

“If I don’t write I am not a happy person”: An interview with Margaret McMullan

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The present interview was conducted in December 2010 in the office of the writer as Fulbright professor at the University of Pécs.

Q: First, could you talk about your background: place, family, upbringing?

MMc: I was born in Newton, Mississippi and we moved in 1969 up to Chicago. It was a big move for me. My mother is from Vienna, Austria and my father is from Lake, Mississippi. They met in Washington D.C. I have always found their relationship very interesting because it is so unusual even in the twenty-first century this kind of couple to me. I went to school at Grinnell College in Iowa and then right after college (four years in Iowa) I had a semester abroad in England, my junior year. I moved to New York even though I had never been there and worked for a magazine, called *Glamour Magazine*. Basically, I started writing for this magazine by doing interviews. I did that for three and a half years and then quit so that I could write a novel, which I did. It was a bad novel but I finished it. Then I went to graduate school to the University of Arkansas. I didn’t know much about graduate writing programs, I didn’t know they existed but I wanted to study under this man, Jim Whitehead who was from Mississippi too. He helped me a lot. He died a couple of years ago and I have dedicated my last book to him.

Q: When did you first start to think about devoting yourself to writing?

MMc: I started writing when I was about ten but I never thought of it as writing. When I moved to Chicago no one could understand my Southern accent. So I stopped talking because I was teased a lot. And when you don’t talk you have to do something else. So I started getting in the habit of writing every day in a little journal, just about my feelings and how much I miss my cat and Mississippi. I got in the habit of doing it. I guess the devotion part came later when I quit *Glamour*. That was a big deal because it was such a big job and it took so much out of me. It was a difficult decision, probably not very logical or smart but that is when I realized that if I quit a job like that, then I have to make the writing work. That is when I really took it seriously.

Q: Would you tell us about the beginning of your career as a writer?

MMc: My first novel came out in 1994 and it was called *When Warhol Was Still Alive*. It was loosely based on my experiences in New York: working at *Glamour* and I had a friend who died of AIDS. That book came out and I believe most writers think that when you have a book that comes out, everything changes, the world stops spinning or something. But my big realization was: “I have to write another one if I am really in this game.” One person told me once that as soon as you send out a story or a book, hurry and start another one, so that you can just stop thinking about that and get on to the next. And that was such good advice because I have done that ever since. There is always something new going. There are some people I know who have

one book, which is fine because usually those books are really good and they come from their heart.

Q: You chose Mississippi as the setting of your novels. What is it about Mississippi that inspires you to write?

MMc: So far, Mississippi was the setting for three of the books and then there are other settings. But it has been interesting that I have turned back to it. It was the setting for my first really bad book.

Q: I don't think it was bad.

MMc: It was. It really was when I think about. The heart and soul of it was there, but the writing was not ready. I wasn't ready for the material.

Anyway, Mississippi is an interesting state and I think we have explored or maybe I have explored a lot of that, this semester in the class that I taught here, in Southern American Literature. The South is so complicated. It has got all these great conflicts between rich and poor, between black and white, between losing and winning, poverty and wealth, existing and not existing; I am thinking about the Native American Indians, the Choctaw. So, it is just this really interesting place to me with wonderfully crazy characters most of whom I am related to. And I think all of that interests any writer because what we are really looking for is conflict in stories. Even though you don't want that in your life you really look for that in material. This is very interesting to me. In the middle of researching one of my novels called *When I Crossed No Bob* hurricane Katrina hit this area where I was. That became part of the story somehow. It was one more destructive force hitting Mississippi.

Q: *In My Mother's House* was your first really successful novel. It revolves around Jenny's commitment to silence about her family's experiences in Vienna during World War II. What inspired you to write it?

MMc: The first inspiration probably came from my great-grandmother Maria. She is the gross mama in the story. A lot of that story is based on real life. But the real life part of it didn't have any shape so I had to start making things up, to make it into a story. My great-grandmother was from Vienna and married a man from Pécs. I knew her and was at her death bed when she died at 105. I did feel very close to this woman. I really liked her, we really got along. I know that it sounds strange but after her death she just kept coming to me. I keep thinking about her just the same way the girl in the book thinks a lot about her gross mama. My mother also inspired me. She has always been this fascinating character in my life. What I knew about her and then what I didn't know. I think we all, especially women feel that way towards our mothers. We want to know more and they want their own lives. This is very interesting. In researching that book—even though my mother does not want me to ever write about her—we did ultimately become really close as a result of it. I was relieved about that because you never know.

Q: I believe she was very much honored.

MMc: It prodded her too; it inspired her to write her own story. But I think she is realizing how difficult it is to sit down and write every day. Now, she understands me a little more.

Q: The story is told in alternating voices (Elizabeth's and her mother, Jenny's). Does this serve to highlight the different views of mother and daughter?

MMc: When I was researching this, I was staying at this place in England where there was a conference for the viola d'amore. And that is where I got this idea. I went to the lectures and concerts and I started looking at this instrument with the two rows of strings. At first, I thought "No, should I really do this?" but it seemed like such a big metaphor for me, that I had to use it. That was the driving force between the alternating voices. Besides, I did not want to tell the story just from the daughter's point of view. To me that wasn't interesting. The real interest for me was the mother's point of view because of what she had gone through.

