



The Learning Project

by Lincoln Stoller

Caitlin McKenna: Student, Writer

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Born: 1988 in Bethesda, Maryland

*“The temple bell stops.
But the sound keeps coming
out of the flowers.”*

— Matsuo Basho, 17th century Japanese poet

CM:

Before I started writing I was a big reader. I had this one favorite author called K.A. Applegate, she'd written this long book series. I started reading that in 4th grade and it went through to 7th grade. Before finishing the series I'd written a few things for school, mostly short stories, but they didn't amount to much.

In 7th grade I finished reading this huge story that had taken years of my life to get through, and that was when I started writing. I think I was sort of drifting, having nothing to do, and I thought I'd like to create a story like that, I'd like to give something to the world that would touch someone else like her story touched me.

I knew I had an aptitude for writing but I hadn't thought of doing it seriously until that moment. I can't explain it beyond that. It was a period of time when I was floating, I wasn't reading any story that I could "glom" onto, and I was sort of lost as to what to do with my mind. I always need to be doing something with my mind, creating or absorbing, whether I'm reading a book or writing a story. I can't just be idle.

LS:

This is the long series; how long was it?

CM:

It was 54 books.

LS:

She really kept the plot going for the whole series?

CM:

She did; I was so amazed. She's my role model for a writer, basically. I've known a lot of great writers but she's the one who got me interested in writing because she kept her story going for 3 whole years, even longer. It was an epic — it was sci-fi.

LS:



Do you remember what you felt before you started reading this series?

CM:

These books got me interested in science fiction. Before I'd read some fantasy, like Brian Jacks, he wrote what we call "beast epics" where there are medieval settings, and where the characters were mice and squirrels and foxes instead of humans.

I hadn't really found a purpose — I didn't like to be idle but I wasn't as involved in any long reading commitments. There wasn't much to my own artistic endeavors, I was more of a sketcher. Actually, I used to draw a lot of comic strips, and I did that for years. That was sort of my passion when I was younger.

LS:

What was the transition like when you ended the 54th volume? It must have been difficult. I mean... I've never read anything that long but I've read shorter things, and ending them can be a shock.

CM:

It was, it really was. I actually cried when I finished it. It was very hard to imagine that it was over even though it made sense, story-wise. It was the culmination and you could tell. At the same time it was sort of unreal because it had been a big part of my life, as you can imagine.

LS:

When I finished the Lord of the Rings, which I did when I was pretty young, I searched at the back of the book for more, and I reread the end and read the footnotes.

CM:

Yeah, me too.

LS:

It was hard to think that that world was gone. Did you take up writing at that time?

CM:

I'd done some school writing, I'd written a short story that was a fantasy about this girl who went to another dimension, a parallel world. I'd liked writing that and it made me think I might want to write more, but I hadn't written that much prior to this transition.

After I finished this long series it took me a couple of months just absorbing it and going over it. I didn't actually start writing my own stuff until September or October, because I started 8th grade. I think that was important. Not to speak ill of school but 8th grade for me was not a very stimulating environment.

LS:

How did you feel about the other grades? Did you have a particular attitude towards school at that point?



CM:

Well, no... it's hard to describe. Elementary school was very different because I was at a small school. I changed schools at the beginning of 7th grade, but I was still reading this series at that point, so I still had that.

I live in two worlds. A real world and a mental world that's comprised of everything that I've read and written and seen, and everything that isn't in the real world. Because I was still reading the series in 7th grade I still had that.

My elementary school was very small, I knew everyone in my grade and in the two grades above and below. It was relaxed. There were no cliques. It was very different.

But when 8th grade came along there was a paradigm shift: school got harder and more serious plus, since I finished the series, my mental world was seriously lacking something to look forward to (laughs).

That was 2001 and I needed to find something quickly. The 9-11 attack on the Trade Center happened in the second week of school and that for me was quite... well... I didn't lose anyone, which I was glad for. Although two of our friends were going to go to see the World Trade Center that day, but they decided not to, who knows why. So they escaped being killed.

