

## Jo Ann Beard Interview

Jo Ann Beard's essay, "The Fourth State of Matter," about a workplace shooting in the University of Iowa's Physics department where she worked, put the then 30-something year old writer on the literary map. Shortly after the New Yorker published that piece, *The Boys of my Youth*, her book of autobiographical essays, came out to much acclaim. Laura Miller of *The New York Times Book Review* wrote, "Beard remembers (or imagines) her childhood self with an uncanny lucidity that startles." Today she is recognized as a writer who merges fiction and nonfiction techniques, creating an art form that lies somewhere in between. Beard's work has also appeared in *Story*, *Tin House*, *the Iowa Review*, *the Best American Essays*, *O Magazine* and elsewhere. She has been the recipient of a Whiting Foundation award and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts. She has just completed a novel, *In Zanesville*, which will be published by Little, Brown in the spring of 2011.

**You seem to be a pretty private person. You were quoted as saying this, but it was also hard to track you down for this interview. I'm wondering how you balance that with writing creative nonfiction and revealing yourself in that way.**

I don't believe writing creative nonfiction is synonymous with revealing yourself, or anyway it hasn't been for me. The goal is to use one's own experience as a launching point to talk about something bigger, something beyond the writer. What you want to reveal is not necessarily yourself, but some kind of truth. That's a lot harder, by the way, than confessing that at age seventeen you drunkenly stole steaks out of someone's parent's freezer and wandered through the neighborhood in the dark, feeding them to various tied-up dogs.

An anecdote, no matter how amusing or startling, is not literature, and we have to remember that that's our job, as artists—to try to make literature. It's exceptionally hard, but rewarding.

Of course, a dog would probably say that a frozen steak delivery in the middle of the night doesn't need any further meaning, but we aren't dogs. Alas.

**I get what you mean about that larger truth but still, in getting to that truth and keeping it interesting for the reader, you need to reveal certain details about yourself. Are you saying it never feels uncomfortable for you to reveal certain things about your personal life or your family life?**

Sure, it would be uncomfortable for me to reveal certain things, so therefore I don't. Even though to the reader it seems as though they know me and they're getting a glimpse into my psyche or something like that, in fact, what I do mostly and what I think most creative nonfiction writers do is create a persona that they use to illustrate their ideas. I never reveal anything that I don't feel comfortable revealing and I do hold things back that belong only to me and not to my writing or to that persona that I create in my writing.

**And how far is that persona from who you really are?**

I think it's very close to who I am in certain ways, but I think it's also an idealized version of who I am, or who I wish I had been. I've always been an edge-dweller, the person in the room no one pays much attention to. The middle-child in all ways and in all situations. The middle-class middle child from the middle west. It's actually a great way to live, a comfortable, useful vantage point, and it's served me well.

**I'm curious what the first story was that you ever had published?**

It was a story called “Coyotes,” which is collected in *The Boys of my Youth*. It was a personal essay but published as fiction in *Story Magazine*.

**Do you remember how you felt when you got the letter that your first story was published?**

Actually I had an agent at the time and she called and told me. Although I was a bit disappointed that it was published as fiction, mostly I was just really happy.

**This was before *the New Yorker* piece was published, right? “The Fourth State of Matter” – the piece that changed everything? Yet you already had an agent?**

Yes, this was in June of 1991. I went to a conference that year in Utah called Writers at Work, and I met an agent there through my first writing teacher, Bob Shacochis. The agent, Elizabeth Grossman, liked “Coyotes” and found someone to publish it for me.

**So she became your agent based on this one story, “Coyotes”?**

Yes, she became my ongoing agent ...even though I didn’t really have anything she could sell. She and I became friendly and worked together and when I finished something I would show it to her. She just kept tabs on me for a few years and at some point I had enough essays that they made up a book and she began sending that book around. Lizzie was the difference between me having a writing career and not having a writing career, I believe. At some point, she moved from New York to the west and began writing books herself. She’s gone native.

**So when you started writing these essays during your writing program, were you were aiming for a book?**

No. But I worked really hard in my graduate program and when I was done, I realized I had enough pages that it could be a book. Before I got into the nonfiction writing program, I had written most of a novel that I had put away, so I had some experience with thinking about and writing a book. So it didn’t come out of nowhere for me ...it was more or less my second book.

