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# Q&A With Nina Schuyler (Part 2)

Posted on January 9, 2014 by BLOOM

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*Following is Part 2 of an extensive interview with author **Nina Schuyler**. Click [here](#) to read Part 2.*

**Terry Hong:** As a writer who is a woman, who also happens to be a mother of two small young kids—do you feel that motherhood has specifically influenced your writing? And if so, how?

**Nina Schuyler:** My quick response: Writer's block? I don't have time.

On a more honest note, I have a two-and-a-half year old, and the world for him is full of wonder. A toddler's way of moving through the world is slow, full of curiosity, and easily and delightfully dazzled.

An artist, any artist, works to see the world anew. Having a young son who naturally sees the world with bright eyes, well, it's a blessing. He's pointing out to me so much beauty and mystery.

Finally, I've learned to get the writing done any way I can. I am so flexible now I should be a contortionist. I have no rituals, no lighting of candles or music or anything. I manage to write nearly every day. If it's only a sentence, or a revision of a sentence, I call that writing and let it feed me.

**TH:** And are you and [Mr. Timer](#) still good friends?

Welcome to Bloom — where you'll encounter the work and lives of authors whose first books were published when they were 40 or older; who bloomed in their own good time.

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**NS:** We are. But I can now go for about 45 minutes instead of just 30. My two-and-a-half year old is older now. I wrote that [blog post] when he was just 1. Now I have more energy and can focus for longer periods of time.

Mr. Timer is still my buddy. He helps me bake *and* he helps me write.

**TH:** You mentioned in an interview that you'd "love to read more novels with female characters that shake up and out of the stereotype. More females who experience anger, raw ambition, intellect, sexual hunger, arrogance, a solid ego, authority, power." Who are some of your favorite women characters who fit such a description? Who are some of your own favorite writers (NO gender specified here on purpose!) who have created such women?

**NS:** Lily Briscoe in **Virginia Woolf's** *To the Lighthouse* for her ambition and passion for her art, painting right to the very end of the novel. **J.M. Coetzee's** Elizabeth Costello in the book of the same name for her intellect, her honesty, her solid ego. **Elizabeth Strout's** Olive Kitteridge in the book by the same name is dear to me. Olive gave me permission to go ahead and create a complex female character, full of impatience and patience, who is stern, driven, and utterly devoted to her art and her children. Leda in **Elena Ferrante's** *The Lost Daughter*, for her brutally honest ambivalence toward motherhood. **Grace Paley's** first person narrators, especially in her short story collection, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*.



**TH:** Do you think writers who are also women (won't dare use "women writers"! ) need to create more female characters like those you describe above? Just as authors get outed, noted, criticized, or applauded for writing beyond their ethnic box, do you think authors can or should write beyond their gender?

**NS:** Absolutely. In my first novel, *The Painting*, I wrote my way back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Japan and Paris during the Franco-Prussian War, inhabiting both men and women. It was thrilling.

**TH:** Now that I've outed that word—sex, albeit via "gender"—I have to mention your blog post, "Writing Sex," in which you confess, "I have to write a sex scene. It's inevitable." I love that "inevitable." In the post, you channel the words of **Edmund White** ("Most sex is funny...") and **Ernest Hemingway** ("... and for her everything was red, orange, gold-red from the sun on the closed eyes, and it all was that color, all of it, the filling, the possessing, the having,

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

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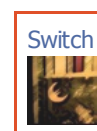
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"When you add a qualifier to the term '#fiction,' you are setting up a tier system." Well-said, @Nina\_Schuyler. [bit.ly/1cBbEHG](http://bit.ly/1cBbEHG)  
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Terry Hong [@SIBookDragon] talks to @Nina\_Schuyler in part 1 of this 2 part interview. [bit.ly/1cBbEHG](http://bit.ly/1cBbEHG) Part 2 goes live tomorrow! 13 hours ago

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all of that color, all in a blindness of that color”). How come no exemplary scenes by writers who are women?

**NS:** You’re right. I’m not sure there’s one author, but let’s add the “Song of Solomon” from the King James Bible. **Anaïs Nin**. **Marguerite Duras’s** *The Lover*. I’m thinking of writers who do sex in an interesting way. Oh, **Toni Morrison’s** scene in *Beloved* between Sethe and Paul D. Garner.

I’d love to hear from your readers about their favorite sex scene in literature.

