

## LINDA K SIENKESWICZ'S INTERVIEW of LOUISE FARMER SMITH

## WHAT

“What is it you want out of all of this?”

This was my husband's plaintive and exasperated question regarding my continuing to write fiction. He was in pain. A short story of mine or a book or a query to an agent had again met with rejection. I can't now remember which because I was not in as much pain as he was. In his career he has not met with steady or even intermittent rejection, whereas I bring it on myself in waves. At one time I tried to keep five different short stories in the US mail to five different literary magazines, swapping them back out the same day they thudded through the mail slot. I was, however, understaffed having no one but myself to keep these spinning plates whirling. So after a while it all crashed. I started again more modestly.

Rejections don't make me cry. Grit my teeth maybe. Swallow hard. Curse softly. It would be nice to cry. Crying over a rejection of my work would be an immediate and passionate release and would leave me confident that I had honored my work with mourning before sending it off to be judged by another editor's eyes. But I don't cry.

## WHY

The answer to my husband's question, Why did I write and continue to cast my beautiful children out to be judged by cold-eyed strangers?

“READERS,” I called out. “I wanted readers.”

It was too late for fame, and, as for fortune, literary short stories are made into movies just about as often as straw is spun into gold. But readers, surely they were within my reach. To know that the ink on my pages was converted into a story in an unknown person's imagination was reason enough for me to get up in the morning. This meant that someone on a bus, looking over the shoulder at another person's e-reader, counted in my measure of success.

In another essay I tried to answer the question of why I seem to keep on writing these blatantly un-commercial short works: short stories, short short stories, 500 word stories, flash fiction, 150 word storybytes; I even published a six-word novel. The only play I ever wrote was a very slender one-act.

After another rejection arrived in the mail as they used to do before a writer could be shunned instantly through cyberspace, my husband, wincing asked, "Why don't you just write for yourself?"

"I'd rather talk on a dead phone!"

## HOW

To be honest, I have to have encouragement. I have to hear some applause even if it's just a chuckle from someone I respect who is reading my stuff. I need, not often, but once in awhile, someone to say to me, This is good. I like this. Some writers claim they don't care what other people think, and a few of them actually don't care and can therefore happily write for themselves. But I need appreciation. I'm not talking about clamor from the New York publishing world. I just need human feedback. But how to get it?

Another fiction writer I had met in an artists' colony invited me to join a group of writers. I was thrilled. Was it convenient to get to this group that met monthly.

Absolutely not. They convened three and a half hours away by train, but these people were all published writers, and they weren't asking any questions about my resume'. I worked for these people for years and am still working for them. They are kind, but tough, with lots of qualms and suggestions about my stories, but also some praise. I search for those check marks in the margins that show someone liked a turn of phrase or a metaphor or choice of words. I might have gone on writing with no encouragement, only rejections, but that could have led to masochism or a persecution complex or worse — hatred of the people who edit literary journals. But I don't think I could have kept writing without receiving the encouragement which came to me, not as regularly as an I.V. drip, but just often enough to keep me going. I started writing when my children were in grade school. I published my first story when they were in high school. They were both out of college before I published a book.

With the help of the group I gathered my stories into a novel-in-stories. I got a top-ranked agent who found a prestigious editor at a big publishing house. The editor told the agent that I was "the real thing." The only problem was the editor didn't want the last story because it was narrated by a son and all the rest of the stories were narrated by daughters. Not to worry, I said. Out goes the son. In comes a new daughter story. But the editor couldn't get the marketing guys onboard for what was frankly an unconventional book that went backward in time. The deal fell through. The agent persevered with other editors for at least six months, and after that I persevered with small presses for another year. Then I published the book myself after putting the son's story back in.

It was over a year before a traditional press discovered and republished the book, giving it the credentials to be reviewed and placed on the shelf of my local library. That book, *One Hundred Years of Marriage*, is now in its second edition. My next book, *Cadillac, Oklahoma*, a collection of my Oklahoma stories came out two years later. That first wonderful agent told me she knew I would succeed eventually because I kept at it. And I have. The third book, *The Woman Without a Voice*, a non-fiction family history came out the following year.

Our children now have school-age children of their own. It has been a very long haul. My royalties still equal about one percent of my expenses. I write every day believing in that reader out there, ensnared by my plot, running her eyes over the ink on the page, spinning the story in her head, maybe smiling, maybe even crying (oh joy!) over characters who had come to me in dreams. I write for her.

The End