**You didn't know that you were writing a book – yet all the essays in *Boys of my Youth* seem thematically linked?**

They only seem that way because they appear together in a book. They're thematically all over the map actually. I was writing them for nonfiction writing workshops that I was taking at Iowa. It wasn't until the end of the program that I put together all the pieces together.

**But for me, as a reader, they all seem to touch upon the theme of boys of my youth in some way.**

Well, that's an illusion.

**But it works!**

I thought it worked too, but no one else did, with the notable exception of Lizzie Grossman. For a long time that collection went around and around all the different tiers of the publishing world and all of them turned it down for the same reason, which is that it was a collection of disparate essays instead of a book with one narrative thread. So all of them would say the same thing, which was that they were interested in the writing, but they wanted me to remake the book so that it would be one long narrative.

**And what was your response?**

My response was that it was impossible. That it would be like asking someone to take a short story collection and turn it into a novel. It just wouldn't work. To me it was absolutely a collection of essays and not a memoir or one long narrative. And even now people will say to me, "Some of those chapters don't hang together." Well, that's because they're not chapters.

**I guess I was able to find something in each of them that made them a cohesive whole in terms of being a book.**

See, that's a generous reading. It's great when there is a meeting of the minds between reader and writer, when they work together to create something that's bigger than the sum of its parts. Thank you.

**Everything changed for you when you got the piece in *The New Yorker* published. Can you talk a bit about that?**

In 1996, people were really interested in this issue of workplace shootings, and I think my story gave them a certain kind glimpse into what that experience felt like from the inside of one of those incidents. I had very unfortunate subject matter that was also timely. I think right around then too *The New Yorker* became interested in the idea of creative nonfiction vs. fiction, and how there was a kind of gray area between the two. So my piece was published in the fiction issue, but they stated it was something in between fiction and nonfiction, a "true" story, as we say. That changed things for me professionally.

**Shortly after getting *Boys of my Youth* published, you are quoted in a BookPage.com interview saying that publication was more negative than positive. I was curious about that.**

I would disagree with that now. Being published makes a difference to a writer. It makes life better because you have an audience; because writing is lonely work and getting published makes it less lonely. It's nice to have your work out in the world and know that people are reading it, and thinking about it.

**And wanting to interview you.**

Honestly, not so much that. It's hard hearing yourself quoted when you know you're basically an idiot and that you don't think half the time before you speak and that your deep and ingrained

contentiousness means you will even disagree with yourself if there's no one else around to disagree with. So that when you read things you said even a week ago—let alone years ago in BookPage—you realize once again that humility in your case has been earned.

**I wanted to ask you about your essay, “Bonanza,” which was about a visit to your grandmother's house. I was reading along and admiring all the details in it but starting to get kind of bored, which maybe was intentional, as a reflection of the character's state (the character being you as a child). Then I get to the scene where the show *Bonanaza* is on TV and you, the child, have this epiphany of how depressing your grandmother and her husband's life really is...and you start crying and suddenly I'm bawling and thinking, huh? I didn't see that coming! It was really powerful, and surprising. So I was curious how that piece came to be...was it just a little kernel that you remembered and then you started writing and you got to the universal meaning in it?**

I had a writing friend back in Iowa, a writer name Mary Ellen, and we would do this writing exercise late at night where we'd assign ourselves a topic over the phone and then we'd hang up, write for 50 minutes, and then call each other back and read what we'd written. One night the topic was an experience in a childhood house...that was the directive...and so “Bonanza” was my 50 minute writing exercise.

**And you wrote that whole piece? Or an early draft of it?**

I think I wrote that whole piece actually. I was a better writer then. Back then it was like being a high wire walker and I never looked down. Now all I do is look down. But yeah, it was really, really fun to write that. I still remember it: I remember being in my house in Iowa City, in my abandoned divorce house, with my dogs, sitting at my big desk in the living room. I remember the lamp light, I remember smoking cigarettes, I remember drinking a beer and I remember writing that piece. And then I remember having the absolute, unbelievable pleasure of calling Mary and having her read her piece to me and then reading my piece to her.

