Nina Schuyler: “Like most writers, I work at the edges of the day”

Posted on January 6, 2014 by BLOOM Leave a comment

by Terry Hong

1.

Wife, mother, teacher, poet, writer—**Nina Schuyler** wears many labels. Her youngest is still a toddler, she balances multiple part-time jobs, keeps up with the daily-life expectations of cooking and laundry, soccer and basketball mom-ing, not to mention the care and feeding of the family’s dog and fish.

In the midst of all the multi-tasking, Schuyler has managed to write three novels, with a fourth in progress: her debut, *The Painting*, hit shelves in 2004 when she was 41; she wrote a second novel that she hasn’t yet shared with the world; her latest, *The Translator*, pubbed in July 2013, almost a decade after her first; and she’s already blogged about the sex scenes in her latest book-in-the-making.

“Like most writers, I work at the edges of the day,” Schuyler confesses in a recent blog post on her author website. “Early morning. Late at night. A babysitter who comes and watches the little one, giving me the luxury to stretch out in a big acre of time.” Although she refers to “discipline” as “an archaic word,” she relies on a $5.00 kitchen device to keep her writing.

Literally.

> [M]y friend, my enemy, my companion, my task master is the Timer . . . it sits on my desk and I set it for thirty minutes. The implicit agreement between Timer and me is that I cannot move from my chair until the beeper goes off. . . . A new novel, page by page, hour by hour, something—a story? . . . I sit and write until I hear the beep.

Schuyler had much to do before settling into writing fiction full time, including the study and mastery of many languages. Before, during, and after studying economics and human biology at Stanford University, then law at University of California Hastings College of the Law, Schuyler also acquired Spanish, Danish, and Japanese. She honed her writing skills as a journalist at a legal newspaper, where she dealt with facts. “[A]s I gathered stories for the paper, so much was left on the cutting floor, so to speak,” she told **Amy Sue Nathan** of the Women’s Fiction Writers blog. “A newspaper article uses a specific form that delivers information efficiently and concisely to the reader. Yet I met so many fascinating characters, characters in the true sense of the word.” That fascination sent her back for a third stint at school, this time to San Francisco State University’s graduate creative writing program: “When I was accepted, I got enough validation to keep writing.”

2.

By the time Schuyler finished her MFA, she had what would become her first published novel. That debut—Schuyler’s thesis after many revisions—“had a speedy entrance into the world—in a matter of weeks, I got an agent, and she sold it quickly.” *The Painting* was the result of a confluence of sights, sounds, and smells during a Japanese language class in her teacher’s home. On Backstory, Schuyler recalled her introduction to *ukiyo-e*: “It means ‘pictures of the floating world,’ [Schuyler’s sensei] said, smiling faintly, as if she’d just laid down a winning card. She knew I dabbled in painting and she’d probably found a way to spark her flailing student’s interest.” During an afternoon redolent with green tea, mochi, and the scent of fresh-cut grass outside intermingled with the musty pages of books inside, Schuyler listened to her sensei explain: “’For the first time, art being created for [the] everyday person.’”

These popular paintings of “almost everything” produced during the 17th to 19th centuries became a major export item when Japan capitulated to the

OTHER BLOOMERS & SHAKERS: Oh, Fug: The World’s Oldest Rock Star
Q&A With Abigail Thomas
Abigail Thomas: Accidentally Deliberate
BLOOMERS AT LARGE: Creative Paces
IN HER OWN WORDS: Penelope Fitzgerald
Penelope Fitzgerald: Outrunning “Time’s Winged Chariot”

TWITTER

What do you #write as #fiction? What as #memoir? Abigail Thomas has considered the question: bitly.com/1dWKb2b 1 day ago

@NicoleWolverton takes a look at "The World's Oldest #Rock Star": bitly.com/19RUaGK 1 day ago

"I only liked the part of #publishing where you could fall in love with a #book..." bitly.com/1dWKb2b 1 day ago

Follow @bloom_site

Bloom
Like 737

BLOOMERS @ THE MILLIONS

Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854, which opened Japan’s trade routes to the West after 250 years of isolation. That ukiyo-e prints traveled far and wide through open borders was especially fascinating to Schuyler:

> I was struck by the image of colorful paintings flying through the air from East to West. Over the next weeks, I found myself thinking about these paintings, broadly, in history, and I couldn’t shake the questions: what is the purpose of beauty? The purpose of art? What if the world was knit together by beauty?

In seeking answers, Schuyler wove a resonating story spanning cultures, oceans, time.

When I discovered *The Painting* in 2004, it went immediately into my then-monthly “New and Notable Books” column for ***AsianWeek***. Undoubtedly, it was one of the best books I read that year. Blending fiction, history, and art, Schuyler introduced Ayoshi, a woman artist in 1869 Japan, who paints in order to remember her lost lover. She hides one of her paintings in a shipment of pottery her husband sends to France, where an ex-soldier unpacks the far-flung riches in a Paris on the verge of defeat during the Franco-Prussian War. And so begins the tenuous relationship between two love stories, half a world apart.

