

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

The first time I saw Lidia Yuknavitch speak, it was at Powell's Books. Of the speakers that night, only Yuknavitch was unknown to me. As the last syllables of the first sentence she spoke filtered through the air, I thought, "Who is this magnificent creature?" I don't remember what she said, but I bought one of her books, "The Chronology of Water," and took it home to read.

That memoir, as well as her novel "Dora: A Headcase," has been widely acclaimed. Her second novel, "The Small Backs of Children," explores the treacherous borders between war and sex, love and art. It is available from Harper Collins on July 7. Yuknavitch will read from her book at 7:30 p.m. July 8 at Powell's in downtown Portland.

Yuknavitch's writing has appeared in publications such as The Atlantic, The Iowa Review, Mother Jones and many other publications. She is the recipient of the Oregon Book Award — Reader's Choice and was a finalist for the 2012 PEN Center creative nonfiction award. She is also an exceptional swimmer.

I told Yuknavitch, when we met in a Southeast Portland vegan diner for this interview, that while reading her book late one night, I was compelled to get up out of bed, slide on my bathing suit and head to the gym to swim. She told me that thrilled her.

Yuknavitch's bio will tell you that most recently, her jobs have been "bourgeois teaching gigs," but there is nothing bourgeois about her.

Sue Zalokar: How would you describe your body of work?

Lidia Yuknavitch: Well, I'm interested in exploring the relationship between bodies, art and politics. And I've addressed those ideas from many different angles. In my stories, I'm often focusing in on characters who are misfits of one kind or another, characters who don't necessarily fit in with the cult of good citizenship.

S.Z.: You are a teacher. What are the good parts of that?

L.Y.: The students, of course. I teach at a community college. So when I say "students," what I mean is returning older displaced workers and single moms scratching a life out and first-generation immigrants and ex-cons and rehabbers and vets trying to piece a life back together and sex workers and nurses and people struggling with serious mental health issues and abuse victims and sometimes well-adjusted twenty-something students.

The good parts of being a teacher to this population is that I can help people on the edge of giving up. I know what that feels like because I've been there.

I've been the addict. I've been arrested. I flunked out of college the first time, more than once. I've been the grief-stricken ghost, I've been the first-time mother ... so I am very good at jamming my foot in the door so that others can get through, even when nothing and no one in their life is supporting them. I'm good at helping people find their self-esteem and beauty and skill. They walk in the door with those things, but sometimes the world

WRITING



Lidia Yuknavitch will read from her novel "The Small Backs of Children" at 7:30 p.m. July 8 at Powell's Books.

Lidia Yuknavitch's experiences with addiction, grief, mental illness and motherhood shape her work

can make you forget how to see it in yourself. I also love getting to turn people on to writing and literature and film and art.

S.Z.: Mental health and addiction issues can play a major part in becoming homeless. What is your experience with each?

L.Y.: I've had episodes of severe depression that began when I was 8 years old. Sometimes the waves go away, sometimes they don't. Sometimes I'm on medication to help navigate the waves. I'd say abuse and anger and grief took root in me young enough that it will likely be with me for life in some form.

I was addicted to heroin as a young adult, kicked, restarted when my daughter died, kicked again after a brief period of psychosis and homelessness. I think mental health and addiction and surviving abuse and deep grief are real places that some people go. They are dark places, like the bottom of the ocean. Some people don't ever come back up. For whatever reasons, I was able to come back up, come back to life, more than once, and so I have vowed to bring something with me — the responsibility to help other people afflicted by the darkness.

I'm not down with the way our culture treats depressed people and bipolar people and junkies and ex-cons and varieties of misfits and criminals and fuck-ups. There are things I learned in those dark places; when I stick my hand out to help, it's not an ignorant or false-faith hand.

I'm not afraid to stand in the muck with

others. I came from muck. I made some of the muck.

S.Z.: Your biography on your Web page begins: "In 1986 my daughter died the day she was born. From her I became a writer." You have since become a mother. Tell us about motherhood.

L.Y.: My motherhood includes birthing a dead daughter as well as a very alive son, who is now 14. When my daughter died the day she was born, I kind of went underwater. I'm talking about depression and grief, of course, but I also flirted with the edges of psychosis. I lost several marbles.