**So were you surprised where that piece went as your wrote it?**

I'm not sure I was surprised, but I'm sure I was excited by it. Because even talking about the writing of that piece that night in Iowa City and how much fun it was, even now I have that sort of racing heart feeling you have when the writing is going well. I'm sure I was very excited by it because I knew I had hit on something important from my past. I'm sure that Mary made me feel excited about it too.

**Do you still share work with Mary? Is she still in Iowa?**

Yes, she is still in Iowa and we still share work. Yesterday at about 4pm I was reading something to Mary over the phone and getting that same excited feeling and today she is going to read something to me. My writing life would not be the same if I did not having Mary to bounce things off of.

**Was she someone you met in your program?**

She and I worked together many years ago at the University of Iowa. We job-shared, so we were rarely in the office at the same time but we became really close by leaving notes for each other in the desk drawer. We were true writing friends from the very beginning.

**What are your feelings about writing groups?**

I had really good experience with a writing group back in Iowa. Then when I lived in Ithaca, I tried hard to find a writing group but none of them would have me. One group asked me to submit work and when I did they invited me provisionally but then wouldn't tell me when they were meeting. Once they called me and said they were meeting right then and did I want to come over to whoever's house it was. I remember I was in the middle of washing windows, a lonely task for a lonely person, but still I said no out of self-respect and then they never called again. So I got used to just doing it on my own, and living in my own head that way. It's lonely, but it's a necessary kind of loneliness. And it's boring, but it's a necessary kind of boredom. The thing about me is I never really listen to what other people say about my work anyway. So the writing group in Iowa for me was most helpful in that it was a warm, smart community of

women. I loved them, I loved reading their work, I loved having a place to take my work. But I am my best and harshest critic, so I don't really listen that much to what other people say. That doesn't really matter—because a writing group, or any writing workshop, is good for more than receiving feedback. I think you learn the most from reading other people's work and figuring out what they're doing right and what they're doing wrong, and then forcing yourself to write those diplomatic but also helpful critiques. Now that's creative writing! Having to look at someone else's writing in that analytical way is helpful in honing your skills and understanding how the form works.

**Do you find that the teaching feeds your own writing as well?**

I teach writing at Sarah Lawrence, primarily in the graduate program and primarily personal essay. I like teaching the personal essay because I like thinking about essays, pulling them apart and figuring out how really great personal essay writers do what they do. And yes, I'm a much better writer because of my teaching.

**Who are some of your most admired personal essay writers?**

Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, EB White, Virginia Woolf and then a whole bunch of other people I teach who have singular, brilliant essays that I use in my teaching the way an artist uses a palette of paint. Those people would be David Sedaris, Christian Wyman, Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, Tobias Wolff, Mary Karr, and then a lot of short story writers as well.

**Let's talk about endings for a moment. I loved the way you end many of your essays. One of my favorite endings was from "In the Current." The line was "My Shorts are bagging out." To me it epitomized the entire piece; this story where you're worrying about all these little adolescent concerns during this life or death moment for these other kids who are about to drown. And the "Boys of My Youth" ending was also a "wow" moment for me when you write, "We are no longer bored." Perfect! I guess my question is: how do you approach endings? And do you struggle with them?**

Let's just say I struggle with my writing period. The endings are probably the easiest part...you know that moment when you realize, *Oh My God! I'm actually getting out of this thing!* That's a thrilling moment for me...because it takes me a long time to write these essays. So I think you can feel the elation of the writer on the last sentence of everything I write and it's only because I get to put it away now and I don't have to do it anymore. By the time I get to the end I don't have the strength to lift a finger to do anything else.

**How long does it take you to write an essay on average?**

On average? An eon. Actually, with the essays for that first book I was faster because I was writing them for a class and you didn't have the liberty to take six months to think about what the next sentence should be. I didn't have that freedom then. I had to finish because I had to turn it in to my teacher. Now nobody's in charge, so it goes slower.

