

Interview with Laury A. Egan about *Jenny Kidd*

October 1, 2012

What inspired the idea of Jenny Kidd?

I've visited Venice on three occasions, the last for over two weeks while teaching a photographic workshop. Focusing on the visual aspects of the city made me acutely aware of colors, textures, architecture, the changing light, as well as the behavior of its inhabitants. Venice is sublimely romantic and ephemeral, yet if you wander into a dark street at night, it can suddenly shift into a claustrophobic and frightening place. I loved this dichotomy and wanted to portray it in the novel, exploring a similar duality in the characters.

Did any of the characters surprise you while writing?

The reader may find that Sebastiano Barbon and Randi Carroll transform into somewhat different characters by the book's end. Although I didn't have strict intentions regarding them, I was a bit surprised how they changed. And Jenny Kidd also showed unexpected strength and growth.

What other writers do you read?

I'm an avid fan of Donna Leon's series set in Venice, which allows me the pleasure of "returning" to the city. For mysteries, Patricia Highsmith and Martha Grimes are favorite writers. Other much admired titles are Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy*; Virginia Woolf has always fascinated me and is incorporated, in a minor way, in my newest manuscript, *Wave in D Minor*.

Who is your main audience?

Good question! I love to explore the spectrum of sexuality and to create characters who struggle to define their orientation, sometimes decisively coming to grips with which gender they love, and sometimes remaining fluid. Most of my novels have strong psychological elements that appeal to mainstream readers, though gay and bisexual readers might find sympathy with some of the protagonists. However, I prefer not to write for a specific market because labels feel restrictive.

What was it like seeing your book in the bookstore for the first time?

Perhaps the better question starts earlier in the process: what is it like to read a bound, typeset copy? Even though I edit and polish my work over and over—sometimes reading a manuscript and proof 75 times or more—it is a different experience having a book in hand. Very much like someone else wrote the novel. When I do readings from my two poetry books, *Snow, Shadows, a Stranger* and *Beneath the Lion's Paw*, for example, I am frequently struck by the bizarre sensation of foreignness, of quiet surprise to find a new poet that writes much like I do!

Do you find writing novels different than short stories? And poetry?

In many ways, I feel freer to take chances, to experiment with style, characterization, place, and plot in a short story because there is less commitment. My collection, *Fog and Other Stories*, is very diverse and allowed me to play in ways that a novel doesn't. That said, it feels great to bear down and immerse myself in a long work, to achieve an arc and final closure after so many pages and so much effort.

As for poetry, it is difficult to switch from prose to poetry or vice versa within a close period of time. Because I am also a fine arts photographer, I've noticed it's hard to go out and spend time making images and then later sit down to write poetry, though what I see and capture on camera frequently inspires me to try. The verbal/visual processes don't usually flow together very well.

What is your writing process?

I tend to work all day, most days, combining new writing with the tasks of editing, proofing, and assisting in a book's publicity, a demanding job for authors these days. My ideas come from many sources. As in the case of *Jenny Kidd*, the setting of Venice was a dominant inspiration—I am frequently seduced by place. Other times, a character or a character's name might pop into my head and demand attention, sometimes entering my mind almost fully realized.

Why are you a writer?

I began writing poetry at seven, and a first novel was begun at twelve, so the urge to create was strong at an early age. As an only child who lived in a spectacularly beautiful place with views of the ocean and forests, I was deeply sensitive to my surroundings. In many ways, nature was my friend—there weren't many children who lived nearby and my family was essentially limited to a triangle. I became an observer, like many only children are, and found that writing was my strategy to make sense of an often complicated world. As an adult, I spent my career in publishing, but only in the last eighteen years have had the opportunity and means to devote myself to the craft of writing fiction and poetry.