



Interview: Marly Youmans, Author of 'Glimmerglass: A Novel,' Poet and Writing Instructor, Part 1 of 2

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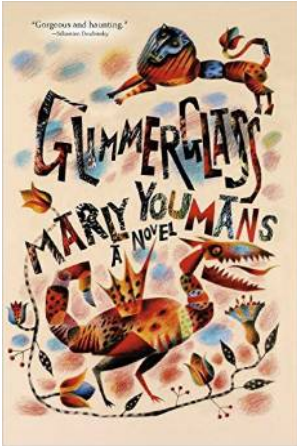


Marly Youmans is a poet, novelist, and teacher living in Cooperstown, NY, with her family. She has been called “the best kept secret” among contemporary writers and her prose hailed as “gorgeous, haunting, beautiful and brilliant.” Youmans is a recipient of the New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship and her previous novels, short stories and poetry have won numerous awards. I found *Glimmerglass* (Mercer University Press, 2014) on my library shelf and after falling under its spell, requested an interview. She was gracious with her time and experience as we covered ground from the lack of quality literary criticism to the trait most writers need to cultivate.

As you know, I read and loved *Glimmerglass* and am curious to know where you got the idea for this tale about the artist in the gatehouse.

A great deal that characterizes the book has to do with my belief that [Cooperstown](#) (the inspiration for Cooper Patent) is a place that mixes the real and unreal, but there are more straightforward elements that led me to an artist and a gatehouse. I have a lot of friends who are painters, and Cooperstown is awash in visual arts; the Susquehanna River Valley is still strongly appealing as a place to live for many artists. My most frequent lunch buddies are the two painters to whom the book is dedicated, [Ashley Norwood Cooper](#) and [Yolanda Sharpe](#), though I’m glad to say that they do not suffer from Cynthia’s art troubles.

We live in a time when every person who strives to make art that is authentic and strong must mull how the work can and should be done, and how it relates to a commercial, mainstream world that rates money above the true, the good, and the beautiful. Through Cynthia, I dealt with the problem of making art in our current culture (though that was not in the least what I consciously intended, when dreaming through the story), considering the situation of someone who had made a choice that she came to see as wrong. The book offers her a kind of redemption, and even though she does not get to keep the physical proof of what she achieves, the possibility of meaningful work is still open to her. She reaches for the same joyful knowledge that [Hawthorne's](#) artist of the beautiful achieves in his glittering, mechanic art.



The gatehouse is a charming local one with seven doors and a stream rushing by, down to *Otsego Lake*, James Fenimore Cooper's *Glimmerglass*. I once ate lunch there and had a tour of the place, and the house stuck in my mind as magical and odd. (The watermark, the ceiling motifs, and the overall look of the place all draw on that memory. Frog pageants also were borrowed from the gatehouse residents.) I took the liberty of creating Sea House because the mansion near the gate burned to the foundation stones long ago.

Can you elaborate on your creative process? Specifically, do you begin with a pre-planned plot, a simple idea or problem? Does the story seem to write itself or come from some mysterious place within, and is it the same for all of your stories?

No, I don't care for much pre-planning and am not one of the people (I know some of these and admire their organization) who make charts of characters and detailed outlines of plots. With *Glimmerglass*, I had a feeling for the places and knew that there would be a labyrinth. In writing, I tend to move by instinct, but I don't claim that as a virtue – I don't suppose there's merit in one way of working over another. After all, it's the final result that counts, no matter how it was made. I just write in the way that feels like a "rightness" to me. Sometimes I am suddenly gripped by something that I did not expect at all; that's the way *Thaliad* (2012) arrived. I just woke up one morning and the narrative was in my mind, burning to leap out. The poems for *The Book of the Red King* (a lot of them have been published, but I'm still not quite ready for a book) arrived in a similar manner. For about three months I was inhabited by the book and wrote at least a poem a day.