**This brings me a question about revision. I read something where you said you only move forward and not backward in your writing. What does that mean?**

I hesitate to explain it because it makes me sound insane, but every sentence, when I settle on it has to be right. Let's say I work on the paragraph level. So you know how when you're writing on your computer and you have the piece up on the screen and then you have a scrap file— anyway that's how I do it – in the scrap file I have 5,000 versions of every sentence that I write. I only go sentence by sentence by sentence, and once a sentence is done and it gets down it doesn't really come up for anything. Unless I read it to Mary and she says go back and read that sentence again because there was something I didn't understand about it. Then I'll tinker with it, but for the most part, I just go forward.

**So you won't jump forward, further into the essay, until you nail down those sentences that come before the next part?**

Right. But I jump forward mentally all the time during my insomnia hours between 3:30 and 5:30 in the morning. I think about where I am in a piece and I think about where I believe it's going. So I do a lot of that work without realizing I'm actually doing it.

**And that's all in your head? You don't break out a journal during those hours?**

No, because if I broke out the journal I would have to accept that I was actually a fully awake person instead of a temporarily-awake person.

**So this is the same idea like when I'm washing dishes or driving the car and I'm going over a piece in my head trying to figure it out...**

Right, but it's slightly different because when you're doing dishes or driving your car you are engaging a part of your brain that leaves the other part of your brain free to do this creative work. When you're lying in bed, thrashing around having insomnia, it's not quite as productive because you're focusing all of your thoughts on the story.

**So you're pushing too hard.**

Yes. So I spend that amount of time pushing too hard.

**Is your insomnia caused by your writing...because you are so agitated to be working on something?**

Oh no – I am never agitated to be working on something. I'm the laziest writer who ever lived. No my insomnia I think is more caused by my chemistry than by anything else. It's garden-variety insomnia. It's the insomnia that neurotic people have.

**Ah, OK, I'm sure it will evolve in me at some point then.**

You don't seem at all neurotic to me. But I don't seem neurotic at a glance either – my domestic partner describes me as having “penetrating sanity,” but partly that's because he can sleep through anything, and partly it's because he believes in the power of suggestion.

**Can you explain your comment about being a lazy writer. Do you mean you're not disciplined?**

I'm disciplined in that I show up. I put the computer on my lap. I can lead the horse to water but I can't make it drink, just to coin a cliché. You know, I sit there. I think about 10,000 other things and I don't want to do because it's hard and I don't like to do things that are hard.

I also get distracted by the computer itself, which is why I decided to give it up for a while.

**Really?**

I'm trying to wean myself off of it because it sucks – it literally sucks the life out of my writing. I don't know if you have this experience or not but being addicted to that flickering light has been quite damaging to me as writer, I think. I can't even tell you how much time I was spending every day playing computer solitaire. I wouldn't even win! But now it's like quitting smoking-- I would drive by these people outside buildings smoking in the cold and I'd think I've been liberated. Now I see people with their Blackberries and I think, you know, I've been liberated.

**You have been. You're my hero right now.**

Yes. I'm a hero!

**Seriously, I've had this thought that I have to give up my blackberry to be more productive.**

Well, as a writer, I think if you could just test it and see how your brain functions not on flickering light all the time you might just find out that your writing improves.

**I wanted to talk about a passage from another essay called, "Cousins." It's a wonderful passage – where you're in the car driving with your cousin to a bar. You write**

**The sky is black and glittering with pinholes. Old trees are bent down over the highway. In the dark field, the corn gathers its strength, grows an inch in the**

silence, then stops to rest. The deer is waiting to spring out from the wings into the next moving spotlight. The asphalt sighs in anticipation.

**This is just a small part of that whole passage, but the language here, the details, are so vivid and alive, and it continues this way for a while. How do you go about writing a scene like this?**

Remember, the people whose writing was really instructive to me and really mean something to me on a soul level are the people I mentioned earlier: Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, EB White – all of these people have the ability to take you anywhere. For instance, Annie Dillard has an essay called “Living like Weasels”, in which she takes you from a field somewhere, sitting on a stump suddenly to the bottom of a pond, in one slick move – she puts you on the bottom of the pond looking up at the lily pads that are floating on the surface of the pond: “The water lilies have blossomed and spread to a green horizontal plane that is terra firma to plodding blackbirds, and tremulous ceiling to black leeches, crayfish and carp.”

