



*Howard County Poetry
and Literature Society Presents*

An Interview with Edith Pearlman

Edith Pearlman is ruthless. Every short story writer must be. Each word, on each draft, must prove its worth, or out it goes.

Her advice to writers? “Revise. Revise each story from beginning to end at least three times. When I say ‘revise’ I mean ‘rewrite’ completely. Do not use the computer until the last few drafts.”

So every morning, from 8 a.m. to noon, this merciless writer pounds her prose to ribbons on her manual Olympia typewriter, behind a screen in a quiet room of her suburban Boston home. She calls her writing “taking the time to be brief.

“I don’t like to take too much of other people’s time; and I don’t want them to resent or even notice the passing of the time I do take,” Pearlman has explained. “So I welcome the challenge of compressing a character, a setting, a problem, maybe even its solution, into as few words as possible. It takes a lengthy and sustained effort to be brief; I enjoy that paradox.”

Critics clearly enjoy her work. Roxanna Robinson of *The New York Times* writes: “Pearlman’s view of the world is large and compassionate, delivered through small, beautifully precise moments. Her characters inhabit terrain that all of us recognize, one defined by anxieties and longing, love and grief, loss and exultation. These quiet, elegant stories add something significant to the literary landscape.”

Pearlman is in her mid-70s. Over the past thirty years, she has published more than 250 works—short stories, essays, travel pieces on places like the Cotswolds and Jerusalem—in national magazines such as *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Smithsonian*, *Ploughshares*. While she has been included in three *Best American Short Stories* collections, and had won prizes like the O. Henry Prize before, 2011 proved to be the year that Pearlman was discovered by a wider circle.

Last year, she was a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She won the 2011 PEN/Malamud Award.

“*Binocular Vision* should be the book with which Edith Pearlman casts off her secret-handshake status and takes up her rightful position as a national treasure,” writes Ann Patchett, author of *Bel Canto*, in the introduction to *Binocular Vision*. “Put her stories beside those of John Updike and Alice Munro. That’s where they belong.”



That latest book, *Binocular Vision*, was snapped up by a new publisher, Lookout Books, an imprint of the creative writing department of the University of North Carolina Wilmington. How lucky they were to snag her. The stories in this collection, twenty-one older stories and thirteen new pieces, throng with characters and scenes that swiftly become indelible in the reader’s brain.

Her characters, tenderly drawn in quick strokes, range from a precocious child lost in Boston to a pair of elderly lovers partial to petty theft. Pearlman sets her stories in London during the aftermath of World War II, in Latin America at its most beautiful and corrupt, in Eastern European mountain inns brimming with secrets, in a richly imagined suburb of Boston.

She wrote stories in college—even winning a national prize—then worked as a computer programmer for ten years after graduating Radcliffe. When she married, her husband made her a deal: If she’d handle the kids and the house, he’d pay the bills and she could write. She has been “forever grateful” for that settlement, she says.

Her three previous books, *Vaquita*, *Love Among the Greats* and *How to Fall*, were published by small presses in 1996, 2002 and 2005, respectively. Besides writing for four hours a day, Pearlman is a prodigious reader. Her influences, she says, include Colette, Dickens, Sylvia Townsend Warner and John Updike, and many more.

Pearlman’s careful attention to language—as a reader and a writer—has led to a restrained style that bears both humor and pathos. Especially when relating harrowing scenarios, Pearlman keeps her prose clean—no extraneous words allowed.

A writer should aim, she says, “not to show off your artistry, but to conceal it.”

Little Patuxent Review: I’ve read that your family provided story and song in your childhood. Did that atmosphere encourage your imagination and your writing?

Edith Pearlman: Yes, there was a respect for the imagination and the telling of stories to engage the listener. Good training.

LPR: Could you describe what stories were told in your childhood that you loved? And what songs did your mother sing that you remember?

Pearlman: My aunt read *Tales from Shakespeare* and my mother sang show tunes.

LPR: Your advice to writers is to read everything, then write every so often. What's your ratio of reading to writing?

Pearlman: I read 50 books a year and write six stories.

LPR: And whose books are you reading now?

Pearlman: *Galore* by Michael Crummey, *Barnaby Rudge* by Charles Dickens.

LPR: You once said that you don't write the first sentence of a short story until you're almost done [with] the piece—so how do you begin?

Pearlman: I begin with pages and pages of exploration. It's the marble slab in which the sculptor finds the statue. I am not yet sure how I'll organize the material so my first draft, or perhaps you might call it my second, attempts to do that; I write a sentence that I hope will help me find my way into the marble. It almost always begins with the word *When*. "When so-and-so realized that her marriage resembled a third-rate song and dance" And proceed from there. That sentence will not survive the next draft, but it has begun, not the story, but the process.

LPR: Could you explain your typewriter preference, your revision process and how it affects your writing?