With fiction, I often start with relatively little knowledge. With *A Death at the White Camellia Orphanage* (2012), I wrote the first two chapters in a big swoop and then had to figure out what happened afterward. But some things were quite clear in my mind – the main character, the sharecropper's farm (modeled closely on the one my paternal grandparents worked), the fact that Pip would ride the rails west and north. I did not know if he would ever return or find a place to alight and stay. My 13th book, *Maze of Blood* (September, 2015) is one of the few books that I've written based on specific happenings in our real world. Though fiction, it depends on events in the life of pulp writer Robert Howard. I've wanted to do something based on an existing pattern for a while, as I've long been fascinated by the way Shakespeare takes what was known about the history of a figure and makes something new from it. So I did choose some key moments to juggle and play with as fiction. That plan had its own odd challenges, and I ended up radically re-working the order of events.

My favorite times tend to be when poems rush out unexpectedly, or when stories or parts of novels seem to pour out as if by magic. I love the strange sensation that something is pouring through me – a waterfall of language that feels like me and not-me at once. It leads to a thrilling sense of surprise. Of course, there are parts of novels that must be stitched together in a more mundane way. I've never been particularly interested in elaborate transitions and the "fat" of many novels, and my books tend to be lean. If a reader does not like that Jack-Sprat tendency, well, he or she has a challenge.

I would say that every narrative begins in a different way, that it is never "the same." In order to make books that live, a writer needs to strive to do something she can't do – to make something that has no recipe or instructions, that is not explained or plotted-out by one of her previous books. So I never know at the start where I am going, or whether I can master the dream and make it shapely.

Even your prose responses to my questions seem to have a bit of poetry in them. Was this unusual way of looking at the world something you've always possessed? Do you view the daily "mundane" world through similar spectacles (e.g., when giving instructions to your children, etc.)?

Some of my early childhood memories sparkle – my memories of my years as a small child in Louisiana (Gramercy and Baton Rouge) are colorful and magical. But I think a lot of us tend to veer from the grossly mundane to the soulful, often in the same minute.

I believe that one of the great functions of storytelling is to share a kind of enchantment – to give us eyes to see how beautiful and extraordinary the world is, and to know that being alive and conscious is a gift. Storytelling also tells us how very far we have fallen from being creatures who know and love what we are, and who love the world we possess for a while as the stage for our lives.

"When giving instructions to children?" Interesting question. Children love it when things are slightly askew, and when adults are playful. So yes, I was sometimes playful. But I expect that many parents are. During the teen years of the older two, I posted a big chart of epithets that my three could use on one another – they were drawn from Shakespeare and Wodehouse. "Great steaming radish!" "Peevish canker-blossom!" "Prating malignancy!" For a time, that list eliminated most of the bad (and boring) things that they called one another and meant that they laughed a good deal more than they might have otherwise. And occasionally I would sing my advice or requests in operatic flights (Cooperstown is home to Glimmerglass Opera.) Right now I have only one child left in high school, and we do often act quite silly or dance around the kitchen together.

Can you describe in any specific technical detail how you approach the revision/rewriting process? Is this different every time as well or is there a routine you follow?

I'm fairly simple-minded in this area. With fiction, I write on the computer because I like being able to fly along with my thoughts. Then I print out what I've done and blacken it with additions and deletions. Then I let time go by and repeat the process. And again and again until I'm just fiddling. Then I stop and read the whole thing aloud to catch any weird, unattractive rhymes and sounds. Reading aloud to children, you learn that a great many writers skip that step, and that they should not. My mode is similar with poetry, although poetry enjoys a much richer structure of sounds.

Can you share a colorful or magical memory from your childhood?

When I lived in Gramercy, I spoke Cajun French with the children next door. I was only three and don't remember it, but I do remember playing with Maxine, and that she taught me to wear little green lizards with pink throats as earrings. The poor creatures could not release themselves until we pinched their jaws. In the yard were holes with big, hairy spiders. We had a garden bed made out of sugar slag from the refinery, and the plants grew up into the trees. My small garden was cucumbers and moonflowers; I loved to see them spiral open at night, their faces looking up at the moon.

Back to your writing, when did you start to produce material for publication? How did you know you were ready and how long did it take you to get there?

