



Interview: Marly Youmans, Author of ‘Glimmerglass: A Novel’, Poet and Teacher, Part 2 of 2

Posted by: [Suzanne Brazil](#) February 18, 2015 in [Book Interviews](#), [Books](#), [Fiction](#), [Genres](#), [Poetry](#)



Continued from [Part 1](#)

This is the second of our two-part interview with author Marly Youmans. Her deep love of language, books and art shone through her thoughtful answers. Read on for more insight into her writing process.

As for the aspects of the craft being valued or undervalued, I guess I was trying to understand how you learned to jump from lily pad to lily pad. What knowledge gleaned kept you from ending up on the same level of lily pad? Were you searching for “causality” and “propulsion” because a teacher or book told you that was the right way or was it more of a natural insight as a gifted storyteller?

I’m not so sure that we learn much from advice when it comes to writing. Yes, I may occasionally come upon a comment in a review, say, and think it a good point, and that I might need to think about an issue a little more. But we learn by writing. I’m not saying that a writer can’t learn anything from advice, but that I learn infinitely more by trying to make something out of words.

The way I think about moving from book to book is this: I’ve established a certain land mass, a kind of country made up of poems and stories and novels. That’s the ground under my feet. That’s where I have been, what I have made. When I want to write a new book, I run across the land and leap off the edge of the known world. I trust that my feet will find something solid as I fall.

Did you always trust your feet would find something? Is that a natural-born confidence?

I definitely grow bolder over time, so I suppose it is a learned confidence and faith that the work will find its way. Meanwhile, I'm not particularly adept about the business side of things. I do a good many events, but I have more and more gone on my own path in terms of publishing. I'm not with a [Big 5 publisher](#) any longer, and I have sacrificed a certain amount in order to have my books be the way I want them to be. I've loved being with small and university houses and plotting with my friend [Clive Hicks-Jenkins' Artlog](#): to make beautiful books – particularly *Thaliad* from Phoenixia, *The Foliate Head* from Stanza, and *Glimmerglass* from Mercer. *The Throne of Psyche* and *Glimmerglass* are also immaculate-looking books (Mercer outsources to Burt & Burt, a great design team), though there's less collaboration on those. Part of the impulse to make beautiful books [comes from] starting out as a poet, where smaller and university presses are so important.

Some time ago I parted with my agent, [Liz Darhansoff](#), and I have not bothered to look for another one, a lack which has some drawbacks. Usually I've relied on requests for manuscripts from publishers. Also, I've gotten some recent film option nibbles and ought to get a good film agent, but I tend to be so busy with family and books that I don't get all the practical things done.

Your work has received many awards and has been hailed as genius and rare and beautiful. How do you celebrate finished books and are you emotionally affected by critical acclaim?

I am one of those writers who gets good critical feedback and awards and has loyal readers but who really needs a larger readership. That's something that's hard to manage when I do a lot of projects with smaller houses, where marketing and promotion are limited. And I probably need a more "braggadocio" personality! When books come out, I'm pleased but don't do anything extraordinary – just more events. I tend to be relieved as well as glad when I have good reviews and notice and awards. Relief was part of my attitude to my first book acceptance as well. Externals don't affect what I do next.

A family thread runs through your responses, *Glimmerglass*, and much if not all of your other writing. How has being a mother influenced your prose and poetry? Is it possible for you to distinguish natural growth as a writer from any specific effects of parenthood?

Life comes before art, and parenthood is important to me. Children are not easy, they don't need a writer in the house, and their needs seem quite pressing to them. Being a mother has meant that I had to learn how to use well what time I had – and to go without sleep when I needed to do so! It meant that I had to learn how to think about stories while doing other things (particularly housework). Sometimes it meant being clever about help; the two Southern fantasies were written as gifts for my daughter, who begged for them, and who babysat her busy little brother in order to get new pages. It was a good swap for both of us. Bits of my children as babies, children, and young people appear in characters who inhabit my short stories and poems and novels. *Catherwood* in particular is about the potency of motherhood and mother love. My eldest child's obsession with the Civil War led me in the direction of *The Wolf Pit*. Lots of my poems began with some detail of a child's life.

Anything that deepens your life is of use to a writer. Anything that makes you a bigger person on the inside is of use. Anything that helps you understand other people is of use. And anything that causes you to grieve, love, be sheltering, be upset, and feel joy is of use. Children may be [Bacon's "hostages to fortune."](#) but they also teach, widen the mind's focus, and make a parent change and mature. I would say that my growth as a writer has often been tangled with my life as a mother.