That whole piece is an incredibly instructive piece of writing. EB White does the same thing where he can take you from what he refers to as the loose, tanbark of a circus ring all the way up to the stars. That’s how his perspective can shift. The idea being that you have to fully imagine what you’re trying to write. The writer has to *see* everything – you have to see not just the highway but what’s beyond the headlights; what’s standing out in the trees; you have to know what earth looks like from the point of view of the stars; you have to know what lily pads look like from underneath, from the perspective of a fish on the bottom of a pond. And if you can’t know that, and if you can’t imagine that as a writer, then what’s the point in writing creative nonfiction? What’s the point in writing if you’re not going to try to project yourself into those points of view? I’m sure other people have their own reasons for writing. But that’s my reason for writing.

**In the Art of Time in Memoir, Sven Birketts writes of your book, “I have in front of me a copy of Joann Beard’s book *The Boys of My Youth* and what a baffling item it is.” Was it baffling to write?**

No. But I like the word baffle, the way it sounds and what it means, and I also like referring to the book as an item. It makes for a nice, surprising sentence. That said, I'm surprised anyone would think that book was baffling.

**Well I think it's the way you break rules. The way you jump around in time... jumping decades on occasion, without even a paragraph break. And you do it so well the reader hardly notices. You also shift point of view, in one instance even taking on the point of view of yourself in the womb! Perhaps what Mr Birketts meant is that trying to analyze your work is baffling. Have you read what Sven Birketts wrote about you?**

Not at this point in time, as people like to say.

**Well you should read it because he writes about you.**

That's the best reason not to read it.

**He uses you as a positive example. You'd probably like it.**

I know Birketts' work and I am interested in the issue of time in memoir, but I need to avoid over-thinking my own work, and so I might have avoided the book for that reason. But let me go back to one thing you said: There are no rules in writing. There are no rules about time. Or about point of view. None. Writing is about doing something new. So, please try not to think of it in terms of rules and breaking rules.

**I guess I mean more playing with form. Abigail Thomas and Joan Wickersham are two other authors I read recently who play with traditional memoir form and create something unique and wonderful.**

Well I love talking about how other people do the work—people like Abigail Thomas and Joan Wickersham especially. But I just don't think it's wise to do that with my own writing. And not quite as interesting either. When we could be talking about how Annie Dillard writes "Living like

Weasels” or how EB White writes “The Ring of time.” It seems that those are much more instructive and illustrative of how good essays operate.

**Well I can still use yours. You can use theirs, and I can use yours.**

Okay, it’s a deal.

**The piece that launched your career: “The Fourth State of Matter”. How long after the actual shootings did you begin to write that piece? And was writing it difficult ...or healing?**

As I said, every piece I write is difficult to write. And no, it did not feel healing because I wasn’t wounded. I write in order to make art, not to pursue or banish personal demons. And not to put too fine a point on it, but nobody gets ‘healed’ from a mass murder by putting black marks on a white page and asking strangers to read it.

**There’s a moment in the piece when you’re looking up at the sky you say “No matter how you miss them, they never come back once they’re gone.’ I know you’re also talking about your mother at that point. Was that something that evolved from the writing? I guess I’m asking again how you do you get to the meaning or the insight of these memories that you’re writing about?**

I think it’s a mystery. And let’s face it. We all have our losses, and my mother, who never got to know that I became a writer, is in all my writing, somewhere. One loss always bring up another, so it makes sense that she would pass through that essay, with her trailing tubes and her regret.

**Well she’s certainly quite the character in your stories.**

Yeah, the character of my mother in the pieces that I’ve written about her is somewhere between who she was and who I’d like to remember her as. But I only depict some facets of her character—I know she had more edge as a real person and she was probably less glib than I make her out to be. But it was a long time ago.

**Would she be OK with her character?**

That's a tough one. When I write about my parents, my siblings, my ex-husband, my friends, I'm using them to illustrate a story I'm telling. So even though you try to make your characters three dimensional, you're folding them into your own narrative. And I don't think anyone ever wants to see themselves depicted only in terms of someone else's story.

