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Interview/ Connie May Fowler

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Against the Grain

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Under the Microscope

A sometimes feature From Your Editor

I was undergoing a crisis — as they say in French, a crise (everything sounds so much more dramatic in French). Nothing seemed to be working out the way it was supposed to. My son was sick. My daughter was put upon. My husband was mad. And I was feeling decidedly failuristic.

And, like all people who love to go shopping (but don't have the money), I took a trip instead. I took a glorious trip. To Jacksonville, Florida, to A Night of Literary Feasts, Chapter III, sponsored by the Friends of the Jacksonville Public Library. (see this issue, page)

On that trip, I met lots of delightful people, but the positively, absolutely most delightful person I met was Connie May Fowler.

In my deep doldrums, I started to talk to her. I even told her I was a librarian, the type who spent money (the shopping librarian) and who bought books and journals. We talked about some of the changes in libraries. I told her that I didn't know how much longer libraries as we know them would exist. A friendship evolved. I asked her if I could publish an interview with her. She cocked her head. Sure Katina, publish an interview and I'll be Princess Di. Well, Connie May, here it is. I told you so.

Connie May Fowler is 34 years old. She lives in St. Augustine, Florida. She is soft spoken and unassuming. She was getting her MA in English literature with emphasis on creative writing at the University of Kansas planning to specialize in poetry when she learned that she was required to take a fiction creative writing course. For that course, she wrote a short story which she called "The Auction." Her professor liked the short story so much that she encouraged Connie May to write a novel. *Sugar Cage* (Putnam) is the result. *Sugar Cage* has been well received and is due to come out in March of this year in paperback from Washington Square Press. Columbia Pictures bought the option for TV which they are calling a "limited series," a new form of mini

series, and foreign rights have been sold in seven countries.

ATG: Connie May, how much of "The Auction" is in *Sugar Cage*?

CMF: *Sugar Cage* is not at all like the short story which was never published. Only two character names remain and it has no relationship to the short story. "The Auction" was set in Kansas. When I tried to start the novel, it was winter and Kansas was grey and brown and foreign to me. I realized that I knew and loved Florida. Suddenly, I realized how important the sense of place was and once I changed the setting to Florida, the story line started to fall into place.

ATG: Tell us more about *Sugar*

Cage. How was it sold?

CMF: *Sugar Cage* was amazing. I knew nothing about getting a book published. Carolyn, my teacher, gave me a list of agents and Joy Harris was on the list. I finished *Sugar Cage* (it was my thesis) and I was excited to go home to St. Augustine. I was moving. It was hard to get hold of me. But I got a postcard from Carolyn. It said: "Joy Harris loves the novel. Where are you?" In a week (it was when the stockmarket crashed), we had an offer. My agent wanted to "shop the book around." I was young, naive, paranoid, and afraid all publishing houses would fold after Black Monday. The editor who bought *Sugar Cage* was Faith Sale — editor to people like Donald Barthelme and

Amy Tan. I didn't want to wait. We sold it right away. It was pretty exciting — amazing. I couldn't believe my good fortune and all the positive things that happened, one after another.

ATG: Who inspired you?

CMF: When I learned that I had to take a fiction course, Carolyn Doty, my teacher, really inspired me. I thought I had no talent as a fiction writer. It was a case of the right student finding the right teacher and everything jelled. I started on the novel and everything flew.

ATG: Who is/are your favorite author(s)? Is there a writer who you can use as a model in your writing?

CMF: *Sugar Cage* uses multiple points of view with strong first person voices. There is resistance to first person and multiple points of view everywhere, but especially in New York. When I wrote this book, I was scared. It is a collection of 9 strong first person voices telling their stories. People would tell me "don't write in multiple points of view; you will never get published." Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* gave me the courage to go on. She captured the language of common folks and, using multiple points of view, is sublimely poetic. I am now rereading *All the King's Men*. I love his use of language — it's like poetry. Writers can influence you in many different ways. I like to study the prose of Robert Penn Warren. I like Faulkner because he is a technical wizard. I like Louise Erdrich because she captures the human spirit of everyday folk. I don't think that writers are exactly aware of how other writers influence them but they are very aware of what they appreciate in other writers.

ATG: In Jacksonville at the *Night of Literary Feasts*, you were on a panel called the feminine advantage. Can you comment on the female point of view in contemporary fiction?

CMF: I am non-sexist and I feel speaking about "the female advantage" naturally leads you into saying sexist things. Of course, I am interested in female writers and the female point of view. I think that what we're currently seeing in contemporary fiction is an explosion of talented female writers. We're finally being given a voice.