That was quite a shock to me. Before that I thought the stuff on the news had little impact on my life, but this did. The whole world seemed to shudder and I needed to do something in my own world to reflect this shift. I couldn't just let it go, I had to analyze it, to work it over, maybe start doing something different. Writing for me is just what came out of that. I guess... it's hard to explain.

LS:

I find writing difficult, but it doesn't seem that it was too difficult for you. What did you get out of it? Did you get a way back into that world that you were in when you were reading?

CM:

Yeah, I think that's what it was. My mental world always has to be expanding. I don't like it being static or stagnant. I think people lose their imaginations that way.

I think the imagination is one of the most important things that humans' have. It can do so much for us and it doesn't ask anything in return, except that we use it.

Writing is a way of expanding my world and keeping it from falling still. You can read a lot, but if you expand it on your own, then you can do it anytime you want and you feel the sense of ... (sigh)... endless possibility, maybe.

The outside world is moving, always moving — maybe not forward exactly, but in all directions. We have to keep up in our heads — and I have to keep up in my head — so I started making my own worlds. I had to record them. That's what writing is for me: recording the worlds in here, in my head.



LS:

It's so different than reading.

CM:

It really is.

LS:

How did you make that transition from reading? When you're reading it just pours into you, you can do nothing and just be half awake and it will pour into you, or you can be very awake. But in writing you have to be peddling, or do you? Can you write stream-of-consciousness and feel that you're rewarded?

CM:

It depends. I can do that for my journals. But if I'm writing a story I try to make it sound real. If I wrote a story from a stream-of-consciousness perspective I don't think it would make much sense. I could do poetry like that, but with writing I like to have a decent plot and believable characters.

For me the most important thing are the characters, and I feel like I have to be fully awake to know and talk to them. If you're half asleep in this world and you're trying to talk to people, then you're not going to get to know half of them. When you're meeting people you have to be awake. When you're writing you're meeting people from your subconscious, I think.

LS:

Tell me more about the conversations you have with those characters. How do they grow?

CM:

Usually the idea has to gestate, you know? The characters have to grow along with the story. It's not like conversations exactly, it's more like having an inner dialog with yourself because characters are aspects of you.

Anyone you create has to come from inside yourself, they can't come from somewhere else, which is kind of scary if you have a character whom you think of as evil. You wonder, "Is that part of me?" Subconsciously, maybe... yeah. But it's OK because we all have things like that in us.

They grow through being written. You introduce them and then, as the plot progresses, you get to see more of their character. Sometimes you're surprised by the turns it takes and you think, "Oh, I didn't know this about them!" And it seems weird because it's you, but it's a part of you that you don't normally see — a subconscious part of you.

As they grow you learn things about yourself, but you also learn things about them because the second you put a character down on paper they become something that's also separate from you. They do become their own person within the reality of the story, and it's just by writing their story that you learn about them. You can't have them fully formed before you put down a single word, that doesn't work. It's impractical. It's like a creationism of writing and that's not how it works; writing is an evolution. Characters evolve as you take them further in their stories.



LS:

Do your characters lead the development of your stories, or do you?

CM: It's sort of a collaborative. You set out different paths, well *you* set out the paths but then *they* choose the path. The choosing is up to them but the setting up is up to you. I'm setting up the reality, as far as I know, but maybe I'm just channeling it all from somewhere else.

LS:

There are lots of situations that you can set up knowing what you know, but there are many situations you don't have personal experience with, not you or anyone. Do your characters avoid those situations where you feel confused because you don't know what they should do?

CM:

I think they might, yeah. If they're part of you, then their character would guide them to avoid situations where they wouldn't fit.

It's like an intuition, there's a lot that you can imagine that you don't have personal experience with. Science fiction runs into this all the time. I can guarantee you that no one who has written science fiction, not the writers I've read anyway, have actually been into space. But they write about it. They write on the basis of what they know from reading about it and then their own intuition.

