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Twilight

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Did you always want to be a writer? You write both fiction and poetry. Which form first drew you to write?

As far back as I can remember I wanted to be a writer. I grew up among books: both of my parents were crazy for books, collecting them by the thousands. I read voraciously as a child, intoxicated by the transport books provided. In addition to a love of words, I also inherited a great love of travel, and in my mind the two pleasures are linked because of the ways in which they are inherently alike.

Writing seemed an ideal endeavor to me as even a very young child. As I explained to a grownup when I was eight years old, "You get to make stories up and you can stay in your pajamas all day and you don't need to spell because someone else fixes it at the end." Still sounds good to me forty years later. If only it were reliably self-supporting, it would be in every way the ideal endeavor I first imagined it to be.

I started writing poetry as soon as I learned to write. I filled speckled composition books and around the holidays, made limited editions, with construction paper and rubber cement. Some of the poems were illustrated in crayon. I think they were also awarded gold stars in accordance with which ones were my favorites at the time of manufacture.

When I began *Private Altars* in the second half of my twenties, it came as something of a surprise and a departure for me to venture into prose. Now they are both equally important channels for me to voice my imagination.

Why did you write this book? What inspired you to explore Lavinia's past?

I found that after I had completed *The Season of Lillian Dawes*, I was not done with Lavinia Gibbs, a secondary character in that book. I had become fascinated with her and the untold story that shaped her life prior to the point at which she enters the life of her nephew, Gabriel Gibbs, the narrator of *The Season of Lillian Dawes*.

This time however, I wanted to take a very intimate look at Lavinia, examining her sexual awakening, because it came at such a cost. The only thing about her life that Gabriel knew prior to his meeting her was that she was a liminal character in the family, and perhaps the world, because of her affair. It seemed like the bravery of that choice had to be acknowledged if I were going to write her story.

It was also a challenge to find a different approach to the familiar theme of adultery which Flaubert likened to the subject of the nude in painting: painfully familiar but always individual. Because Lavinia's on the outside in the adulterous triangle, she seemed much more vulnerable than Mme. Bovary for whom it was a way to escape marriage rather than simulate it. To be true to the character of Lavinia, her story needed to feel almost disconcertingly candid.

I wanted the prose to have a distinctly different voice, told episodically, from pulse-point to pulse-point through the span of years, reducing Lavinia's story to a handful of moments: its emotional essence. *Twilight* felt from the earliest inklings like it needed to be spare, and so tightly focused on Lavinia's interior, personal drama that the larger, public drama of WWII is peripheral, glimpsed only at the edges of the scenes, like a stray figure caught unintentionally in the background of a snapshot. The compression of form mirrors Lavinia's experience of the affair, condensing weeks into hours, months into days, intensifying time in its reduction.

I think I wrote the book also because I was interested in exploring the role passion (or its lack) plays in the unfolding of character, as well as the unexpected ways in which character is redefined by circumstance. The backdrop of war provided a terrific set of conditions with which to watch, like time lapse photography, the way in which personality is distorted or refined by external pressures. I have always been interested in the question of heroism and how much is intrinsic and how much circumstantial. In *Twilight* I was able to take a look at the topic through the guise of a character I had come to care about deeply.

Do you use your own family history in any of the novels?

No. As a matter of fact, I feel very strongly about this. I think the act of creative writing demands, by definition, that one create and not record. It is an act of imagination and invention which allows the writer to transcend the limitations of his own particulars and discover something universal, something profound, something that connects him to all humanity.

It is riskier, there is no doubt about it. Of course writers do cull details and images from their own life: all their experiences, all their knowledge of the world as it has been seen or heard or heard of or read of or imagined goes into the mix. But if it does not go through the prism of the creative process the writer has not done her job. That seems to me either lazy or narcissistic. It is also less rewarding as there is no chance for discovery and serendipity in merely transcribing from life but changing the scenery.

In addition to writing fiction, you are also a poet. How are the demands and rewards of poetry different from that of fiction? How, in your own work, does one art form influence the other?

One of the biggest differences between working on the two forms is that with poetry, even though you can tinker and tweak a poem forever, I usually have a first draft in a matter of days, or at most weeks, whereas with a novel, it can take months just to get a character through a door, and it might be years before I have a first draft complete.

This is a huge difference because not only is there a much longer delay of the gratification of completion but also it means that in fiction, you are working in the dark (as far as the overall shape of the work) for long, frustrating periods of time. It requires a different kind of psychic stamina, as well as a huge leap of faith that you will eventually achieve completion, and when you do, it will have been worth the effort. But there is also more latitude in prose, because a poem, precisely because of its more modest size, demands a precision that cannot accommodate even an extra or imperfect word.

The ending of this novel leaves open the possibility of a future encounter with these characters. Is there a chance of another book involving any of these characters?

I don't like to talk about works in progress because I adhere to the superstition that afflicts so many writers, but I will say that what I am working on at present is a departure from these characters, though *Twilight* was populated by characters I would love to explore from other angles, at some point. I have also returned my focus recently to poetry and completing another collection of poems.