
Doug Marlette

The Bridge
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A Conversation with Doug Marlette

Q: At the beginning of the book you include a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Dragon-Princess*. Why did you choose this passage? How does this relate to the story?

A: I came across the Rilke quote after I had finished the novel. The notion of the Dragon-Princess seemed to express perfectly what was at work in my story of transformation. The dragon in Pick's life, his grandmother, is for him tamed by learning of the young girl she had once been and the forces and events that shaped her life. The quotation gets at that seed of hope and redemption that sometimes lies within our deepest fears.

Q: Your grandmother was the inspiration for the character of Mama Lucy. What can you tell us about your grandmother?

A: My grandmother, Grace Pickard, or Mama Gracie as we called her, a fiery and colorful woman, dominated her family. Her fearsome personality imprinted itself indelibly upon my young psyche. The fictional portrait of Mama Lucy in the Prologue as snuff dipping and pistol packing, a "blue haired Ayatollah," a "black belt in passive aggression," "a master of manipulation," "a carnival sideshow of hysterical symptoms" is pretty accurate although I actually had to tone her down for the book, for the sake of plausibility. In fact, she was so outrageous I had to leave out many details because nobody would believe them. Sometimes fiction is more believable than the facts.

Q: Much of your novel is set against the backdrop of a bitter labor dispute, a textile strike during the depression era. Was this an actual event?

A: Yes, probably the most important and least known event in American history. The General Textile Strike of 1934 was the first time southern workers, like my grandmother, ever stood up en masse against the mill owners who controlled their lives. It started on Labor Day, the fourth of September, and spread like brushfire through pine needles all across the region, with nearly 500,000 cotton mill workers shutting down the looms from Gadsden, Alabama, to Knoxville, Tennessee, from Newnan, Georgia, to Honea Path, South Carolina. Mill town to mill town they toppled like dominoes up through the North Carolina Piedmont to Burlington and Hillsborough, where most of my people lived and worked.

Q: Why is so little known about it?

A: The Uprising of '34, as it would come to be called, was swept from memory, not only in my family, but in mill villages all across the South, in a kind of collective amnesia, like it was some shameful secret, a painful, traumatic experience of abuse and betrayal that was best left buried and forgotten. Union was a dirty word in the South.

Q: Why did you choose to write a novel rather than telling your family's story as a memoir or historical narrative?

A: Although there was much in my book that was literally true about my family's involvement in the Uprising of '34, I decided to write a novel instead of a memoir because fiction gave me more freedom and flexibility to tell the story I wanted to tell. The more I learned about the General Textile strike of 1934, the more I wanted to write a story that would encompass the dramatic events that occurred all across the South at that time; the massacre at Honea Path, South Carolina, the rounding up of strikers in internment camps in Georgia, the dynamite plot in Burlington and the rioting, bayoneting and blacklisting that went on all over the south and the stigmatizing and punishment of strikers in the aftermath. Fiction allowed me to telescope it all into the experience of one family in the towns of Eno and Burlington. It also gave me the opportunity to explore the ways in which the strike divided friends and families. I realized that my family's involvement offered me a rare gift and opportunity, a personal way into the story. Fiction, I believe, can get at truths greater than the sum of the facts.

Q: What was the reaction of your family to *The Bridge*, since much of your family history is immortalized in this novel?

A: My family's reaction so far has been magnificent. They seem to grasp the reasons I had to tell the story the way I did, understanding instinctively the writer's necessary use of composite and autobiographical detail, what Thomas Wolfe meant when he said, "The sculpture should not be mistaken for the clay from which it is formed." Also, I think they recognized that I was not trying to nail anybody, that these were loving portraits of my family, friends and neighbors. I think they were surprised to learn that their family had been involved in one of the most important unknown events in American history. There was actually a sense of gratitude and relief, I believe, that the book tried to give meaning to some things that they had experienced as irrational and painful.

Q: In the novel, Pick and Cam have a passion for restoring old houses. Is this a passion that you share?

A: I certainly have an appreciation and love of old houses, having owned such a house in the "historic district" of Hillsborough, NC. Although I did not have to renovate the house myself, (and by the way, unlike Pick Cantrell, nobody has ever accused me of being "handy") I would have to say I have observed this passion for renovation more than I have participated in it.

