

Adam O'Connor Rodriguez

A Conversation with Kirsten Sundberg Lunstrum February 3, 2005

Kirsten Sundberg Lunstrum was born in Chicago and raised in the Pacific Northwest. She holds a BA in English and writing from Pacific Lutheran University and an MA from the fiction writing program at the University of California, Davis. Her short fiction has appeared in Calyx and Willow Springs, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her first book, This Life She's Chosen (Chronicle, 2005) was named a Barnes and Noble "Discover Great New Writers" title. The New York Times Book Review calls the collection "An impressive debut from [...] a promising young writer."

During the interview, which took place at the Palm Court Grill in Spokane, we discussed the role of faith in creative work, how family reacts to the autobiographical elements of fiction, and the pressure of being considered a "poster child" for a young writer's success.

Lunstrum currently resides in South Bend, IN with her husband, the photographer Nathan Lunstrum, and teaches English at Saint Mary's College and Indiana University, South Bend.

ADAM O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Since you're a young writer, what should people know about your personal history?

LUNSTRUM

I was born in Chicago, but we moved a lot, something like 26 times. My mom was a nurse. My father was in grad school—he was going to be a professor—and when he left his Ph.D. program he had a lot of jobs—at a bank, at a men's clothing store, as the vice president of a travel corporation. Eventually he went to seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. We spent two years there, then the year of his internship in Lincoln, Nebraska. By the time he finished that, I was in high school. We moved back to Washington—Bellingham, Monroe, Edmonds, Lynnwood. Now my parents are settled, and it is such a relief to feel like we have a home.

My husband and I helped them move into the first house they've owned in years a couple Thanksgivings ago, and it was an emotional day for the whole family. We've never had a place that felt like ours exactly, and so moving them into this house was momentous. We feel grounded in a way I don't think any of us did before.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Is your religious belief one of the reasons the sex and violence are toned down in your work?

LUNSTRUM

I hesitate to call myself a religious person because of what that word—religious—has come to imply in our culture at our particular moment in history. But, yes, I am religious, and yes, I think my faith and my upbringing in the Lutheran tradition shapes my writing.

In a sort of practical sense, the stories and language of the Christian tradition taught me about storytelling. In my family's household, my sister and I were taught biblical stories as metaphor, rather than as evidence or factual history of our faith. I think this encouraged me to search out metaphor and to relish it—and more important, to see the way in which metaphorical truth can be more true than facts. That is an essential lesson for the young fiction writer, I think—the lesson that fact is not always truth.

I also think I learned rhythm and cadence in listening to my father's sermons. He's an amazing writer, and often his sermons took the form of long poems or short stories. I liked listening to the sound of his voice through the walls of his home office as he practiced and memorized his sermons each week, and listening to the more finished product on Sunday mornings. I think his sense of language as a spoken, living thing helps me when I construct my own stories. I still read out loud as I write, going over and over sentences vocally until they sound right to my ear.

My faith probably underpins all of my stories, and probably is part of the reason sex and violence are limited in my work. I don't mean to suggest that faith eliminates sexual desire or our tendencies toward violence—not at all. But I do think that my Lutheranism has taught me to search out grace in life—and to see the grace of people finding ways to carry on with their lives. The kind of redemption that comes in the continual carrying on.

The other reason my stories don't include much violence is because I'm not interested in violence, I haven't lived it, so I don't even think I'd

know how to write it, or that it's necessary for me. I'm more interested in those small internal changes in characters. That's where my faith comes in, too. Faith is subtle. In our culture, we like to see faith changing people in drastic ways—lives turning upside down, people who were scoundrels being suddenly reformed. And although I'm sure that may happen to some, I think real faith is much more subtle. It changes perspective and self quietly and without much glory or fanfare or glamour. I'm interested in how, sometimes, the most miraculous thing is the person who accepts what is and keeps going.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

The one scene of violence in the book is completely shocking—when the kid in “Exhibitions” loses his hand.