So, no. I think my mother would probably not like the reductive way in which I used her character or her interesting personality to line my own writing nest. But that said, she would have been happy to know I'm published and am teaching writing at a good college.

**I've been in writing workshops where people say, "Oh you've slipped out of the child's POV/voice." Did you have trouble with that at all or was it easy for you to write from that perspective?**

Childhood had a big impact on me. I spent a lot of time pondering as a kid and storing up memories and images and feelings, so writing from the perspective of a child is my favorite thing to do. And I can go pretty deep into it.

**There is a powerful scene in your essay "The Family Hour." Your father had stopped drinking for two months and your mother is complaining about it, and you say to him "want me to get you a beer?" He says no, but then goes into the kitchen a little while later and opens a beer. I wanted to ask you about that moment. Did that really happen? And was that something you felt you needed to write about?**

Well, not *needed* to write about it. But I do think it's really interesting how as an adult you look back and you see these childhood moments with expanded awareness. In this specific case, you see how a whole family suffers from the disease of alcoholism. I played my role; my mother played her role.

**And now for the \$100,000 dollar question: how much of your work is true? Because of your age in some of the pieces, like "Bulldozing the Baby" where you're two or three, and the preface, where you're writing from the point of view of yourself as a baby in a crib, how**

**much of it is real, vs. created? The pieces are so detailed, but memories from that age are so fuzzy.**

In terms of the two pieces you're referring to, I remembered the bare bones, and then the rest of is just constructed from what I know of the people involved. Fuzzy memory doesn't usually work in an essay; you have to be detailed. As for the preface, I had the memory of the night light in all its garish glory and a memory of my parents not understanding why I was terrified. I remember the bedroom walls, because they had a bumpy surface and that was the era of tactile sensation. But the dialogue and various other things were constructed for the pleasure of the reader. And, I must add, the writer.

**I know a lot of creative nonfiction or memoir writers struggle with this when they're starting out. They think you need to write the facts, and just the facts, and it feels uncomfortable to start putting fictions into it. Did you ever feel that way?**

I don't think so. But I began as a fiction writer— so I was open to the idea of creating an interesting scene out of interesting characters. And so when the characters became me and my family, I was still ready to make them interesting and put them in interesting scenes.

**Was there something in your book that notes that everything is not fact?**

Yes, there's some sort of disclaimer, like a legal disclaimer...But I don't think anybody could read that book and that think they were reading a factual account of someone's childhood and life. If they thought that "Bulldozing the Baby" was a factual account, or that I was taking notes in my crib before I could actually talk, then they should go back to reading Wikipedia on their I-Phones.

**Let's talk about two essays that weren't in the book. One is called "Undertaker Please Drive Slow," which was in *Tin House* and is about a woman with cancer who recruits Jack Kevorkian to help her die. Another was "Werner," which was included in the *Best***

***American Essays 2007*, and is an extremely detailed account about a man who gets burned in a fire. What draws you to these dark stories?**

You think these are dark stories?

**Oh yeah. Werner – the man who was in the fire, for instance? I found myself extremely disturbed while reading it.**

Hmmm. Well I guess they are dark topics. I guess I forget this sometimes because they are so exciting to write. It's so fun to write about other people's darkness, rather than my own. I feel very cheerful about both of those pieces, to tell you the truth. I came to truly love Cheri Tremble through imagining her life and her death while writing *Undertaker*. And Werner is just a fascinating, articulate and talented person so it was fun to spend time with him and think about his story. It was such a relief really not to be writing about myself.

**But when you were interviewing Werner for instance, trying to get in his head, didn't it freak you out a little bit?**

Which part?

**The scene where the fire starts – the suffocating feeling – it's horrifying.**

Well you have to fully imagine it to write about it effectively.

**You did a fine job – because I felt like I was there which is why I was so disturbed.**

Thank you. I think a reading story about a fire where someone is breathing oily black smoke is the perfect occasion in which to feel disturbed.