LS:

How do you deal with characters doing things you are uncomfortable with? Do you censor yourself, do you lock your journal, do you write things and then throw them away, or do you just decide this is going to ruin my day so I think I'll just have my characters do something else?

CM:

It depends on the situation. I have a journal that I've written all in this code that I've invented. No one can read it except me. Sometimes I use this journal to write things that I don't want anyone else to read. I think you need privacy. It's important to record your thoughts, but you sometimes you want you — and only you — to be able to read them.

I also have a sketch book that's intertwined with my stories because sometimes I create a creature, draw it, write down its history and a story will come out of that. I don't usually draw scenes, I prefer words because it's more of a challenge than drawing. I can't draw everything, I can't draw people at all. I can get to the cartoon level but not to a realistic level. Mostly I draw things that never were.

LS:

Does this relationship you have with writing make you feel unusual? Where do you place yourself among your colleagues?

CM:

I've a lot of friends who would probably be considered unusual by normal standards. But I've kind of kept my writing personal, I let my friends read a few things, but my writing life really is



separate, and in that way I am unusual. I don't know if there are that many people of my age who are serious about writing.

I'd really like to get published, and I'm making steps toward that. I feel like I'm in a chrysalis because not many people have read my words. When and if I get published it will bring my personal and writing lives together. Then I will be able to show people the product of my efforts and say, "Here, this is what I'm doing. This is the part of my life you don't see."

LS:

What do you think about your friends who are on other paths?

CM:

Some of my friends are really passionate about things, but they still don't know what they want to do. I think they would like to bring the same passion that they have for, like, reading or music, but they don't know what to do in their own lives.

They don't know if their talent lies in music because they like it, or if they're destined for something completely different. I think college will be good for them because they'll be able to explore their interests. At the same time I think college will be good for me because I know what I want to do.

LS:

Do you think that it's right to say that there are some people who have a public life but no private life, and that you have a private life and a public life?

CM:

That's an interesting question. It's appropriate to say I have a private life and a public life. I could go farther and say that I'm living both at the same time. Like when I go to presentations at this conference and Dad introduces me to all these people, that involves the public part of me, and then when I get bored I go off to think about something.

Thinking for me is part of my private life, it's an interior mental exercise. I carry that with me everywhere I go. If I get bored with the public life I can retreat. Except sometimes I can't retreat, or shouldn't, or don't want to.

The crisis is that people often don't have enough of a private life. American society is very up on being public and socializing: getting to know people, being gregarious, being social. Except for the extremes I don't think there is such a thing as being anti-social. I don't think people leave enough time for themselves, their minds and their own growth — for just being alone with their thoughts. People need to stop and smell the roses; it's cliché but it's true.

LS:

Has your traveling been important for your writing?

CM:

Oh yeah, very. I live in a small town most of the time. Travel has helped lend a patina of reality to what I write. I can actually recall smells and sounds and sights. I might be describing



somewhere I'll never get to, that no one will get to, but I can make it real because I can lend to it the qualities of real cities I've been to. Also books have been important for expanding my mind. But there is something travel gives you that books can't. The reality is so much greater when you're actually there and you're actually processing this enormous amount of data.

Books describe things in words, which only goes so far. They describe things one at a time, so you can't hold it all in your mind simultaneously, which you need to do for it to be completely real. But if you're dropped onto a street in some city it's all coming at you at once and you have to process it, integrate it, feel how it works, deal with the chaos. I think chaos is important to experience because so much of the world is bathed in it all the time. Part of reality involves a certain amount of chaos. It's important to know that not every place is idyllic, small and provincial.

LS:

Are there any other things about writing that you'd like to add that I haven't thought to ask?

CM:

One of the most important things in writing is syntax. People don't appreciate punctuation. It's not just the words, it's how you use them, it's the rhythms; writing is almost like singing, or playing music.