LUNSTRUM

That story is more about how the mother deals with his imperfection than about the violence. And there's grace at the heart of that story, too, when she realizes at the end that what is imperfect is often more beautiful than what is perfect. And the missing sex is more my own worry that I wouldn't be able to write it correctly. I've read so many bad sex scenes. It's implied in certain stories, but I don't want to be one of those writers who gets wrapped up in tangled sheets. I know I wouldn't write that well. I'd rather imply things. I'm aiming for elegance. I don't know if I hit it, but I want to avoid things short of that, if I can. A woman I went to school with, Jodi Angel, who wrote *The History of Vegas*, writes amazing sex scenes. They're graphic, but they're not at all off-putting. So I know it can be done. But not by me.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

How did you come to writing and to fiction specifically?

LUNSTRUM

I wanted to be a ballet dancer, so I devoted my teenage life to dancing. When I was sixteen, I went to college through the Running Start program, part of the point being not only to escape my horrible high school experience, but also to have more time to dance. That year, I auditioned for a company and failed miserably, because I'm not a good dancer. After I failed, I went through this depression about what I was going to do with myself. Then, I couldn't get into a particular creative writing class I wanted to take for fun, on a whim, so I signed up for

the only English class left. I was lucky enough to get a creative writing teacher teaching a composition class. He let me write all my papers as stories, and he became a mentor. Rich Ives, he still teaches at the community college in Everett. He really encouraged me. I started writing then, and I haven't stopped. I think, too, the first story I ever sent out, which was in that first quarter I took creative writing, was to *Seventeen* magazine's fiction writing contest. And it placed. So I thought, Well, this is easier than I thought. Which was completely not how it worked out for me. But I think that encouraged me, helped me keep going. Then I kind of fell in love with it.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Your husband is a photography professor at Notre Dame—what's it like being an artist married to an artist?

LUNSTRUM

Being married to an artist is a blessing, I think, especially because he's not the tortured soul type. He's grounded, a practical thinker. He approaches his work, maybe because it's photography, in a measured, technical way—the same way he tends to approach life. It's good because he stabilizes me. I'm not a tortured soul either, but I tend to be more emotional about my work. I'm fitful when I'm writing, more fitful when I'm not writing, and he tolerates that in me and actually, in living with him, I've learned to be more disciplined but less uptight about my work habits, too.

I'm also glad he's not a writer. I could never be married to a writer—I'm far too competitive for that. I like that we have our own worlds to disappear into during the day, and that we can then come together in the evening, pleased to re-enter our relationship. He doesn't read my work until it's finished, and I don't see his photos until they're printed. We don't make suggestions or dally in one another's projects, and I like that.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Do you feel you're living the dream, having your master's thesis become a published work?

LUNSTRUM

You know, you're in a fiction writing program, or you're sitting in your room writing, and you think, If I have just this one success then

everything will be okay and I'll never feel self-doubt about the writing again and it'll just be beautiful. It was not that way at all. It made things worse.

All of last year, I was totally paralyzed by the publication and I couldn't write anything, because I thought it wouldn't live up to this book. I felt, just as more experienced writers always tell you you'll feel after your first publication, like a fraud or a fluke. I was horrified by the idea that I would be a one-hit wonder. That I would never write anything of value again. I didn't think I would be able to do it, so I would try to write and it was terrible—I would feel physically sick when I sat at my desk. I'd never had panic or anxiety attacks before, but now I'm sure that's what I was experiencing.

I'm returning to writing slowly. I've written a few stories—and I'll keep a couple of them. I think I became so bound to perfection—to trying to surpass what I did in *This Life*—that I tied my hands. I've had to try to forget about rules, forget about readability, focusing on the process rather than the finished, perfect product.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Do you feel the short story is a superior form, at least for you?

LUNSTRUM

For me, it is. Although sometimes I think I'm inferior to the novel. I love the way a story allows you to narrow your focus as the writer. There is no room for the unnecessary or the extraneous in a short story, and that leads, I think, to a kind of refined and elegant prose. And though I've read a few novels that achieve that kind of precision in the longer form, I don't know if I am up to that challenge yet.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

All the stories in your collection have a very Northwest perspective. Even the one that's set in Iowa has a western perspective on snow. Do you think your northwest upbringing is essential to your stories?

