

# Ruffling Feathers

## An Interview With

### Novelist Sabina Murray

by Terry Hong

Sabina Murray's published output over the past five years has been substantial by anyone's standards: three books, five screenplays, umpteen short stories, and winning the prestigious 2003 PEN/Faulkner Award. [See *TBR* Jan/Feb 2004.] All that on top of teaching graduate students how to write well (including directing some eight theses every year, although this year it was 12), balanced with raising two small kids with her poet husband, John Hennessy (who just debuted with his collection *Bridge and Tunnel*, from Turning Point Books).

Murray swears she doesn't get writer's block. She's got time management down so well that she can work minor miracles in scattered 20-minute snippets during her day. "There's no other choice," she says matter-of-factly. "You just keep going and you get things done. I'm not a procrastinator. I pack everything in."

That is, until you get Murray to Greece and suddenly everything changes. Absolutely nothing gets done. Something just shuts off, she confesses, and she's able to achieve an enviable state of do-nothingness. She's been there six times already. "Mostly, I waded into that shimmering blue water, about knee high. My jaw goes slack. I think about nothing. As my body is digesting the too-big lunch I ate with the two glasses of wine I downed, I wait for the fishes to jump and just watch the horizon," she laughs.

In this blissful state, Murray somehow managed to formulate her latest book, an enticing, slyly entertaining novel called *Forgery*. Rupert Brigg, an overprivileged New Yorker who knows a little something about art, mourns silently. As an antidote to his sadness, his uncle William insists he go to Greece to find more treasures that will further enhance William's art collection. It's the summer of 1963; the islands are gorgeous, the wine flowing, the water warm and beckoning. Lost and searching souls gather, hoping someone else will be interested enough to share their secrets and offer a few new ones in trade.

Murray's sun-soaked days are well evident amidst the pages of *Forgery*, and while you might be tempted to linger over the beckoning prose, Rupert's antics will keep you steadfastly reading until the book is finished all too soon. When that happens, Murray has three previous titles to entertain you—if you haven't discovered them already.

Katherine Shea, in *A Carnivore's Inquiry*, is quite the unreliable heroine—as charming and irresistible as she

is—in this neo-Gothic romp in which time, art, and some very interesting meals coalesce. Additionally, Grove/Atlantic has rereleased Murray's PEN/Faulkner-awarded, haunting short-story collection, *The Caprices*, which draws on the brutal effects of the Pacific campaign of World War II directly on Murray's Filipina mother's family. If you want to go way back, check out *Slow Burn*, a look at decadent youth in 1980s Manila. A trivia tidbit to share: Murray wrote and managed to get *Slow Burn* published before she was 21.

Certainly there's nothing slow about Murray's career ... and since she doesn't get writer's block, we can look forward to more fast-paced achievements ahead.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *Your first effort after winning the PEN/Faulkner was A Carnivore's Inquiry, a novel very different from your winning short-story collection, which you had finished before the win. How did your audience react? Were you happy with the book's outcome?*

**Sabina Murray:** Yes, definitely happy. *Carnivore* was maybe a strange way to go back out after *Caprices*. I was doing one kind of thing with *Caprices*: using historical material and dealing directly with family memories in some of the stories. That kind of familiar territory—writing about family history especially—I think is a comfortable place for women writers of color, or at least half-color in my case. [Murray's mother is Filipina; her father is Boston Brahmin.] So that made it easy for the market to place me. The bookstores knew where to put me on their shelves. Then you get something like *Carnivore*—a postcolonial, anticolonial, modern Gothic. It ruffled some feathers, but I like doing that.

I don't want to end up writing the great Asian novel—not that there's anything wrong with that. I like to write books about ideas. *Caprices* was about Western-style colonialism in the Pacific, and the violent explosion of World War II that finally put that kind of colonialism to rest. *Carnivore* was a natural progression to *Caprices* in that it's all about appetite: *Carnivore's* inhumane appetite is a metaphor for the appetite for countries like the United States for expanding their empire. The justification is that their survival depends on it. That's Katherine's justification, too.

People who read *Carnivore* as a mystery—although I never intended it to be—weren't so satisfied with it as such. The people who read it as a postmodern romp loved it. It bothered people who liked it and those who didn't—that's a success for me.