**TH:** In *The Translator*, regarding Hanne’s given and last names ... did I get any of that right in my [review](#)? Hanne and the two meanings for *hanasu*, depending on the kanji characters—“to speak, to talk” (話す), or “to separate, disconnect, divide” (離す)? And a musical reference for **Schubert**?

**NS:** You got it right! I also loved that Hanne in German means grace, God’s graciousness.

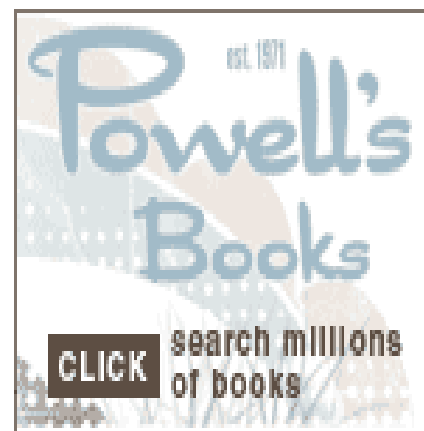
**TH:** Given that nod to Schubert, how important is music in your life and your writing? “Lyrical” is a word that certainly has been used more than a few times to describe your writing. I especially love this quote from *The Translator*: “Every situation, every person has a melody playing, even if you can’t hear it.” Is that your own thought, too?

**NS:** Music is very important to my writing. Though I write in silence, so as to better hear the words’ notes. Some words are loud—those plosive consonants. Some are soft and swoosh by—the sibilants. I’m listening as I write, listening to the rhythms and repetitions and sounds. I love what Virginia Woolf had to say about style: “Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can’t use the wrong words.... Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it.” So, I guess I’m listening to the wave in my mind and trying to find the right word to fit it.

**TH:** You were trained as a lawyer before you turned to writing full-time. Do you think that lawyering training and background influenced your writing? What prompted the career change? What sparked *The Painting*?

**NS:** As **Joan Didion** says, “We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line.” So the narrative I like to tell myself is that my legal training helped me understand several fundamental elements of fiction.

Readers read with causation in mind. If a boy and a mother are fighting, then



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in the next paragraph, the boy is speaking sweetly to his mother, the reader will hunt for causation. Causation, too, is critical in the law and proving one's case.



Speaking of proof: Prove it, says the reader. Don't just tell me, show me. That, too, is a fundamental part of the law. You need proof, evidence to make your case in the law, and in fiction, too. The specific details convince a reader that your protagonist is strolling down a street in downtown Tokyo, marveling at all the kitsch. As **John Gardner** says, "[W]e discover that the importance of physical detail is that it creates for us a kind of dream, a rich and vivid play in the mind."

What sparked the career change? I missed writing. Prior to law school, I was a newspaper reporter and loved it. I wanted to return to writing, but this time, not be yoked to facts and the standard form demanded by a newspaper article.

**TH:** So at 41, you became a published writer on "Best-of" lists and a recipient of other laudatory accolades. Had the success happened at 31, or even 21, do you think your writing would have been very different? In what ways?

**NS:** I have no idea. I'd studied economics, human biology, law, and then went back to school to earn an MFA in creative writing. I'd always been an avid reader, but not a writer. I had so much to learn about writing fiction. I'm still learning.

**TH:** At what point did you think, "I'm really a writer"?

**NS:** I don't think like that. I write. It's an action, not an identity. For me, writing has always been the way I've come to know my own mind, feeling through the sounds of words to the forms they make, and from those forms to the life beyond them. I feel fortunate I discovered something I love to do.

**TH:** I read about an unsold novel that exists between *The Painting* and *The Translator*...might we see that on shelves at some point?

**NS:** I'm finishing a different novel now. I've got a short story collection that I'd like to revise. And there's that unsold novel that needs work. You see what I mean that there's no time for writer's block.

**TH:** Since writer's block won't be holding you back, I have to ask the inevitable.

...Since your “Sex”-y blog post talks about a work in progress, what might you be able to share about your title-to-be?

**NS:** It’s a work-in-progress, and, well, it’s moving, like hot lava, and it doesn’t want to be hardened into a shape or a summary—not yet. The most I can say is it’s engaging me completely.



Click [here](#) to read Terry Hong’s feature on Nina Schuyler.

Terry Hong writes [BookDragon](#), a book review blog for the [Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center](#).

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