LUNSTRUM

A lot of times my stories start with wanting to write a place. Especially ones like "The Skin of My Fingers," which is set in Juneau, Alaska. That one started because I went to Juneau and wanted to write the place.

I think that when you move around as much as I did as a kid, you want to find home. I remember living in the Midwest, thinking, When

are we going to go back home, to Washington? and feeling like that was the center of the universe. Because of that feeling, when I moved back I became more aware of the place. I love the Northwest, and I think I love it more than I might have if I hadn't left it. And I think the characters a lot of times are looking for home in these stories.

Writing the land was a large aspect of the program I attended at UC Davis, too. That rubbed off on me, I'm sure, though I don't write landscape in the way some of my professors or fellow students did. Landscape is not the focus of my writing, but I do consider landscape as more than just setting in my stories. I think my characters are shaped by the regions in which they live.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

You're a very physical and object-oriented writer. How did that style emerge?

LUNSTRUM

That's my favorite part of the writing process. I love writing description. That's where I'm having fun in the story. I kind of write myself ways to have fun. And I like stories to be visually interesting. I've probably had too many workshops, with the whole show-don't-tell thing going through my head. But I often don't care as much for stories that have just a first person narrator talking to you. I want to see the place, so maybe that's my effort at that—

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

You do write some first-person narrators, though.

LUNSTRUM

Those came last. The first story I wrote in first, "By the Skin of My Fingers," was an experiment to see if I could write first-person, because I was so used to writing in third. I went through this process—and that was the first story I was thinking about it—of deciding how much description you can put into a story before it becomes overwhelming to the reader, because I was reading a lot of Alice Munro then. She goes whole-hog, puts in everything and gets away with it. I felt, in that story, I got the closest to putting in as much as I could. And I was pleased that it seemed to work out. Also, that story feels the most autobiographical, even though nothing in it actually happened to me. And I feel closest to it.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

You only have one male point of view character in the book, and he only tells half a story. Is it a conscious choice for you to write primarily from a female POV, or did your editor just pick these stories?

LUNSTRUM

These were the only stories that I had for them, so it wasn't their choice. But I wouldn't say it was conscious, either. I don't want to make a gender stereotype, but I think because I'm female, it's easier to speak in a female voice. So, generally, the characters who occur to me are female. But Otto, in that story, is—I met this person on a trip who that story is loosely based on. I was struck by him, was really interested in why he had made the decisions in his life that he had made. I wanted to be in his head for a while. But I think I'm a little nervous to write men, especially younger men. I'm interested in trying it more. I know lots of writers who are able to write in either gender, but it's a little scary to do it, just because I want it to work so bad. The one novel I wrote after college, the one no one saw because it was horrible, was all told in the POV of a twelve-year-old boy. So it's not that I haven't done it.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Many characters in *This Life She's Chosen* have “complex” relationships with their mothers (and in one case, a mother-in-law), and the ways mothers and children see each other is a theme you return to several times. I'm not going to ask you, “How is your relationship with your mother,” but, do the character relationships in the book mirror your own life?

LUNSTRUM

I don't think I'm alone in this—a lot of women and probably men go through a period of figuring out How am I like my parents? How am I not like them? and I think the characters in the stories are doing that quite a bit. And that mirrored my own life, because I did go through that. All through my childhood, I was told how much I looked like my mother, and every family reunion, people would pull out baby pictures of both of us and say, “You can't tell the difference. They're the same person.” And we do have similar qualities in our personalities. So I spent a lot of time individuating. And that's happening in the book, too. But my mother isn't any of these characters. They're all fictional, drawn from many people.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

How did your family react to the book?

LUNSTRUM

My father calls me almost every day to tell me if they spelled my name incorrectly somewhere online. My parents bought the book Tuesday and I'm sure the people at Barnes and Noble were tortured by the fact that I was their daughter. But they've been good about it. They had read all the stories before. Actually, they're usually my first readers for any story, because they're good readers. My father writes poetry, and he writes a sermon every week. So we can talk about that. And my mother is a voracious reader. They read things first and are usually great about not being upset if something's based on our family.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

What about your husband?

