



Maud Casey

Genealogy
ISBN13: 9780060740894

A Conversation With Maud Casey

Louise Lateau, the "bleeding Belgian," propels the novel's themes, characters, and even some of the plot. Why does she fascinate you? Does your interest resemble Bernard's?

Like Bernard, I discovered Louise Lateau accidentally as a footnote in a book I'd been reading while doing scattered research to do with the history of the diagnosis of various mental illnesses. (And that is where the similarities between Bernard — fond as I am of him — and me end, she said hopefully.) I ordered what I thought was a book about Lateau and instead a flimsy, shoddily bound essay (excerpted in *Genealogy*) arrived. It was written by a German doctor, Augustus Rohling, in 1879 for the *Catholic Review*, and in it Dr. Rohling tries to get to the bottom of this young girl — he was very focused on her as a teenager though her career as a mystic lasted until the notable age of thirty-three — and her ecstasies. There were a lot of people trying to get to the bottom of her and Rohling

documented them too — among these, doctors who came to her family home to test the authenticity of her stigmata by running electrical currents through her arm, cutting her neck with a penknife, sticking an ammonia-soaked feather up her nose. Rohling really wanted her to *mean* something — for the Catholic Church, as a vessel of God — but something else goes on between the lines of his essay. He describes her as "totally devoid of imagination" and "simple and upright." In fact, she seems filled with imagination and passion. It's hard to tell what was really going on there — what were these ecstasies about? Was she performing for the doctors and bishops who came to poke and prod her and test her with religious objects? The parts of her that eluded everyone fascinated me. And maybe Bernard and I have that in common too — an admiration for her mystery. There's also a beauty in her language, in the rare moments when she speaks for herself in Rohling's essay. At one point, she says to the president of the Episcopal Seminary of Tournay, "It fills me with such a lively sense of the presence of God, that, from the contemplation of his greatness, of my own littleness, I feel at a loss whither to turn that I may hide myself." *My own littleness*. I love that. I feel my own littleness all the time. William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experiences* I'd just been reading when I came across the Rohling essay, talks about how religious fervor and insanity sometimes look alike — hearing voices, hallucinations, certain feelings of transformation. I wanted to lay the essay side by side with Marguerite's delusional voice, also striving for a transformation of some kind, a striving for *more*. I thought there might be a strange echo.

You suffered writer's block while working on *Genealogy*. How did you recover your ability to write? Did it inform your depiction of Samantha's inability to write poetry?

There wasn't one particular moment of recovery. It was a series of meltdowns (five, six?) and recoveries. One time I fled my apartment and left town. When I returned, my apartment was filled with gas. I'd forgotten to turn the oven off. Was I trying to Sylvia Plath my novel? Who knows? There was at least a year and a half of thinking: I can't do this but I can't not do this so what do I do?

One thing that helped a lot was listening to music — Bill Evans, Chopin, and the Staples Singers, in particular. The music filled the space usually taken up by the annoying voices in my head ("Give it up loser"). Music and teaching. Thinking and talking with students about other, better writers buoyed me.

And yes, my writer's block became the reason for Samantha's. Now here's something I can really write about: writer's block.

An embalming room seems like such an unorthodox place to find peace. Where did that notion come from, and how did you conceive of a character like Hyuen?

Just out of college, I worked for six months as a temp in the University of California San Francisco's Whole Body and Unclaimed Dead Program, answering the phone to potential donors. At the end of my stint, it seemed important to me to go to the morgue and watch a donor's body being embalmed. It seemed the honorable thing, a way of paying my respects after months of talking to donors and their next-of-kin on the phone. So I did, and it was really scary, but it was also really moving. There was something peaceful about the body on the table, and the morgue technician seemed to be involved in an elaborate dance, a death rite of sorts (I was filled with the drama of a twenty-one year old far, far away from death), as he checked the tubes and did his work. That's where Hyuen started. He grew into a character who might serve as a foil for the Hennarts, someone who had suffered great loss but found other ways of dealing with it.

Marguerite provides such a compelling glimpse into a mind unmoored from conventional reality. Is there a name for her condition? Did you research mental illness in preparation?

I did some research, some reading, but mostly it was a matter of finding the cadence of that voice. In the end, I wanted to avoid diagnosing Marguerite outright because I was worried it would limit her, reduce her character to a category. I've written two essays about my personal experience with bipolar disorder — "A Better Place to Live" for my sister Nell Casey's anthology, *Unholy Ghost*, and "The Rise From the Earth (So Far)" for *Maybe Baby*, an anthology edited by Lori Leibovitch. That's where talking about a diagnosis made sense. Those essays allowed me to organize my thoughts on subjects that were unruly and upsetting. I wrote my way into some kind of sense. In *Genealogy*, it was less about making sense than about making music out of that unruliness. I wanted to create an artful voice that captured the lyrical nature of psychosis and mental illness. My goal was not to romanticize it, but rather to show its associative logic, the way Nabokov does in his story "Signs and Symbols". The son in that story is in a psychiatric hospital and he's decided there's a system to the patterns of clouds in the sky that can be read and understood. Frank Bidart's poem "The Arc" has a line that really speaks to this: "Insanity is the insistence on meaning."

Part of the poem is a meditation on the narrator's mother in a psychiatric hospital. There's a moment where the narrator wonders how he

could possibly explain to his mother that the painting of a winter landscape over her bed wasn't put there by the hospital staff in order to make her feel cold. But how can you argue with that kind of logic? In the poem, Bidart has a great empathy for this rage against randomness. There has to be a reason! There has to be sense! Because if there's not, well, then what the hell is going on here? If there's not, then why am I in despair? There's also a lot of wordplay involved in a manic episode or a psychotic break that's really captivating, and makes a kind of terrific sense in the end. It's utterly debilitating, no question — you can't make it down the street if, like Marguerite, you think the soles of your shoes are also "souls" — but there's also a magic to it. I tried to create a system, a vocabulary, for this voice that readers could follow, while also trying to convey the mystery.

Genealogy germinated from a story in your previous collection of shorts, *Drastic*. Do you find that each work informs the next? Do you have plans for another book?

My hope is that each work pushes me in a new direction and forces me to think about new material, and about the best vehicle for that material, but often I feel like I'm just crashing around. And maybe that's important too. Both of my novels started with a short story (*The Shape of Things to Come* began with "Days at Home", a short story that appears in my story collection, *Drastic*). This was partly because I wasn't done with the characters but mostly out of sheer terror of the blank page.

I do have plans for another book. The reading I did for *Genealogy* led me to some interesting stuff — Charcot's pictures of hysterical women, Kraepelin's operating theater in Paris, a French man who wandered in a trance as far afield as Constantinople — but for fear of bringing on another bout of writer's block, I'll leave it at that.