**TBR:** *How did life after the PEN/Faulkner award? Do you think your writing changed?*

**SM:** The award didn't change my writing so much as it gave my writing confirmation. No one wanted me to write about the Pacific campaign, but I did anyway and was greatly rewarded. If I had just written what someone else thought was safe, I would never have gotten that award. Being told what's safe just plays into my stubbornness and brings out my uncompromising desire to write anything I want.

**TBR:** *How did Forgery come about? How was doing all that research in Greece?*

**SM:** It was terribly arduous and toilsome doing research in Greece! [Pause.] Okay, not at all. I didn't do

REVIEWER: Terry Hong is media arts consultant for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program at the Smithsonian Institution.  
PHOTOGRAPHER: ????

anything. But even when I was doing nothing, I would just think about the book, about the landscape, about how people discover themselves when they are in a foreign land. There was something visceral and basic about sending someone to Greece and connecting with art. Except maybe for Italy, Greece is the richest place to discover ancient Western art, to understand the history of art in the West. So it was fun to send my character Rupert out there, to see how he got thrown into focus against the brilliant, beautiful backdrop of the Greek islands.

Aspros [*Forgery* takes place mostly in Athens and the remote island of Aspros] is actually a made-up island. I promised the locals that I would never say the name of the island where I did my research—the people there said they would strangle me if I revealed their secret hideaway—but I guess that’s good because they believe that my book will actually reach masses of people who will then want to overrun their island.

**TBR:** *And why Greece?*

**SM:** I’ve always had a deep interest in art and been fascinated by notions of beauty. In college I majored in art history. So you have a pot—black figures on a red background—and it takes 11 experts to tell you it’s not 2,000 years old. Now how does that define its beauty in any way? But it does. And now that it’s not “real,” not “authentic,” how does that affect someone’s artistic response? It’s the same face, it’s the same figure.

Somehow, though, the genuineness of an object affects its beauty. The *perception* of it affects how it’s viewed. Beauty is not skin deep—as that much-maligned cliché goes. If we apply that to us, to people, then Rupert himself is a forgery. People are forgeries. And that’s a deep idea I wanted to explore.

**TBR:** *Did you go to Greece with a book in mind?*

**SM:** Not specifically. Although if you had asked me whether I would write about the experience of going, I would have said “Probably.” But I did really think that I was on vacation. That said, writing that book felt like a vacation. Of course, books are not always fun in the process of rewriting and reediting, but the conception of that book was absolutely gleeful. I found myself constantly delighting in its intricacies. I liked spending time with the characters and working out the plot to fit them.

The actual process of writing *Forgery* was interesting and entertaining. I wrote it in installments like Dickens did with his stories. I had written some of it, and then went to Greece, where I didn’t do a damn thing. I had 80 pages that I read to my husband and our dear friend, Daniel Hall, who is a poet, and they asked, “What happens next?” I wanted to know, too, and was encouraged to keep going with the story, and that’s what made me want to write more.

I would write in chunks of 30 to 40 pages, and when I was done, my husband and I would call Daniel over, eat a big meal, and then I would read to them. That kept my focus going because I knew that I would be reading it aloud every couple weeks. That proved to be a fast process, and fun and entertaining for all of us along the way.

**TBR:** *Caprices had an Asian Pacific American element. Carnivore and Forgery do not in any way. How does your ethnicity play into your writing? Does being mixed-race factor into your stories?*

**SM:** Being mixed-race, yes, impacts my writing. But I think having grown up outside the U.S. in the Philippines affects me more. Growing up in a place that has been so powerfully colonized is what affects me. Because of that, for example, Mexico feels incredibly familiar to me even though I don’t speak Spanish. These big white nations with far-reaching tentacles propelled by foreign design—you can’t get away from those tentacles under the watchful eye of the U.S. That kind of belief made me radical.

Being mixed-race keeps you slightly at a distance. No one quite identifies with your experience completely—not that you could *ever* identify completely with anyone, but one part of you always stands back looking in a distanced, ironic way of perceiving what’s going on around you. That distance carries through to everything you do.