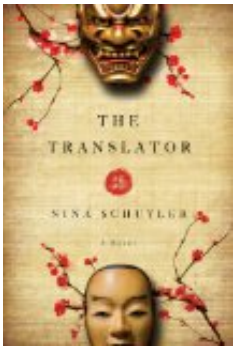
My “wow”-response was shared by plenty of others: *The Painting* was a finalist for the Northern California Book Awards, selected by *San Francisco Chronicle* as one of the Best Books of 2004, and dubbed a “fearless debut” by MSNBC.

3.

Nine years passed before another Schuyler title hit shelves. In between, Schuyler explained to Nathan, “[T]here’s an unsold novel, another baby, an editor who retires, an agent who leaves her agency, my mother passing, teaching on Tuesday and Wednesday nights.” When *The Translator* was finally ready for the world, Schuyler wasn’t quite sure of its future: “[W]ho would help? Who would believe? Love it?” But tenacity sealed the book’s success: “Twenty query letters later, I found a new agent, who was enthusiastic and smart and savvy and lovely. Thankfully, she sold it.” *The Translator*—about language, communication, understanding, and ultimately, the bonds of family — arrived in July 2013 with starred reviews and fellow authors’ enthusiastic endorsements.

CATEGORIES

Select Category



In just her protagonist’s name alone, Schuyler instills linguistic magic. Hanne’s given name reflects her German-Dutch origins, yet its pronunciation is not far from the Japanese infinitive, *hanasu*, which, depending on the kanji character, can mean “to speak, to talk” (話す), or “to separate, disconnect, divide” (離す). Over the novel’s 300 pages, Hanne will move between the desire to speak and communicate, as she longs to repair the separations and disconnects that have left her isolated in middle age. Hanne’s last name, Schubert, is likely a nod to the prodigious composer Franz Schubert, who passed away far too young, leaving behind what would become one of his signature pieces, “Unfinished Symphony.” In her isolation, so much of Hanne’s life is unfinished, unsorted, unknown.

Hanne is 53 and speaks seven languages, working daily with non-native words as both a college professor of Japanese language in San Francisco, as well as a translator of Japanese texts into English. After finishing her latest project, she takes a walk to City Hall, where she tumbles down the stairs. Although Hanne seems to recover from her accident in just a few days, her ability to speak English disappears. Suffering from a rare form of aphasia, her verbal fluency is limited to only Japanese. Unable to communicate at home, Hanne takes the opportunity to speak at a conference in Tokyo. There she’s publicly confronted by Kobayashi, the author whose work she’s just translated, who accuses her of having “‘ruined my main character!’”

Kobayashi’s protagonist, Hanne is reminded, has a living counterpart: the renowned Noh actor, Moto, whom Schuyler has named with significant purpose—of the many kanji his name might represent, *moto* (元) could mean “the beginning,” or “the genesis.” For Hanne, seeking and finding Moto forces her to confront the seeds of her own difficult relationships—with both her late mother and her estranged daughter—in order to finally ford the divide, restore lost communications, and reclaim severed connections.

For the multilingual Schuyler, writing *The Translator* seems to be her own version of righting wordy wrongs. In a guest post for the blog, First Books: Reading and Writing with Friends, Schuyler channels a 2005 *New Yorker* article, “The Translation Wars” by **David Remnick**, about the blatant inaccuracies in the first English translations of some of the greatest 19th-century Russian titles perpetuated by a single translator, **Constance Garnett**. During a difficult pregnancy in 1891, Garnett taught herself Russian, and soon began to translate novels: “According to Remnick, when she came across a word or phrase she didn’t know, she merrily skipped it and moved on,”

Schuyler writes. Checking her own shelves, Schuyler realized all her own personal copies of Russian novels were rendered by Garnett: “I felt betrayed! Cheated! Lied to! I’d read a watered-down, corrupted Russian translation, soaked in a heavy dose of English custom and sensibility,” she admits. “At the same time, questions swirled: What constitutes a good translation? What does a translator owe the author?”

Curious, Schuyler contacted a translator of Japanese literature into English she met through her father: “I interviewed the translator and one interview turned into seven,” she recalls. But that wasn’t enough: “I got carried away—I discovered that a language learned later in life is located in a different area of the brain. I interviewed a neurosurgeon to find out more.” Still searching, Schuyler “listened for trouble—a good sign of a story,” until trouble duly arrived: “A translator told me, ‘I don’t take on a project unless I can really relate to and understand the main character.’ . . . So . . . what if the translator unknowingly made a mistake? An egregious error?” Again, she had more questions than answers: “I was transfixed by the complexities that exhausted easy explanations. . . . I had, to my delight, the beginning of a novel.”

Finally, almost a decade in the making, Schuyler imparts that delight to lucky readers. Infused with so many layers to be deciphered, puzzled, revealed, and understood, *The Translator* proves to be a lingua-lover’s near-perfect novel.

Terry Hong writes BookDragon, a book review blog for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center.

Homepage photo credit: ▓▒ *TORLEY* ▒▓ *via photopin cc*

Related

Kim Thúy's Ru: An A…
In "Debut Authors"

No Apparent Bound…
In "Author Features"

Bloomers At-Large: “…
In "Bloomers At Large"

Tags: Amy Sue Nathan, Constance Garnett, David Remnick, Nina Schuyler, Terry Hong, The Painting, The Translator. Bookmark the permalink.

Previous post
OTHER BLOOMERS & SHAKERS: Oh, Fug: The World’s Oldest Rock Star

Leave a Comment

Enter your comment here...