

The Truth of Human Experience: Alexandra Handley in Conversation with Carmelinda Scian

Was "The Butterfly First" a piece written for the Open Season Awards, or did it come about before the contest?

"The Butterfly First" began as a longer piece written for a Masters course workshop at the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto. In the longer version, Milita has a younger brother and her grandfather plays a more prominent role. I decided to leave the two characters out in the shorter version so as not to crowd the story, which is really about Milita and her early awareness of the world around her.

Judge Helen Humphreys remarked that "The Butterfly First' is a poignant and memorable account of a young girl's encounter with the tragedy and hypocrisy of the adult world." The young speaker in the story begins in a state of corrupted innocence, learning early on from those around her that the female gender role prescribed to her is dangerous, that "it's always the women who suffer." The butterfly, it seems, is unattainable, an enigma. What drew you to portray such an early loss of innocence?

The Portugal of the 1960's where I grew up was, as Helen Humphreys succinctly remarked, a place of hypocrisy and tragedy. Hypocrisy, because there was this mythologized belief that our society was one of benevolence, decency, morality, and integrity, all blessed by the divine intervention of the Roman Catholic church. Herein lies the tragedy. Reality was very different but no one dared talk about it for fear of shame and ostracism. Children were part of the everyday adult world - not protected like we tend to do in North American middle-class society - and thus quickly glimpsed at the truth but kept what they observed and experienced to themselves.

Domestic space and attention to architecture feature prominently in this piece and are contrasted with the long railroad and open highway out front of grandfather's patio. What ties do you see between domestic space and gender roles? Do you have favourite works by other authors who also treat domestic space and gender?

The railroad and main highway, although unconsciously, (she's still too young to realize this) represents for Milita the hope of escape and adventure into more exciting worlds. The railroad and highway lead to large cities, such as Setúbal and Lisbon and far-away places like Algarve with its exotic Arabian influence, where she and her family come from. These contrast with the domestic space which, for Milita, means confinement.

Yes, domestic spaces were tied to gender roles (still are to a large extent, even in our "more liberated" twenty-first century). Women were mostly home cooking, doing household chores and pastimes like crocheting or embroidering, where men went out into the world, as it were, to work. The kitchen was a woman's domain, men only entering it to eat. Milita's grandmother was a bit of a maverick for selling the flowers from her garden and she is gravitational in shaping Milita's nascent individuality. I have been greatly influenced by Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro for whom domestic space often defines the social and familial roles and predicament of their female heroines. But also, such favourites as William Faulkner and Joseph Conrad clearly delineate the dichotomy between the confining reality of female domesticity and the open world of adventure and possibility for their male characters. Conrad, for instance, in *Heart of Darkness*, shows us that Kurtz's fiancée devotedly waits for him at home – like Penelope waiting for Odysseus – while he journeys, literally, to the distant shores of Africa, and metaphorically, to the evil within.

What do you feel is the value of writing contests? How was the experience of entering this contest for you, and would you recommend it for emerging writers?

I place enormous value on writing contests: Firstly, the word limit of most contests forces the emerging writer to focus on what is intrinsically important in the story and to leave out the "extras." Secondly, that one's story is going to be judged by published authors serves as an incentive for him/her to ensure that the story is interesting and well-written. Thirdly, the editing process, as I experienced with John Barton at *The Malahat*, teaches the new writer to look at the micro-detail of the piece, making it tighter. In other words, writing contests help hone one's skills and I strongly encourage other emerging writers to enter. For me, the *Malahat Review* win is a confirmation that what I have to say has some merit.

Can you tell me how you began writing and what you strive for in your writing?

I have always had a deep desire to learn about the world around me. After completing my BA and MA in English at the University of Toronto and afterwards getting bored with taking PolSci courses, I

decided to enroll in an autobiographical writing course through the School of Continuing Studies at the same university. Since “we all have a story to tell,” I thought I’d try it. Under the tutelage of Christine Pountney (*Sweet Jesus*, 2012), it turned out to be a seminal experience. It’s as if everything in my life before that point was a preparation for this new experience.

I find the writing process (the same with all art) is the highest form of individual expression by the very nature of it being unencumbered by any other interaction – it’s you and the written page. In my writing I strive to grasp a glimpse of the truth of human experience.

Who or what are some of your influences?

Well, the authors mentioned above plus Rudyard Kipling, James Joyce, Alistair McLeod and Ian McEwan. But I also love younger generation writers, like Andrew Pyper, Joseph Boyden, Miriam Toews, Jeannette Winterson, Sherman Alexie, Juno Diaz, to name a few. If I had to zero in on a quality that for me unites all of the mentioned writers, I would say that it’s their vivid portrayal of what, for me, are unfamiliar worlds. And of course, there’s Margaret Atwood who has the ability to turn the familiar into the exceptional.