Having lived in so many different places, I feel like I’ve faced constant cultural and language barriers. When I first moved to the U.S. from Manila, for example, I didn’t know why something was funny, I didn’t know why people were laughing. Now I find inane movies like *Wedding Crashers* incredibly funny, which I wouldn’t have even gotten right after we left Manila. I’ve always been kind of out of it, but at the same time, I’ve always been okay with that because there’s a certain ease in being alien. I know that in general I’m always going to be a little different.

**TBR:** *How’s the teaching going? You moved, since we last talked, from teaching high school kids to college students. What’s that change been like?*

**SM:** Really good. Now I’m teaching graduate students almost exclusively, and I have some brilliant students that I love. Most are writing novels, and I think that’s where I’m good as a teacher. They keep me engaged and make me constantly question what is good fiction, which I can apply to my own writing. Teaching makes me sound smarter—because I have to put a concrete name on everything I do as a writer in order to be a teacher. I rise to the occasion of being smarter than I might otherwise be if I were not teaching.

I recently taught a literature class in contemporary Australian fiction [Murray also grew up in Australia]. I had very good response from the students. I had the freedom to make my own syllabus, to teach what I wanted. That’s a wonderful freedom. But when I’m teaching, I can’t just say, “I love this book; it’s one of my favorites.” I have to say why I believe that, what makes the text something exceptional, why this is working, why that’s not. That sort of critical thinking helps me see when themes are not coming together in my own work, for example, because that’s the way I have to think daily with my students. I have no doubt that you will be interviewing some of my brilliant students down the road!

**TBR:** *Is it kosher for me to ask for some names?*

**SM:** I can give you a couple, because they already

have contracts in the works. Jed Berry has a novel, *The Manual of Detection*. Robert Morgan is about to get a contract for a memoir about growing up in Martha's Vineyard, called *Boy Pursued by Sharks*. He was an extra on the movie *Jaws*, growing up, and he writes with great humor about being stuck on the Vineyard because his mother never let him leave the island.

**TBR:** *How are you balancing teaching and writing?*

**SM:** This year was especially crazy, but usually I manage pretty well. I do just keep writing books and sometimes I don't know how that happens. I do it by not thinking about how I do it. I never think that I *have* to write a book, that I *have* to write this chapter. I can't look at the big picture all the time. I write as I go along. Yes, sometimes I have to deal with a deadline, but I also have to throw the ball with my five-year-old son at that moment.

**TBR:** *So how are you balancing motherhood and writing?*

**SM:** I'm home a lot because I teach two classes at the most. The rest of the time I work from home in my study, but that's only 50 feet away from the kids. If they need me, they can find me and they do. I think a lot of people with kids get to be very good managers of time.

I have grad students who can't get any writing done because they're teaching one class and their girlfriend or boy-friend just broke up with them. I just want to say to them, "Just wait until you're hit with two kids, a full-time job, and everything else!" Because then, no matter what's going on in your life, you have to keep going and get things done.

Of course, there are days that I have to spend 12 hours reading theses or in conferences 24 hours straight. And things just don't work out time-wise. But I just take stock of what I've already accomplished and try not to freak out about what I haven't gotten done.

**TBR:** *In addition to books, you're making quite the career writing screenplays. A Beautiful Country is out, starring Nick Nolte, produced by the legendary Terrence Malick. What other screenplays are you working on?*

**SM:** I wrote the screenplay for *Cami-vore*. I have a producer working on it: Bob Shapiro, who did *Empire of the Sun*. I did another screenplay of one of the stories from *Caprices*—the story is "Walkabout" and the screenplay is called *The Way Back*—that's being sent around. I also did a screenplay called *Vanished*, for an Australian film company, which is being sent around.

If I have three or four weeks free, I usually crank out a screenplay. They're much easier to write than books. That's the bottom line. Screenplay writing needs a certain kind of brain. A screenplay needs to be written in real time. You have to always be aware of the larger frame of time in which a story takes place, while you pull out three minutes here, four minutes there, and that has to add up to two hours in real time, and represent anywhere from two weeks to 10 years. You need to be able to think that way to give your script an overall structure.