Q: One reviewer stated, "The hero, Pick Cantrell, is a cartoonist, of all things, but we will not linger over the roman a clef question, although it does tease a reader throughout." This does, indeed, tease the reader throughout. Why did you choose Pick's profession to be that of your own, a cartoonist?

A: I made Pick a cartoonist because I had never read a novel with a cartoonist protagonist before and I know something about that quirky profession. Because the cartoonist's job is one of illuminating values, I wanted to put him in a situation wherein his own values are illuminated. I wanted him to discover the unlikely source of his values, politics and against-the-grain sensibility. I liked the idea of having him lose his job and then turn his artistic talent to the task of telling his grandmother's story by literally drawing her memories.

Q: Do you think your work as a cartoonist has impacted your work as a novelist? How so?

A: Yes, but not in the ways you might think. Caricature is a tool, but not one I needed or used much in the novel except early on in the New York dinner party scene where I wanted to establish how a cartoonist like Pick Cantrell might see some of the other guests. Good political cartoons are about powerful images, moving symbols, compelling metaphors, distillation, concision, directness, and strong

emotion expressed clearly and succinctly. I wanted those same qualities in my book. Those skills, I think, translate well to fiction. Fiction, like cartoons, is sort of a heightened reality. The discipline of meeting five deadlines a week for editorial cartoons and seven for my comic strip had taught me some things about the creative process. I had learned as a cartoonist over the years only to draw what moves me, to follow the fire, to trust my instincts. And to show, don't tell. I knew to write visually, that word-pictures are what the best novelists create. But one of the things I had to get over as a cartoonist was just blurting everything out all at once. In cartoons you tell the whole story in one direct hit, you can conceive of it and communicate the whole idea instantly. With a novel you have the luxury of taking your time, letting it out a bit at a time. What you withhold is as important as what you reveal. The process of writing a novel is such an act of faith. Faulkner said it was like driving an automobile across country at night and all you can see is what is in your headlights. I agree.

Q: At one point in the narrative you state, "Memory has a way of doing that, of helping us heal ourselves" (page 382). Can you tell us what you mean by this statement? How does it relate to the novel?

A: Memory is the ultimate self-help, the thread of identity that stitches us together, the means by which we restore ourselves to ourselves. It puts us together by putting us in touch with who we are and were, and where we came from. "The past is not over and done," said Faulkner, "it is not even past." And "Yesterday, today and tomorrow are Is: Indivisible: One." Telling stories and recovering our histories reconnects us and reminds us of who we are. From classic Greek tragedies to contemporary fairy tales like *The Lord of the Rings*, even the impulse to dramatize historical events like Civil War re-enactments, involve storytelling and remembering as that which keeps us human, and is both therapeutic and crucial to our survival.

Q: When did you realize you had a story to tell and a novel to write?

A: The family stories about our history in the town and in the uprising began to leak out when I moved back to Hillsborough. And the more I learned about the strike and my family's involvement, the more I thought there was something there. But here was the clincher: The historic home I bought in Hillsborough was built in 1833 by Paul Cameron, one of the founding fathers of the state, a leading merchant who laid the railroads, owned numerous plantations and served on the board of trustees of the University. A portrait of Paul Cameron hangs at the University of North Carolina with the inscription underneath, Paul Cameron, Capitalist. When I discovered that his family had also helped finance the mills in Hillsborough and Burlington where my grandmother had worked and was bayoneted, it struck me that the grandson of a linthead had moved into the mill owner's house. That's when I knew there was a story to be told.

Q: Did you reconcile with your grandmother?

A: I was never as estranged as Pick Cantrell, but, yes, I did enjoy spending time with her in her last years and interviewed her extensively, recording our conversations about life in the mills when she was a girl and the bayoneting incident. Many of those stories, verbatim, found their way into *The Bridge*.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I am writing a novel set in New York and Mississippi in the 1990's and in the 1960's civil rights era: The protagonist, Carter Ransom, is a newspaper reporter. As a young white Southerner in the South, Carter gets swept up in the movement for social justice through his friendship with the son of his family's housekeeper. Along the way he falls in love with a beautiful Jewish girl who came south to help register voters, setting him in conflict with his father, his family and his community.