You still do a bit of teaching. What do you try to offer your students if you consider a lot of writing advice suspect?

Clever of you to ask me about teaching stints since I've cast doubt on writing advice! Of course, I might very well contradict myself in a weak moment and blather away with advice! But if I did, I would always give the anti-advice that writers must find their own rules of how to go, and they must not let those rules harden into

stone. A person's own writing will dictate what she believes about and wants in her work, but those ideas should keep evolving.

Being individuals, students write differently than I do, so I don't often give them generalized advice but like to figure out the nature of the writing they have already accomplished and in what direction they seem to be and want to be going. From that point, it's interesting to consider what works and does not work in their pieces. Sometimes I might have them write in an unusual form and talk about the advantages and pitfalls of the form, or look at where their use of the form took advantage of its one-of-a-kind demands. Also, sometimes their stage of progression means that they have concerns and questions I did not anticipate. For example, one thing that I didn't expect to do at Antioch last summer was to talk about ordering a poetry manuscript, but I had students who were ready to submit a chapbook or book. So we all tried arranging a couple of 10-poem manuscripts and then discussed why we grouped poems as we did.

What do you feel is the most common trait lacking or underdeveloped in writers who aren't having much success?

Persistence.

In assisting your students with the chapbooks, how do you assess their levels? How do you judge "stages" of writing?

Assessing any work is a result of having read the good and the great – that's the yardstick.

You mentioned a lack of great literary criticism nowadays. Do you consider yourself an astute critic of other literary works?

I do seem to be critical, which I find rather sad at times. I am less able to finish books than years ago, and more prone to setting down a book unfinished. But I have no desire to write criticism.

What do you like to read for pleasure? Are you always "reading like a writer" or are you able to get lost in stories other than your own?

At the moment, I have a number of books underway – Ted Hughes's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and also his *Selected Translations*, Lawrence Principe's *The Secrets of Alchemy*, and Jack Zipes's *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*. Soon I am going to read Scott G. F. Bailey's *The Astrologer*, which has re-surfaced after being carried off and read by my husband.

Getting lost in a story doesn't happen as often as when I was young. The last book in which I strongly felt that childlike sensation was Anthea Bell's translation of a 1971 children's novel by Ottfried Preussler, [*Krabat and the Sorcerer's Mill*](#). I have it more frequently with poetry.

Favorite novel of all time?

Tom Jones? Bleak House? Pride and Prejudice? Jane Eyre?

Favorite poet of all time?

It's between Yeats and Shakespeare.

First book you remember loving as a child?

I was given slipcased copies of the *Alice* books when I was about five, and I have never gotten over Carroll's wondrous freedom.

Any last thoughts or recommendations for writers at the beginning of their journey, or something you wish you had known at the start of your own journey?

Many more presses and awards (especially for early books) and retreats and scholarships exist than when I was young. A national system for producing poets and fiction writers and supporting them via college and university programs is now powerful. A huge number of competent writers are at work. In poetry, I see a lessening of the stigma against writers who care about form and traditional tools. Publishing includes ebooks and self-published paperbacks. These and many other changes have changed the conditions for writers, but I think that a simple "Persist" is still the best advice to give a young novelist or poet.

Yet it's a difficult path, and plenty of writers have found publication to be like dropping a precious manuscript down a well. Most novels are not anointed as lead book for a [Big 5 publisher](#) and given what's called *a push*. Nor do most ebooks have the pleasant outcome of Hugh Howey's *Wool*. Many poetry books find few readers. So I would add that if a writer chooses to put an end to his work, he should not be harsh on himself but search for a meaningful way of life elsewhere.

If I could tell my young self something, I'd say that she should not let anything take away her joy in making things out of words – that whatever tends to take away from that deep play and pleasure should be questioned. I would praise persistence and the weird intuitions of the soul. (I would probably also tell her that living in a snowbank in the remote boondocks is not all that helpful when it comes to visibility and doing events. On the other hand, a Southerner may get a lot of work done, living in a region of mighty snows and long winters.)

You can find out more about Marly Youmans, including all the novels mentioned here, on her [blog](#), "The Palace at 2am." Her books are available at independent bookstores as well as Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

Tagged with: [art artists](#) [Cooperstown](#) [Fantasy](#) [literary criticism](#) [Marly Youmans](#) [painters](#) [Poetry](#) [writing advice](#) [writing tips](#)

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.