The screenplay, though, is an incomplete work. The director has to come in and say how he's going to bring it all together. Actors have their part to do—the writer

doesn't control how an actor presents the work. You could make suggestions, but ultimately the director works with the actor to create something whole. A good producer is key to understanding the project as a whole. The film is all about total teamwork, and that can be a fun experience.

Because the rest of the time I'm writing alone, stuck in my room with no air, playing with imaginary friends. But somehow that works for me, even though it's crazy.

**TBR:** *Congratulations on getting your Guggenheim grant. So what does that mean for next year?*

**SM:** I won't be teaching at all, although I'll still be directing my usual eight theses. Some travel will be necessary, of course. I live to travel—that's where I find my characters. My Guggenheim proposal will be my next novel. It's about Roger Casement, an Irishman who was knighted by the British government for his humanitarian work in the Congo. Ironically he was eventually hanged for treason by the Brits because he was also fighting for freedom for Ireland. So next year I'll take a trip to Ireland, although I haven't figured out where exactly I'll go in Africa. I think I'll be looking for place as opposed to digging up history when I go. I want to be able to absorb the African landscape.

**TBR:** *So screenplays vs. books? Do you have a preference? Three years ago when we talked, it was books. Any change now?*

**SM:** No, I still prefer books. I can do exactly what I want to do. I've been spoiled with writing screenplays for artistic people who value my opinion—this is such an anomaly in the film world. But it's still books.

I still have the same great editor. When I write books, I'm writing about ideas that are totally mine, and only I know what will make it whole or when it's done. That's tremendous control but also terrifying, but terrifying is good, too. That makes me feel alive and awake.

**TBR:** *When you're not writing, what else do you like to do?*

**SM:** I like to garden. I'm not very good at it, but when I get out there, I do have fun. In this town, though, not living a writerly life is very hard. Amherst probably has the highest per capita of writers in the U.S. One out of every five people seems to be a writer. This is Emily Dickinson's town. Norton Juster (*Phantom Tollbooth*), Alexander Chee (*Edinburgh*), Mary Jo Salter (*Open Shutters*) all live here. It's bizarre the number of writers who have chosen Amherst. That means I have a lot of people to talk about books with.

I still have that same "room of my own," just off the porch. It needs a good vacuuming, a good overhaul. But it's a fur- and dust-encrusted heaven for me.

**TBR:** *How is it that you never get writer's block?*

**SM:** I probably don't get it because I do too much research. I either have a research day or a writing day. Part of the reason that I like teaching is that I get to be associated with a library. When I'm not teaching, I just wander through the stacks looking for stuff. Recently I wrote three short stories about explorers. When the *Casement* book is not going well, I check out books about explorers.

I don't write about myself—what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling. So I don't find writing that crippling. My last book was about a young man who's a loungey, partying, disturbed sort of guy in 1963. Writing about him, I didn't have too much to be blocked about because he's not me at all.

If I find I'm not writing about one thing, then I work on something else. Maybe writer's block is just part of the writing process. If I'm not writing and I just stare at a wall, I think of that as part of my process. I think food should be tax-deductible because I go stand in the kitchen as part of that process. Long showers, shoes for long walks, and junk food should all be deductions we writers can take.

**TBR:** *What's a perfect writing day?*

**SM:** We have huge acres of woodland right across the street from our house, and that's where I go to space out and think about things. Then I come back, drink too much coffee, go into my study and spend the whole morning writing. I retire from my study about 12:30 or 1. Then I go sit outside and do nothing. I can't write more than three hours a day.

Writing is the first thing I do every day. I seldom get very emotional about anything. I'm not a mellow person; I'm evenly intense. But then writers can be deluded about who they really are! ■

Pull Quote:

**Being told what's safe just plays into my stubbornness and brings out my uncompromising desire to write anything I want.**

## BOOKS BY SABINA MURRAY

### **Forgery**

Grove, \$24.00 cloth, ISBN 978-0-8021-1844-8

### **A Carnivore's Inquiry**

*Atlantic Monthly*, \$23.00 cloth,  
ISBN 978-0-8021-1769-4; Grove, \$13.00 paper,  
ISBN 978-0-8021-4200-9

### **The Caprices** (reprint)

Grove, \$13.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8021-4313-6

**Slow Burn** (out of print)