It took me over a decade to surface, to choose life over psychosis or a death drive. So sort of it's true to say that being the mother of a dead daughter brought me to writing, because writing definitely saved my life.

Self-expression helped me to not choose self-destruction, a lesson I've learned more than once in my life.

The birth of my son, Miles, well, it felt like he gave my life back to me; he gave me a reason to live, to experience joy again, to take risks with my heart and art again.

My mother died the first year my son Miles was alive. She called me from Florida when I lived in San Diego to tell me that she had late-stage cancer. My husband, Andy, answered the phone, and miraculously, he held on to the information for a week so that I could adjust to bringing my baby boy home with us. Then he sat my sister and me down and gently told us.

It seems birth and death are always

co-existing. I've learned not to think of them as opposites on a line. I've learned that they are always woven together. For me, "beginning" and "ending" are not two points on a line. There's not even a line.

S.Z.: And your next book, "Dora," was a novel. Nonfiction or fiction, which is more honest?

L.Y.: What a great question. My gut wants to say fiction. But I don't see nonfiction and fiction as completely divorced from one another. I think they make a kind of braid. In some ways, fiction is the more "honest," in that you can sometimes take an idea or emotion farther or deeper in fiction, whereas in nonfiction you are a little at least limited by "what really happened."

In fiction, I can drill down into an idea and go beyond "what happened" into what is true. I think people like nonfiction, though, because it comforts us to think there is a truth to things that we can explain and tell ourselves stories about. From my point of view, they are simply different ways to tell a story. The only question I ever have is, what form must I intend to tell this story as deeply as I can?

Language is the ocean we move through, fiction or non, and language doesn't care. For instance, the current flap going on over social media about "Game of Thrones." Supposedly, that's entertainment art.

Supposedly, if you believe the majority of people speaking up about it, the HBO version in particular but also the books should be taken to task for being gratuitously violent and

sexist. Too much rape. Too much abuse and violence for ratings.

I think it is very important to think about those things — how rape is represented in film and television and books. How abuse of women and children, particularly, is represented. I'm glad people are getting fired up about that and discussing their ideas.

I also think it is important to talk about the feeling I had when Daenerys climbed out of the pit of peril and onto the back of her dragon, riding away from three of her supposed male saviors, saving herself. I cried when I saw that image. Later, I figured out why I was crying, why all the hairs on my arm were standing up. It was this: It's incredibly rare in my lifetime to see images of women who save themselves, using their own creative force, their own imaginations, breaking all rules and traditions. Those three male saviors staring up at the sky after she flies away on the back of a so-called "monster"? That image? That's equally important to talk about.

S.Z.: You've written a new book, "The Small Backs of Children." The title foreshadows seemingly another difficult story. Tell me about that.

L.Y.: For children, brutality is every nanosecond of their existence — like (violence toward children) could be happening right next door to us right now. I think we too easily turn off, turn away, donate on Facebook and then don't look at it and don't think about it anymore. And I think that is brutal.

We live in this "Oh, I can't look at that too long or I'll be sad" world. Well how do you think it is to live in Gaza and be a kid? Or be in Iraq and be a kid right now?

I like to put the brutal next to the beautiful because that is real life: Something really fucked is happening right next to something mind bogglingly beautiful.

I've written a heroine who saves herself. I really love this idea that there can be new stories for women and girls, but we have to wrench it away from culture.

S.Z.: How do we create girl myths that are stronger than the ones we have to date? We're doing it — to a degree — but there is a big gap between that image of Daenerys soaring on the back of a dragon and, say, the documentary "Hot Girls Wanted."

L.Y.: If we could ever get to a point where we could agree and accept that women are really weird, messy, complicated, emotions-all-over-the-place, intense people and stop writing about them as either virgins or whores. It's just time. It's ridiculous.

Until we admit that we are living proof that those "codes" about us are limited and ridiculous, until we start buying the books and watching the shows and movies where these stories are allowed to grow ... we will be stuck in the same old scripts forever.

S.Z.: A pretty fascinating part of your history is your work on the novel "Caverns" with Ken Kesey and a group of graduate students.