ATG: What kind of research did you do for *Sugar Cage*?

CMF: I did research on voodoo. In the first draft, a lot was childhood memory. So I did a lot of research to check facts and my memory concerning the 1960s and North Florida. There is a scene where Emory and Soleil Marie see the march on Washington on T.V., and my editor asked me what time of day the march on Washington took place. I realized that she was right, that I needed that detail. I called local libraries in St. Augustine and they referred me to the Center for Nonviolent Change in Atlanta. Finally, a librarian in the Washington, D.C. public library system answered the question. It took him an hour or so to call me back but he found it out. He knew exactly where to go, but he said he would have to dig a little. It was a sunny day when Martin Luther King gave his "I have A Dream Speech," and it was in the mid to late afternoon.

Sparrow Hunter, the book I am working on now, concerns the incarceration by the U.S. government of Native Americans at Castillo de San Marcos, an old Spanish fort in St. Augustine. It was the government's first attempt at "Indian education." In my research I learned that a woman and a little girl were incarcerated with the men for three years. The little girl is the inspiration for the narrator in the novel. Also, through the research, I have begun to see a parallel between the environmental holocaust and the Native American holocaust.

ATG: Where do you get your ideas?

CMF: The core of *Sugar Cage* was a story I have been writing from my earliest days. It is embedded in family history and family myths. My family used to sit on the front porch and tell stories, turning our relatives into mythic figures. The story of Rose and Charlie is very much a story of my own parents.

They were star-crossed lovers and their relationship always begged the questions, "Why is this woman staying with this man?", "Is it madness or is it love?" My mother came from humble beginnings. She was born in Appalachia; her mother died when she was 5 and her father when she was 13. She ran away from the violence in her life after her parents died and eventually went to college. She had a background in journalism and nursing. She joined the convent, but a priest told her she had too much life to be a nun. Then she met a policeman on a motorcycle. With that in my past how could I not be a writer?

Some of this is in *Sugar Cage*. But when I think about their lives, there are many things I don't know or don't understand. This is a luxury of writers. If you don't know your past, you can invent it.

ATG: Where did you get the title *Sugar Cage*?

CMF: The first title which I loved and my friends at KU loved — was *Ave Erzulie*. When they bought the book, New York said that the title had to go. (I went up and met Faith and Joy on my first trip to NY.) And they were right. Unless you've read the book the title makes no sense. On the way home I made lists of potential titles. Emily Dickinson says you can't define good poetry, you just feel like your head is coming off when you read it. I got the same kind of physical feeling when I wrote that title down. I enhanced the title within the pages of the text in the revision process.

ATG: Do you write using a computer?

CMF: I compose on the computer. It is really fast and can keep up with the brain. But I can't read on the screen.

It's not the same as reading on a page and I can't revise on the computer screen. Sometimes, with a particular problem, I'll handwrite it out to slow myself down. Any revision is done by hand. With the computer, there's not the personal relationship between you and the book. I can't imagine that changing in our lifetimes. I mean, I hope it doesn't.

ATG: Tell us about your publishing house, Putnam.

CMF: Putnam doesn't work by Committee. Faith is her own emissary. If she likes the book, it's bought. I have a personal relationship with Faith, meaning I trust her instincts implicitly.

ATG: What do you feel makes a good novel?

CMF: Like Emily Dickinson said, when you read it, the top of your head comes off.

ATG: What did you read when you were a child?

CMF: I didn't stick just to the young adult section. I remember Lois Lenski's *Strawberry Girl*. It was set in Plant City near Tampa where we were living at the time. My family was living in urban decay and this girl was out on a strawberry farm and not a very successful one but, still, it transported me out of the circumstances of my life. I remember "Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle." (Betty Bard MacDonald) I read a lot about World War II and about religion. Every day, I changed my religion depending on what book I was reading.

ATG: This will be read by a lot of librarians. Tell me about the library. Did/does it have any influence on you as a writer?

CMF: From the earliest days, I read because life at home was pretty rocky. I delved into the world of books. Libraries were safe. I spent summers in the library not at the beach. My fondest memories from childhood were of going into the library and feeling like it was a sanctuary. Still, when I go into a library there is that wonderful feeling. I love to wander through libraries. They are safe places. I read an article the

continued on page 53

You Gotta Go To School

continued from page 44

"Oh," she said, waving her hand casually as if everyone keeps the guts of their dashboard in the floor of their car, "that's just the air conditioner they're working on. I really hate when they do that. Don't you?"

