

Misfit

A Q&A with Lidia Yuknavitch BY KELSEY ANNE RANKIN

Lidia Yuknavitch is a beast of an author. Her writing is raw, uncensored and has a strength that can only come from living one hell of a life (check out her Ted Talk “The Beauty of Being a Misfit”). Yuknavitch — a University of Oregon graduate and current literature workshop teacher in Portland — has gone from being a professional swimmer to a mother whose daughter died, and from a dazed lover of substances to a best-selling novelist. Her craft has always been constant in her life: She must write.

EW spoke with Yuknavitch about her artistic process and life as a writer in the wake of her best-selling book *The Small Backs of Children* (2015). The *L.A. Times* called *Small Backs* an “explosive new novel” in which “an Eastern European war orphan watches a wolf free itself from a trap by gnawing off its own leg, then squats over the abandoned limb and urinates on the blood and snow.”

Describe your journey as a writer in one word.
Misfit-y.

How do you describe yourself as a human (same guidelines)?
Misfit.

The voice you use in *Dora: A Headcase* (2012) strongly differs from the voice you employ in *The Small Backs of Children* — how do you conjure and execute the contrasting personas?

Dora actually visited me in a dream — the dream was very realistic and I could *hear* her *shouting*. So, with Dora’s voice, even though this sounds a little weird, all I had to do was listen and follow her.

With *Small Backs*, I had to utterly atomize what we mean by the tradition of “voice” in narrative. I was shooting for emotional intensities and differing subjectivities rather than a traditional set of characters with solid voices or identities. I love to play with voice. I think we all walk around with hundreds of them.

What provokes you to put so much of yourself into what you write?

I think everything ever written has its author in it, to differing degrees and intensities, sometimes obscured on purpose, sometimes revealed on purpose. I don’t think I’m doing anything differently from any other author. My mentors, Ken Kesey and Kathy Acker, were in every character they ever wrote.

Who do you write for? Yourself, others or simply for the sake of storytelling?

I was talking to a big-time writer the other day who said that she has always written to find



love, to be loved. I said my journey was different. When I first started writing, I think I wrote to purge my rage for myself and to agitate through art. I was publishing first during the Reagan years, so that may have been part of the zeitgeist.

Now I write to illuminate difficult ideas and open up possible meanings. I write to make a bridge to others, even if they don’t “like” what I’ve written; that’s less important to me than whether or not they felt something moving in their bodies while reading my work.

What do you think is the most important thing you share through storytelling?

How the beautiful and the brutal always coexist, and how desire, beauty and magic can move even from or through dark places.

Where do you go — mentally and physically — when you write?

I have a dedicated writing room in my home. I didn’t always, so I’d “create” a space — sometimes that was a closet or a corner of a room. I believe hardcore in over-ritualizing your writing space, whatever that means to you.

My writing room doesn’t look like any other room in our house. Once you are in there, you know you are not in Kansas anymore. I have to induce a kind of creative trance-like state in the pure creativity stage. During revision or editing I’m just a regular old cranky lady.

What has been your favorite part about writing so far?

When I’m deeply into the creative process of writing, drawing or painting, I don’t want to ever leave. If it was possible to stay inside the creative process forever, I would. But I love my son, Miles, and my art comrade and husband, Andy, too much not to come back. It’s regular life that is the hard part for me.

How much of your writing is from your own life and how much is created by the story’s characters? Are these two things separate and independent of one another?

Trick question! No. They are not separate and independent of one another. They are inextricably linked, if we’re being honest.

So ... what’s next?

I have a forthcoming novel from Harper Books called *The Book of Joan* (April 2017), an eco-fiction (used to be called “cli-fi”) story based on a re-envisioned Joan of Arc story. And I have a *TED* Book coming out next fall called *The Misfit’s Manifesto*.

STAY WARM & DRY



BOGS®

BOGS ARE OREGON READY: WATERPROOF, WARM & STYLISH

FOOTWISE Downtown Eugene • 181 E Broadway • 541.342.6107
Facebook/footwiseeugene • Mon-Sat 10-6 & Sun 11-5

— where —
GREAT
food
— meets —
great
BEER

THANKS EUGENE!

WE THINK YOU'RE THE BEST TOO.

The Bier Stein
BOTTLESHOP & PUB

1591
WILLAMETTE
EUGENE
THEBIERSTEIN.COM