L.Y.: It was a huge deal. First of all, it should never have happened. It was only there because my friend Meredith sort of infiltrated me into their group. I wasn't a grad student, and I wasn't in an MFA program.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LIDIA YUKNAVITCH

"I'm not afraid to stand in the muck with others. I came from muck. I made some of the muck."

LIDIA YUKNAVITCH

S.Z.: Do tell.

L.Y.: She just brought me to class one day because we were friends and she wanted me in the writing group. She knew my writing and how much I care about fierce writing, and we were friends. She brought me to class and introduced me to everyone, and they let me stay. He (Kesey) thought it was great that I had broken the rule and was there. He thought that was hilarious.

Everybody accepted me pretty instantly. It was a yearlong class, and we lived together part of the time. We spent a lot of time at his place. It was like an old-school, commune, collaborative writing experience. There were some bad parts, and there were some amazing parts. The best part was that he showed me how to be a writer and what to care about and what not to care about.

He had been through the whole "culture turns you into a famous product" thing. ... He never wrote another "Cuckoo's Nest" or "Great Notion." The rest of his life was really difficult because everybody expected him to be that. It had a debilitating effect on him.

We also came out with a friendship. I count it as one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. I also had a boyfriend during that time who punched me in the nose. It was a very intense year. I can't believe that was me. I got to be real with Ken Kesey.

I remain very close friends with three people in that group. And the fact that we were the last group to get to work with him ... He was amazing. He had flaws too, but who doesn't?

S.Z.: So, Kathy Acker?

L.Y.: Another amazing person. (Laughing) I sort of bumbled my way into all of these people.

Well, there was intention behind my friendship with Kathy. I started a zine when I was in school in Eugene. We were sitting in the living room one night — a little bit drunk — and we were like, "What? I know! Let's interview Kathy Acker and put it in the zine." I loved her work. I was obsessed with her work.

I got the University of Oregon to pay her a visiting writer stipend. We legitimized it; it wasn't just, "Hey wanna come to Oregon?"

She ended up coming and giving a big-ass reading that was amazing. She needed sinus medicine at one point, so I drove her around in my blue pickup truck, and then she wanted to go swimming, and then she wanted to do something else, and it ended up turning into the beginning of a friendship.

So, I had an intention; I wanted to bring her to speak. I didn't know she would end up being such an accessible, authentic person. Not all writers are.

S.Z.: One of Kathy's great influences was William S. Burroughs?

L.Y.: Very much. He was also one of her friends.

S.Z.: She has this very strong writing style — kind of punk-feminist writing, and yet she's tight with Burroughs; he shot his wife in the head. How do we overlook that?

L.Y.: Yes. That was unfortunate.

S.Z.: Do we respect the voice and the knowledge of people who do bad things?

L.Y.: It is a good question to ask: Do we condemn the art and the person? Or are there reasons to condemn the person's behaviors and still look at their art?

I'm more interested in holding the question open than I am the condemnation element. But there are ... I mean, like the Bill Cosby thing.

S.Z.: Perfect example. Or Woody Allen ...

L.Y.: I think he (Cosby) needs to go to jail. I feel icky that I watched all of those programs growing up, and I don't like him anymore. And so why don't I feel that way about Burroughs? Probably because when I was becoming a writer, his material helped me give myself permission to explore form and transgression, and those ideas were incredibly important to me.

And he was a junkie and a gay man, and that gave him outsider clout, as well. He shot his wife, I'm sure he was terrible to lots of people. I can't say that I know the answer, but I think it is worth holding the question open.

S.Z.: Did Kathy ever express any ... ?

L.Y.: Her whole deal was that he kind of invented the idea that language is a virus. He wasn't the first person to conceptualize that, but he kind of put it into play. And he was her mentor, intellectually and artistically. Kathy would be the first person to say, "OK, show me someone among us who is not capable of radical wrong."

It's kind of like the secular version of "Let he amongst you cast the first stone." Even though I fail at it, I'm down with that idea.

I think we all carry extreme darkness within us, and we have capabilities that we prefer not to admit. There are pedophiles in jail right now that I hope stay there. And yet, I know a man who was convicted, did his time, got out. He was trying to be a good person and have a good life with this condition.

Those two things are both true: I hate what they've done, and I recognize they are human.