LUNSTRUM

He's really supportive. The last interview I did, the woman asked me, "Is your husband nervous about your view of marriage?" I was sort of taken aback by that. It hadn't occurred to me until then that people might read into the stories and assume things about me. I don't know why that hadn't occurred to me. But some of the questions the characters are struggling with regarding their marriages are questions I have asked.

I remember coming home from teaching after we were first married, and standing over a sink of dirty dishes thinking, When did I become this kind of wife? Our marriage is very egalitarian, and my husband actually does all of our cooking and our laundry—does his fair share of the mundane household things—so I don't mean to suggest otherwise. But I think a lot of wives of my generation, since we are among the first to really expect a kind of truly equal partnership, have that fear of Wifehood in the back of our minds. A fear of sacrifice. Though, I think part of what some of the marriages in my stories are working out is the necessity of sacrifice in marriage. The way in which a partnership challenges you to hold on to your individual identity while working to nurture the shared identity you have in the relationship.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Has teaching affected your writing?

LUNSTRUM

I don't get much writing done while I'm teaching because I take the teaching so seriously, and live the teaching so intensely. Teaching reminds me why I love writing, though. Because the students are reading things for the first time, and I suppose it's like being a parent, because people say you see your own childhood again, and reading certain stories that I read when I first went to college over again is great, because I get to fall in love with them again.

It's rewarding, too, to watch students fall in love with reading or writing. I had a student last quarter who seemed to have just stumbled on her talent for writing, and it was an amazing thing to be able to spot that and encourage her to keep working. I love the way teaching allows you to feel like both the giver and the receiver of a great gift.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

You use the word "love" for books. What authors and books do you love?

LUNSTRUM

Alice Munro is my favorite. Elizabeth Bishop, I love her short stories. I think she's beautiful. I really like John Berger. Gina Berriault. Julie Orringer's first collection, *How to Breathe Underwater*, is really great. She has a story called, "The Isabel Fish," an amazing story about this girl who is with her brother's girlfriend when they're in a car accident that lands them in a pond and drowns the girlfriend, and it's about the repercussions on the girl who witnessed it and lived. I really like the short story most.

This summer I'm reading Alice McDermott, too. I've just finished *At Weddings and Wakes*, and before that, *Charming Billy*. She's my newest favorite, I think. I feel like I'm learning how to write when I read her work. Her sentences are so elegant and careful, her details so rich. And she moves effortlessly through the daily lives of her characters. I've been noticing how her novels don't have much plot. Very little actually happens that one might call plot. But I'm drawn in as a reader anyway, and I come away from her writing feeling like she's told me something essential about the experience of living. I think that's marvelous. I want to know how to do that.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Several reviews of your book thought your cover art suggested that the book was “chick lit,” though the content surely isn't. Do you worry about your book possibly getting thrown in with some less substantial literature?

LUNSTRUM

I talked to the publisher about this, actually. They send you a questionnaire about such things. That was one of the questions: How you would shelf your book? And I don't want it to be classified as “women's fiction.” Not that I'm slamming women's fiction—there's a lot of good fiction written for women by women, but I also want it to be literary. I don't know about the cover. I suppose I had veto power, but it didn't occur to me that the cover would evoke that response. Though part of it is pistachio and pink. So I suppose, maybe. But I don't want the book to be thought of that way. I don't think it's geared only to a female audience, though it deals primarily with female characters. It's more about the experience of figuring out who you are, of figuring out where you belong in the world. That's a universal experience. So I hope they don't misshelve it after its fifteen minutes is up. I don't want it to go the way of—I don't want to mention any book titles—but I don't want it to be shelved next to something frivolous, because I don't think that it's frivolous and I hope other people won't.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Do you feel your experience getting your MA in Creative Writing was useful?

LUNSTRUM

I get frustrated with that whole debate about whether writers should get MAs or MFAs or not, because I don't think it can be anything but useful to be in a community of working writers. And to have time to do your work as your sole purpose. That seems like it can only be a beneficial experience. Some people make it less than that, but I think that's a decision on the writer's part. In that way, it was a huge blessing to have those two years. And I met people who I think I will consider writing mentors for the rest of my life. And I met peers whose work inspires me, and I keep in contact with them, and that helps. When I look at the writing I was doing when I got there and the writing I was doing at the end, my work had completely changed over those two years. The

other piece of it was that it's an MA, not an MFA. Sometimes I debate whether or not that was a good choice. But my experience was so good, in terms of the writing and the classes, that I wouldn't change my mind about it.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Could you describe the process you went through to get your book published?