Q: Music plays a crucial role in the novel *In My Mother's House*. Elizabeth plays the guitar, her mother (Jenny) the piano and uncle Rudy the viola d'amore. Were these instruments strategically chosen?

MMc: Yes. The piano was the classic instrument that a woman of her age would have learned. Besides, she is from Vienna and it seemed right. I have always wanted to play the piano and I sometimes use novels as an excuse to research. I played the guitar so I knew a little about that. It seemed age appropriate, generationally appropriate as well. As for the viola d'amore, well I had an uncle who played the violin but I gave this character a viola d'amore instead.

Q: There is a lot of history in your novels. *In My Mother's House* is concerned with Vienna and WWII while *How I Found the Strong* is set in Mississippi and evokes the horrors of the Civil War. What led you to these historical subjects?

MMc: I tend to go towards material that affects me personally. This material involves stories that I have heard about or know about. The stories that interest me the most are the ones where ordinary people are just sort of caught up in history and in those moments they do extraordinary things. And that to me is very powerful, in that Greek way. To me the story matters more too because it is set in history. It is strange, I never sought historical stories but now I see how all that comes together. My mother taught history, her father also taught history. So it makes sense. You know, when you grow old it all starts falling into place.

Putting a story in a factual situation involves a lot of work because you have to get the facts right. But I love this kind of work because with every historical story I tell, I know that I learn something, which I love. Dry facts are important. The great thing about the students I have had this semester in Hungary, Pécs is that they know so many facts, and all I have to do is maybe reference a year and everyone knows what happened then. You cannot really do that with students in the USA. This is maybe because your lives are brushed up against history more.

Q: *How I Found the Strong: A Story of the Civil War* written in 2004 is your first young adult novel. Since then you have written three other coming-of-age stories:

When I Crossed No-Bob, *Cashay*, and *Sources of Light*. The major characters of these novels are young girls/boys aged ten-fourteen. What makes this age group so interesting?

MMc: First of all, when I set out to write a story honestly, I should but I don't think about the age of the person who is reading it. I just tell the story. That is probably bad advice but that is just how I do it. I do think it is an interesting age group and an interesting genre. It is really that age between ten and up when some major changes are going on and major questioning starts. The time at the cusp of things is simply fascinating to me.

Q: It is the age when we begin to explore the world.

MMc: Yes. That rush to want to grow up, too. You are moving from the familiar of your home, your yard, your neighborhood to the unfamiliar. And all that fear and courage that is required is very interesting to me.

Q: Your second young adult novel *When I Crossed No-Bob* (set in Mississippi in the aftermath of the Civil War) is a sequel to the Civil War novel *How I Found the Strong*. What motivated you to continue Frank Russell's story now portraying him as an adult?

MMc: When *How I Found the Strong* came out, schools started using it as a book to teach the Civil War. Therefore, I started visiting these schools. I had not been to a middle school or a high school since I had been to middle/high school. So that was my *wow experience*, I had forgotten. When students asked questions about the characters, what happened to some, what happened next, I just said, "I don't know. I have finished it." But then, I would leave and start thinking on what did happen. I wrote this book for my son who was about four years old at the time and for my father. It never occurred to me but it is very much a boy's story because there is a boy protagonist. But then I saw these schools with all these girls and knew that I had to write a story for them. I wanted to write of a tough girl who was growing up during a really tough time. The Reconstruction era really interested me. When I was researching that, Hurricane Katrina hit. So after that hurricane, I used that wiped out landscape for the setting of what I thought a place in the South would look like after being ravaged by war. Those were the main inspirations that fit that book.

Q: In your novel *Cashay*, the protagonist tells her sister that: "Your name doesn't signify who you are." Is this your view too?

MMc: Isn't that funny? Because one of the creative writing assignments I always have on the first day is to write about your name. I have never thought of that, but I believe that it does and it doesn't. In the end it does signify who she is, because she is a treasure. Consequently, it does and it does not. As my students write about their names, they always have this line: *I did not pick my name*. But inevitably it informs who you are. You hear about whom you are named after, an aunt or a saint and that is going to affect your personality. Therefore, be careful with names. I take words and names seriously.

Q: Who or what was your inspiration for *Cashay*? As a white writer, wasn't it difficult to write in the first-person voice of an African-American teenage girl from an inner city neighborhood?

MMc: I had a lot of different inspirations for this book. I met this girl in Mississippi. She was African-American and she had read the two other novels for her class. She came up to me and said, "*When you gonna write a story about me?*" And I thought: I do not know anything about you. Tell me something about you. I asked her, "What do you like to eat?" And she said, "Snowballs and twizzlers." So that was sort of the start of me thinking about this African-American girl. But it is really difficult for a white writer to write about an African-American from an African-American's point of view. It is also difficult for readers to accept. It was much more easily acceptable for me to write about Shanks in *How I Found the Strong* than it was to accept me writing about *Cashay*. But I loved that challenge. Even though my editor told me not to do it, I did it. You know, when someone says don't do that, don't do that, you think you can do it. My sister is a stockbroker and this book gave me a chance to research what she does. And that was fun, because I am so bad at numbers. So I decided to make *Cashay* really good at numbers. And I loved writing about Chicago too; I really wanted to set a contemporary story there. Chicago and that world became a kind of character in itself.