**OK: graduate writing programs. Your thoughts?**

Well, I thought it was necessary for me to attend one. I needed the time, I needed to be in that community of writers and I needed to learn what made good writing. I was a rabid, avid reader, but I wanted to have a formal knowledge of how that work was done, because my schooling was in studio art. I didn't get to study literature or language. And those first classes I took in graduate school about essay writing were thrilling to me. I was so excited to figure out how that stuff worked, how it had its effect on me, and how the writer went about creating that effect. For the first time in my life I became a good student. So in that way, because school was so important to me, I can see why it's important to other people.

**What was the most memorable lesson you learned in your writing program?**

What I got from my graduate program and what I try to give to my own students at Sarah Lawrence is support and encouragement. Those two things, combined with good old fashioned book learning, make better writers. That's what I took away from Iowa.

**I went to Lesley, a low-residency writing program, and during the first week of my first residency I wrote in my journal: 'my soul is doing cartwheels.'**

Right! Beautiful way to put it.

**I loved that time in my life because real life isn't like that.**

No it isn't. And you know, going to an art colony is like that, too.

It takes you out of the regular world and puts you in this unique atmosphere that's really conducive to writing. And so you're going to be your writing self there.

**That reminds me of one of my questions. There's a scene in the essay "Boys of my Youth" where you're on a pay phone at Yaddo and you're freaking about being there. Can you say more about your experience at writing colonies?**

That's my age-old problem. I want to write but then when I'm given the opportunity I have a hard time with it. When I was in graduate school I went to Yaddo and worked on my thesis. It was incredibly stimulating – a life-changing event. I loved being there. I still go back there because I get work done. But it comes at a huge cost. You're isolating yourself, sitting alone in a room all day. It's like being in a prison cell. I have gone to Yaddo before and I've been driving up their beautiful, tree-lined drive and started crying in dread over being trapped with myself for a month. I mean let's face it – it ain't that fun to write. It's a lot of fun to have written; but it's not that fun to write.

**You judged a literary contest for Columbia and didn't pick a winner, which of course pisses people off.**

Yeah, including the judge herself. It's a really sickening experience when you're judging a contest and you can't pick a winner. But listen – it has to be *good to win*. People need to spend more time with their work. That's all I can say. I have exacting standards for my own work and I can relax them somewhat but I'm not going to choose a winner for a contest when the work is sloppy.

**But if it's a great story and well told?**

If it's a great story and it's well told, then it's a winner. The winner can't be the least-bad essay in the stack – we can't give up our standards of excellence in order to award prizes. And yes, I know some of it is subjective, etc., but spelling isn't, and certain rules of grammar aren't.

**I read a piece you published in *O magazine* called “Maybe it Happened.” The whole piece looks at the events you're writing about through this one lens: maybe this happened; maybe it didn't. Did you write this as a metaphor for everything you write – Maybe it happened? Maybe it didn't?**

Well, you know that was an unusual situation. *O* magazine, the *Oprah* magazine I might add, called and asked if I would like to submit a piece for their memoir issue. I agreed, but then I just froze up. I imagined Oprah coming after me with a hatchet, holding me to standard of factual truth that was unreasonable given my propensities. So on the very last day, when I was going to have to call them and tell them I had come up with nothing, it dawned on me that I might be able to write it in such a way that would work both for me, and for Oprah. So that piece was my solution.

**So what are you working on now?**

I just finished writing a novel, *In Zanesville*, and have been resting for the last year. But now I want to finish a short story that I put away to write the book. I haven't worked on the story for years, and now I hope I'm going to finish it.

**What is *In Zanesville* about?**

IN ZANESVILLE is a novel about two girls, best friends, growing up in the Midwest. They are ninth graders from another planet—Earth, in 1970.

**Does your process for writing fiction differ much from writing nonfiction?**

It differs a lot, in fact. You can make it up without any guilt involved whatsoever.

**How long did it take you to write?**

Five years, give or take.

**You worked on only the novel for five years? Or were you working on other things too?**

I wrote "Werner" while writing the novel, and some other short essays.

**So do you try to avoid working on too many things at the same time?**

Yes. Because I also teach and commute. Oh, and because I don't like to write. Guess I forgot about that.