In seventh grade I was living in Delaware and attending a huge junior high school. I remember that my English teacher recommended a piece of mine for the literary magazine, and that was the first time somebody requested a piece of writing, and that I was pleased. I had poems and the occasional story in plenty of school magazines, but I'm not sure when my first poem was accepted by a little magazine – probably when I was around 19. I doubt that I did know if it was ready! When I was 20 and graduated from college, I threw away everything I'd done up to that point. I was sorry later, as it was so full of youth.

Along the same lines, what is the one piece of writing advice you received yourself or have heard that you think newer writers should ignore?

Ignore it all! Listen to it all, and then take advice with a grain of salt. I was told all sorts of things – write what you know, don't use certain words (like "love" and "rainbow" and "beautiful"), show don't tell, and so on. Hearing those things just made me obstinate and determined to do the opposite, often in some unexpected manner. There is no writing rule that cannot be broken. Just write. After a while, you will have your own ways of putting words into patterns. But I expect that even those ways will grow constricting, and you'll leap over them and make new ways and then leap over them.

In a previous interview you said that when you first started writing fiction, you didn't understand anything about plot, propulsion or causality. How important are those things in *Glimmerglass* and your other stories and how did you learn about them? What aspect of the craft of writing do you think is undervalued? Overvalued?

My feeling is that you learn about how to write by putting words on the page. Between *Little Jordan* and *Catherwood*, there's a kind of jump – I'm more interested in how choice causes event. Then by the next book, *The Wolf Pit*, I'm fooling around with both causality and form in a bigger way, so that the book becomes a kind of helix composed of two stories, each with its own propulsion. If you look at those books as a group, you can see a poet hopping forward from little lily pad to bigger lily pad, reaching toward those tasty bits of plot and form.

The importance of any aspect of a book is surely determined by the story. With *Val/Orson*, I was working with Shakespearean, mythic materials that had built-in traditional motifs and shapes, ready for play – mistaken identities, twinship and separation, Arcadian romance, fey hints, love for the wrong person that is later transferred to another, doublings, and more. Plot emerged naturally out of those things, and right up to the final page, the story is influenced by Shakespeare.

With the two Southern fantasies, *The Curse of the Raven Mocker* and *Ingledove*, crossing Cherokee lore with the beliefs of Scots-Irish settlers seemed to easily generate story, large mythic entities, and causality. In fact, I would say that marrying two unexpected elements tends to be generative for a writer because something new will always be born.

Underlying *A Death at the White Camellia Orphanage* is a simple, basic structure of journey-and-return, but the main character's hunger to know, to reject, or to search gives birth to a lot of action. The initial tragic event sends Pip pell-mell into the world, and then his inability to love and to trust keeps him moving and dictates a good deal of sudden change in place and event. Character breeds causality.

Glimmerglass is again a more mythic sort of tale – well, I can describe it but don't know exactly what that book is, as yet! – but the engine-thrust of the story is Cynthia's deep ache to be more than she has been, and to make something of meaning from her art and life.

Undervalued. Overvalued. “Value” is an interesting word when applied to craft because we live in a digital age awash in advice to writers on “product” and “platform” and how to become visible to the world. Google the topic, and a wearying onslaught appears instantaneously. The “value” most often evident in the online realm is the value of money – that is, the measure of writing is by its relation to money. We’ve slipped into a state where we measure and value success in writing by monetary success, even though we know perfectly well that major writers from the past often failed to find that kind of success and so failed to make a lot of money.

This tendency to rate by cash afflicts all the arts. (In addition, we no longer have the kind of publicly-admired critics who once helped us see merit and sort out the literary scene –figures like Randall Jarrell, Lionel Trilling, or Edmund Wilson.) So I’d like to misread your question a little, avoiding craft and saying that what is overvalued is money as a measure of art. What is undervalued is mastery, which quite frequently has precious little to do with money and success.

Continued in [Part 2](#).

About Suzanne Brazil



Suzanne M. Brazil is a freelance writer and editor living in a recently empty nest in the suburbs of Chicago. Her work has been featured in Chicken Soup for the Soul, Writer's Digest, The Daily Herald and many local publications. She is a frequent blog contributor and is working on the second draft of her first novel.