Pearlman: When you compose on the typewriter you must of course revise. That is, retype and therefore reconsider each page, every word on it—the typewriter does not allow Saving. And so every word must justify itself or not be retyped. This results in compression and precision. Writing (typing) something again and again encourages the search for the best word. Allowing a sentence or paragraph to remain as first written (as the computer too indulgently does) discourages that search.

LPR: You never went the MFA route. Could you talk about who reads your work before publication and how they might influence it?

Pearlman: An excellent writer named Rose Moss. We read each other's efforts once a month, and offer ruthless criticisms.

LPR: Why does the individual reader suit you better than a group program?

Pearlman: I don't care for groups. I always like to be alone; second best is to be with one person.

LPR: You've confessed to matchmaking as one of your hobbies, and writing seems to be matchmaking in the fictional world—between words, between characters, between paragraphs and themes and scenery. Do you see it that way?

Pearlman: Yes I do, and I'm grateful and impressed that you understand that.

LPR: Some of your stories are set in the fictional town of Godolphin, a suburb of Boston. How is Godolphin like your hometown, and how is it different?

Pearlman: Godolphin is polyglot, rich in libraries and parks and schools and ethnic enterprises and Nobel laureates. It is governed by a town meeting. So is my home town. I have supplied my own architecture, institutions, some natural elements, and characters and predicaments and tragedies and love affairs and some inexplicable happenings.

LPR: What has travel given to your writing?

Pearlman: Settings, characters, a wider view of life.

LPR: Your work is rich with Latin entomological names, Tsarist Russian history, Japanese grammar, the fine points of button collecting, details about London in the 1940s. What research do you do for your work?

Pearlman: Much of it is done in the library, museums, travel. To take an instance, London in the 1940s became known to me from prowling around the city every decade since the War, looking for places that survived the Blitz; visiting the museum of the city of London, reading books about the time.

LPR: Your work sometimes contains dramatic situations, and it seems you tone down the language very carefully around those scenes.

Pearlman: In such scenes the action speaks for itself. I don't care for melodrama.

LPR: Your website lists topics about which you are available to speak. One of the themes is following and flouting the rules of grammar and syntax, but you've said no one has asked you to talk about it. So I'm asking.

Pearlman: Oh, I'd love to give a mini-lecture about how punctuation, word arrangement, run-on sentences, sentences that end in ellipses, fragmented conversations, and so forth, can turn a piece of prose from serviceable to arresting.

LPR: *Binocular Vision* has brought you recent fame, the PEN/Malamud award, a spot as a finalist for the National Book Award. How does that feel?

Pearlman: Delightful, of course. But I have always had a small but loyal following. That following is just bigger now. The prizes are a lovely validation of my efforts, but I always felt prized.

LPR: You've described the short story format as "taking the time to be brief." Could you explain why your writing is most well-suited to short stories?

Pearlman: Brevity is useful to all forms of writing—the essay, the poem, the short story, the novel. Life is short; art should respect that and not waste words.

LPR: Your characters are so tenderly crafted, how do you let them go in such a short time? Some of your characters appear again, in short stories that are linked, as in "Vaquita" and "Allog." Was that an indication that you weren't done with them (or they with you)?

Pearlman: Indeed.

LPR: How do you reveal character in your stories? The glimpses a reader catches of them are so brief.

Pearlman: I try to find or invent a telling detail—something individual and meaningful. Usually a few of these will do to define a character. Small actions reveal characters; fragments of dialogue.

LPR: When you've discussed your characters, you've said that while they aren't autobiographical, they are, as Flaubert said of Emma

Bovary, “*c’est moi.*” Does it help having been many ages, to see through all those eyes?

Pearlman: Yes. It would have helped also have to have been many genders, many nationalities; to have belonged to many social classes and even many biological orders. But it was interesting to imagine being impoverished, male, Hungarian; in one story, a butterfly; in another, a devotee of a Brazilian drug made from beetles. Imagination joins experience.

LPR: You published an essay called “Plan B: Someday You’ll Find Me,” in which you open with a writer frustrated with her work slipping out to sing at a bar dressed in a slinky black dress, rhinestones and emerald shoes. Do you harbor a secret wish to become a torch singer—and do you have those green stilettos?

Pearlman: The wish is not secret—all my friends know I yearn to become a chanteuse. I know quantities of lyrics and tunes. Unfortunately my pitch is untrustworthy. Writing was [and] is a satisfactory second choice. As for the stilettos—no. I probably would have adopted sneakers as my signature footwear, a nice compliment to the slinky black dress.

LPR: In that essay, you talk about singing intimately, to each audience member, as a writer speaking directly to a reader. Do you think about a theoretical reader when you’re writing?

Pearlman: Yes. He’s eager to be pleased but a bit resistant.

LPR: Of what are you most proud?

Pearlman: My family—husband, daughter, son, daughter-in-law, grandson, sister, brother-in-law, some very dear honorary nieces.

~Susan Thornton Hobby