The rhythm in what's written can give an impact that words alone can't, and the way you use words. In long series, deciding where to start the books, and where to place each part of the story chronologically is almost like an expanded version of the syntax that goes in every page. That's something that I value a lot in my own writing and something that I strive the hardest for.

LS:

You speak almost as if you're writing, which makes it easy for me. You're telling me a story with unusual detail. It's like that Bill Cosby joke that begins "I started life as a child".

You started all the back in 4th grade. It all makes sense, everything worked out so well. Were there periods of depression, chaos and elation? What about all of the sorrows or... whatever was happening?

CM:

Yeah, if I described it all in detail you'd be hearing the names of a lot of cats. And a lot of things that I just cannot say.

LS:

Can't say because they're not sayable?

CM:

Well, they are sayable, it would just take too long. It would take hours. You don't want to hear about my life.

LS:



That's true, our readers wouldn't tolerate it. On the other hand, maybe my questions cannot be fully answered through dialog. Maybe we can't answer how young people find what you might call their private lives.

If you think about school, one of the reasons I don't like school, is that they never teach you to have a private life, they never inspire you to take off on your own. Most of school seems aimed to provide a trade to prepare you for a job.

CM:

So is your son home schooled?

LS:

He's largely home schooled.

CM:

I think that's better. If I could do it again I'd be like, "Mom, Dad, home school me." Just so I could see what that's like. I was writing words before I was reading. My parents would help me write, and then I would read it.

LS:

What role did school play? Good and bad.

CM:

I can remember writing before I went to any school. I'd have a piece of paper and my Mom and Dad would teach me how to write letters. I was starting to read words, so when I got to first grade we had these flash cards where we would read words and I thought this was the dullest, most boring shit exercise that I'd ever done. It was rote because I knew these words.

In second grade it was a lot better because we'd have books that we'd read stories out of. Half of the reason that I started reading early was those books. The other half happened at home because that's where I started reading books with my Mom. She would read to me and I would be sitting there looking at the words, so I had that connection.

Third grade was pretty much my least favorite year there because we had books that we would read, but we would read them at a glacial pace. We read "Pipi Longstocking" and I must have read that book in the first day, but it took so much longer for the class to read it. But by that time my love of reading was too strong. If I had been a less enthusiastic reader that probably would have destroyed my desire.

My favorite part of school was the friends that I had. I made some really good friends whom I liked to hang out with. Classes got more interesting as I got farther into school. Elementary school was a good experience for me overall.

LS:

What have you learned from the books you've read? Do you feel that you've understood the material and the people who wrote it?

CM:



There's something I've been noticing: this stereotype of authors being alcoholics. I wonder if that's a reflection of that private life you were talking about. I wonder if they get a little absorbed in it.

LS:

There's a danger in taking your private life too seriously, and alcohol seems to have a particularly insidious effect on people who do that.

CM:

A lot of the time people self-medicate. If they're depressed they self medicate with alcohol or drugs.

LS:

Yeah, and it's not a successful mediation.

CM:

Well, no, it doesn't really work, it just makes things worse.

LS:

That's not medication, that's self destruction.

CM:

Well, sometimes people might subconsciously be seeking oblivion. Depression makes you do that, like thinking that anything may be better than this; that I'd rather die.

Sometimes people can be completely blind to their own personal life and problems. There are people who have advice for everyone but themselves. I think you have to start with yourself because how can you help other people if you can't help yourself.

You're the first person that you know, and you're probably going to be the last, so you're the place you have to start. I hope that doesn't sound egotistical.

LS:

Why should sounding egotistical weaken your observation?

CM:

Maybe egotistical isn't as bad as it's made out to be. You can carry it too far, but you can also carry caring for other people too far too.

It's a balance. Everything in life is a balance: you have to balance yourself and others. You have to balance the outer world and the inner, the public and the private. It's Anthony Burgess who said that duality is the ultimate reality, it seems that there's truth in that.