, has published essays and interviews in literary magazine and anthologies. She received a notable essay recognition in the Best American Essays 2007, and is the recipient of a Sustainable Arts Foundation fellowship, and scholarships to The Prague Summer Program and The Norman Mailer Writer's Colony.