

Oklahoma r e v i e w

Petulah Olibert

Interview with Melissa Pritchard

Bubbly, carefree and with an inclination to be dramatic, which, doubtless, has worked to her advantage in the classroom, nationally-acclaimed author Melissa Pritchard has won several awards for her fiction, including the Flannery O'Connor Award, the Carl Sandburg Award, and the James Phelan Award.

*She is the author of three short story collections, three novels and a biography. Her latest novel, **Late Bloomer**, a satiric romance, was named best book of the year by the Chicago Tribune in 2004.*

Melissa Pritchard is currently a professor of English at Arizona State University.

OKR: It is said that every fiction writer has at least one book that is essentially his or her autobiography. Is this true for you?

MP: To some extent, *Late Bloomer* was mine. I did live with a Native American man. I didn't write romance novels to make money. But I was intrigued with the idea that I was in a romance with a Native American man that everyone thought was so gorgeous and therefore wonderful. My romance was still ongoing while I was writing this book. I looked back over my relationship and selected things that were dramatic or funny or interesting and exaggerated them. With fiction, facts are in service to your imagination and your imagination is in service to the larger story. It's pretty much the most autobiographical thing I've written.

OKR: In *Late Bloomer*, you seem to be working within the genre of the

romance novel while also subverting it. What was your intention for the book?

MP: *Late Bloomer* is supposed to be a very funny book, but it is also about relationships between older women and younger men. The book juxtaposed a romance not going well with those romance books which are exaggerations of our culture's belief in romance as the cure for all things. I decided to focus on the romantic element, because, as a child I was indoctrinated about romance through songs, stories and culture. I over-romanticized everything. So, in the novel, I'm asking serious questions about love: Is romantic love possible in our contemporary world? How is it complicated by our contemporary world? Is love possible if you don't love yourself? I was asking serious questions and I was asking them for me. I think writing fiction is most satisfying when there's a question—something deep, ethical, something connected to you personally. I knew in that book that I was wrestling with that idea of romance because I wanted to get free, and if I had to get rid of romance in my life to get free, I would. What I came up with is that you have to love yourself, accept yourself, and then you'll attract the right people.

OKR: Do you echo the view, like your character in the novel that romance novels are "lurid bromides, foul sop?"

MP: I was satirizing the romance novel because I think it's very unrealistic. Many women read those, and even if I didn't read them, I've watched romantic movies and I read a lot about romance. So part of me was exorcising, breaking the spell of the idea of romance.

OKR: Do you more often write your truth than fiction?

MP: It's a combination. I view it as a quilt, or a scrapbook, or a collage. I'll take something that intrigues me out of my own life or my family's life and then I might layer onto it something that I imagine but that's more extreme, more interesting. It's really selection. Yes, sometimes they stem out of life experiences. I wrote a short story once about a prisoner I'd read about in the newspaper. It had nothing to do with me, although I realized while writing it, that there was a veiled statement about capital punishment. But I didn't set out to write it that way. This man just interested me.

OKR: With that in mind, many of the characters in your short-story collection, *Spirit Seizures*, are grotesque. Placed in mundane settings, many

possess a longing for an awakening, an epiphany, something that exists outside their normal realm of being. Was Flannery O'Connor's fiction important to your development as a writer?

MP: She's one of the reasons I became a writer. I read her work and I thought to myself, I want to do this. There was something of the truth I recognized in her characters even though they are grotesque. There's something raw and true about them. With one of my stories, *Companions*, I set out to write a Flannery O'Connor-like story. That book was my first book, so I was teaching myself to write.

OKR: What makes a good writer? What methods have worked for you?

MP: I've realized that all my books are very different from one another. Usually, writers write within a certain spectrum. I would encourage beginning writers to explore different genres, although I sometimes wonder if I might be better known had I stuck to one type of writing, not that it matters—I'm writing for the sake of the art. I would encourage any writer to listen to himself or herself. What do you want to write? What matters is emotional truth.

OKR: There is no guarantee that a writer's work will be read, loved, nationally acclaimed. Your work has received both critical and popular acclaim. Has that been a difficult balance to achieve? Do you have advice for writers on how to move past the desire for acceptance and continue to dwell in the work?

MP: It's hard when you're caught in a world of creation and you get lost in it. You dedicate to it, you sacrifice for it. Then the book gets accepted and there is this whole build up to the publication. Then the book starts getting reviews. Some might be great, and others might be critical. Some authors don't read their reviews—good or bad. I can't do that, I'm too curious. The public scrutiny of your work is a gamble. But I just always write for me. It's taking a risk. You know when you write that you're not going to please everybody. That's just a matter of taste. You can't write to please the audience or to make money or to sell a book. Your work has to have integrity. Self respect. I like my independence to create. If it doesn't get published, that's just how it goes.

OKR: Have you ever experienced a loss of faith in your ability or zeal to write? How did you work through it?

MP: Sometimes I'd go into a bookstore and I'd have a panic attack. That was either during the time I wasn't writing, or while I was waiting to get something accepted. I'd go in and see all those great books and I'd think what am I doing? I would still write but I couldn't go into a bookstore. In the few years I worked on the biography, I got a little dispirited because I wasn't writing fiction. I'm so happy to get back to writing fiction. I felt a little distanced from myself. I had to use my talent as a writer to tell this lady's story. The book is called *Devotedly Always, Virginia: The Life of Virginia Galvin Piper*. It will be published this October. For this book, I had to write in a certain style because I had to think who the audience was. I knew that was the kind of voice or language I had to use—accessible to many but it was hard for me because I didn't get to indulge. Lately, I haven't written and because I wasn't writing, I was losing my confidence. I was starting to wonder if I could do it again. So when I was in India I started writing again.

OKR: What books have you been reading lately?

MP: John Banville's *The Sea*, it won the Booker Prize last year. *Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Rebecca West's *The Fountain Overflows*, and *Bhagavadgita*. I don't really have a method when I choose books to read, but when I'm writing, I try to read things that would help me prescriptively.

OKR: How do you manage with such a busy schedule to find time to write?

MP: I have a couple answers to that. One of them is that I'm a very disciplined person. I know that if I don't write I get unhappy. Writing makes me happy. It makes me feel centered. It gives me energy. The other reason is that I don't write so much during the school year. I do a lot of my writing in the summer time. I try to get money for the summer so I can just live and write. This fall I have a sabbatical coming up, so I'm going to try to write a new book. I've realized through trial and error over the years that nobody was going to make me write. I have to write for me. Even when my kids were little, I had to do that. I had my secret world of writing that I would go to everyday. It's the one place where I could really be me, speak my truth. Most of one's life is so much compromise and adjustment. It's a rare thing to just speak the truth.

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