Indeed.

We pulled up to this house on the street. I was expecting a huge mansion set way back from the street with an iron gate and maybe a couple of guards. Instead, I find that Mr. Kilpatrick lives in a house with no yard. No one came out to greet us or check our ID's or anything. The back yard, though, did have an iron fence around it, and we headed for the gate. As Katina and I walked up the drive, I must admit I was feeling a bit giddy. I could imagine James J. Kilpatrick storming out of his door in his house robe, munching a cigar, waving a newspaper in his hand and yelling something like why the hell were we in his driveway.

But, he didn't. I was beginning to wonder how we had got this far without being stopped by guards or something. It was quiet . . . too quiet.

Katina led the way as we pushed open the iron gate to the pool area behind the house. Well, I did expect he would have a pool. What self-respecting celebrity would not? What I did not expect was that thing in his pool. There was this mechanical-bug-looking thing that was making its way around the bottom of the pool like it was on automatic pilot. I guess it was sucking up scum. It was the fanciest most automatic scum sucker I had ever seen. What this thing was really doing and how it made its way into this story is beyond me.

Katina approached the back door and rang the doorbell. I stood back and waited for my childhood legend to open the door. What could I possibly say to him? "Golly, Mr. Kilpatrick, loved the way you yelled at Shana. Would you please sign my newspaper?" And then it happened.

Suddenly, from around the corner of

the house bounded a miniature collie. You guessed it. It was James J. Kilpatrick's dog. It ran up to me, jumped up and down and started licking my hands as I bent down to pet it.

I could hardly believe it. I was petting James J. Kilpatrick's dog. This was incredible! This dog had probably, only hours before, jumped on James Kilpatrick himself. Mr. Kilpatrick had surely written hundreds of searing words as this very dog lay at his feet. I was in awe. The dog was all paws. Katina was mad because no one would answer the door.

After a few minutes, the dog ran off and Katina got tired of ringing the doorbell. We decided to go bang on the windows of the pool house to rouse anyone who might be asleep in there. I think it was Katina's idea.

After a few good bangs, a lady who said she was Mr. Kilpatrick's secretary came to the door. She said she was working in the back room and did not hear us come in. I wondered where James J. was but was too embarrassed to ask. She might think I was just one of those crazy columnist groupies scamming for a piece of celebrity type-writer ribbon or a used white out bottle. I had just petted the guy's dog. What else could I ask for?

The secretary gave us three big boxes of books and we lugged them back to the car. We pulled away from James Kilpatrick's house, pool, dog and secretary and headed back to academia.

My sister stared at me. "You petted James J. Kilpatrick's dog?"

I brushed it off. "Oh, it was not as exciting as it sounds. But, I did get to scope out his back yard pretty well. It's mostly pool."

"But, you never got an autograph or anything." She sounded as disappointed as I.

"Unfortunately not. Funny thing about celebrities, though. The closer you live to them or the longer you know them the less you think of them as a celebrity and more like regular folks."

"Really?"

"Well, maybe with the possible ex-

ception of Madonna."

Yea, I guess pretty soon I'll see James Kilpatrick as just a regular Joe guy. A fellow Charlestonian. And if I happen to see him on the beach someday I won't even mention Shana. Just ask him about the weather or his dog.

You'll have to excuse me now. I have to go get an autograph from that famous writer Katina Alexis before she turns into just a regular Joe. That would, indeed, be tragic.☹

Under The Microscope

continued from page 29

other day that the Library of Congress has a new show opening with items on loan from the Vatican Library, items like illuminated manuscripts thousands of years old. They have tried to create an atmosphere like the library in Alexandria. This is the first show in a series to salute the great libraries of the world. That is so important. What would happen if something happened to, for instance, the Library of Congress? Libraries are the lifeblood, the DNA of humanity. They contain what we have all thought — and that is our treasure. Most writers wouldn't be writing today if it weren't for libraries. Good writers are also voracious readers.

ATG: What do you think of libraries today?

CMF: The addition of computerized libraries has changed the feel of libraries. It was comforting to pull out the big card catalog drawers. The University of Kansas library looked like a cathedral but they were changing over to computers. I still went to the card catalog instead of the computer until I realized I was missing a lot of things. Old habits.

Still, librarians have a love of books that doesn't carry over to the hard old computer terminal. I don't want the computer to dehumanize the library.

ATG: Connie May, it's all pretty eloquent. For us collection development and acquisitions librarians out there, undergoing a crisis of conscience, there may be a point to our existence, when we talk to a writer like you. Thank you.☹