Q: Tell us about your latest novel *Sources of Light*.

MMc: It is a book about a girl named Samantha who moves to Jackson, Mississippi with her mother in 1962. It is just before the Civil Rights Movement is about to blow open. So there is a real tension in the air: secrecy, violence. Everything is about to change, but most of the white Southerners don't want the change. I was really young then, but I just remember this feeling. I didn't know what it was until after we left Mississippi and the feeling was gone. And all of a sudden we could talk about politics. But it was a strange thing because you could not talk about politics or the race situation. You could not tell your teachers how your parents voted or what they said at dinner. It was prohibited to talk about the wrong things that happened those days to African-Americans. Children were taught from age two on not to say things. Therefore, it was really interesting to look back and research that. I remember my parents would tell us, "Yeah, this was a really violent time," but I never really believed that. But then, when I researched that I said, "Oh, my Gosh! We were really living in this weird police state where people were spied."

My parents were pretty liberal and they did some surprising things. I didn't even know until I started asking them questions. In the book Samantha's mother is the one to go and give a lecture at an all-black college Tougaloo in Jackson. I kind of borrowed my father's experience because he gave a lecture there, although his boss told him not to do that because he would get into trouble. There was a reporter who wanted to take his picture and my father said, "Let just not take pictures, ok." After he told me the story I kind of developed it into something more in the book. It was really interesting to re-examine that period and I wanted my son to realize this, because he

always tells me, “Oh, mom, stop being so paranoid, the 60s are over.” I was writing this book during a time when there was also some political tension in the air; Obama was running for President of the United States, and in Indiana the racist talk started. It sounded very familiar.

Q: I suppose it is unnecessary to ask whether you enjoy writing. And it seems that you also enjoy teaching. How did you start teaching?

MMc: It was an accident. It was something I never thought I would do or could do or wanted to do. In graduate school you take classes and then you teach classes and in that way you don’t pay tuition. It is a wonderful thing. So I was just rolling into a classroom to teach grammar. And who knew that a person could have so much fun with English grammar?

Teaching is a wonderful way to learn even better, even more. People are asking questions and you have to say: “I don’t know. I have to come back and tell you the answer.” I didn’t think I would be any good at it because I am not patient at all. Teaching is sort of a curse because I love it so much and I could just do that. But if I don’t write, I am not a happy person and then I am not a happy teacher. Therefore, teaching goes hand in hand to me with writing. And this is very natural to me.

Q: You have spent the fall semester teaching Literature of the American South, the Contemporary American Novel, and Creative Writing here, at the University of Pécs. What are your feelings about Pécs?

MMc: I don’t want to leave. It is so hard to leave. I love Pécs and I didn’t expect to love it this much at all. We have had such a good experience. I think part of the reason why we love it is that we came as a family, so we didn’t get homesick. My husband and my son also had this wonderful experience here. I know this is just too much of a commercial for Pécs but it was so interesting to be here, where my ancient relatives once lived. And then to teach such bright students here was just perfect.

Q: What experiences do you take away?

MMc: I taught three really great classes, so there are many experiences. Every day there was something. I cannot think of one in particular. One question that both faculty and students had was: How can you teach writing? I think from the first day in the writing class they were writers because they were writing. And all I had to do was just say, “OK write about your name, write about your birth, write about that,” and everyone had a story. It was a matter of just pressing the button—*Now, tell it.* And I think they were even surprised how quickly it all came. Everyone wrote something once a week, but so many times people would hand in two, three things a week. So it was this really great energy I felt that was in the class and I can say the same thing about the other two classes too. In the Southern Literature class I felt the same thing. Everyone wanted to talk about passages and these insane Southern people. After leaving every class I would just sit and think about what had just happened.

Q: As author of six award-winning novels what advice would you give to aspiring literary writers?

MMc: Read, read, and read. Read things that you might not normally read. Travel and live. I think a lot of people imagine that writers are just these secluded people in caves, smoking cigarettes and thinking about themselves. But I do believe that the best writers are the ones who go out, witness and write about what they see, but not necessarily live through. Therefore, a lot of the best writers are reporters. Even though you could be really good at writing one kind of thing, you should always try to write something different. For me it is really important to challenge myself to write a different kind of thing in every project. In this way you are growing as a writer. But the main thing is keeping at writing. I think people get easily discouraged as they get rejected. But that is just part of this way of life. With every rejection you should send out more, just keep on going.

Q: What are you involved in writing at the moment?

MMc: I don't know. I think it will have something to do probably with my experience here in Pécs. I think it will be probably non-fiction. I love writing essays, so this might be a longer, sort of book length piece about all the things I have discovered here. That is my hope, we will see.

Q: Good luck with it and with all your other plans and engagements. Thank you for the talk.