LUNSTRUM

I was saying to someone the other day that I'm a really bad example of this question. It didn't happen like they say it will. The MA was my thesis, pretty much the ten stories that went in the book, in a slightly different order. After I defended the thesis, Pam Houston said, "You should send this out." She gave me the names of a few editors, and was nice enough to e-mail them and say, "Look at the book." I sent it out in July to a couple places. When I hadn't heard back by September, she sent it to Jay Schaffer at Chronicle. He called me within two weeks. I thought he was going to say, "Make these changes and we'll look at this again," but on the phone he said he wanted to buy the book. It happened really fast—May to October. You spend your whole life having people tell you that it doesn't work that way, especially because none of the stories had been published before. I thought that would be a problem. I was really worried that since none of the stories had been published, I would be embarrassing myself, like publishers would get the collection and be like, Who's heard of this person or any of these stories? It felt good that it didn't happen that way.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

What if someone said you were some sort of "poster child" for graduate writing degrees?

LUNSTRUM

I'm not sure I'm comfortable being the poster child. Because, you sit in a room by yourself and write your little stories. And, when I'm done with a story, I'm done with it. So now that they've been published and they're out in the world, I don't feel connected to them anymore, and so this whole coming out to talk about them is bizarre, and being put in a position where I'm the poster child of what's supposed to happen—or, of what isn't supposed to happen—is also strange. I'm still more excited

about going home and writing the next story than I am about getting up and giving readings. I feel a lot more comfortable at my desk than I do hawking the stories. That's the strange piece of the job that I wasn't expecting. I've been aiming toward having a book since I started writing, and I know that I should be soaking it up—and I am—but it also doesn't feel quite real. I don't feel like the book is what I wrote. When I saw it the other day at the bookstore, I was excited but at the same time it doesn't feel like it's mine the way it would if it were an 8½" x 11" page that looked like it had just been through a workshop.

I work at my writing, and I think I'm very hard on myself, so I don't want to suggest that I haven't "earned" this by not working hard enough. But I know writers who have worked longer and harder than I have, and who have not had publication success. I feel a little un-entitled. And I feel young. I am beyond happy to have had this book published when I am still a young writer, as it is already opening doors for me, and as I feel like I have been given the gift of time for a long career, but I also feel a little shamed by my age when I see writers who are much older than me and still struggling for this—for publication. I am embarrassed at times to admit to my age.

The other odd thing about publication is the social responsibility that has come with it. Writers aren't social beings, so it feels odd that the results of success in this world force us into sociability—readings and interviews and all of the promotion for a book. But I don't want to sound ungrateful. I'm so grateful.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

The last line of your book is "Like a hope chest opened up." While the tone of the story at that point is bittersweet, do you have a hopeful outlook on the world?

LUNSTRUM

I think that if you write, you necessarily think the world is beautiful. Otherwise, why record it? So I would say yes, I have a really hopeful outlook. But I think more than that, because that just suggests something about the future, I am constantly struck—and this sounds so corny—but I am constantly struck by how beautiful the present is. And I'm not talking about my personal situation. I mean the things around us. Like the other day, I was walking in Spokane, and I ate at a Greek

restaurant, and I had these purple olives on my plate and it was sunny out and the light was coming through green bottles on the window ledge in a particular way, and those kind of things make you think it's worth getting up. I think you have to feel that way if you're going to write.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

When you're eighty—and I know this is an unfair question—how do you want people to talk about you?

LUNSTRUM

I want people to say then what I hope they say about the book now. That the writing's elegant. That it's true. And that they find themselves in it. I want people to have the same experience reading my stories that I have reading the stories I love. The kind that settle with you for a while, that you don't forget right away. More, though, I hope I learn to be how I want my stories to be. I hope I can live elegantly, to be a graceful human being. I don't know if I have that down yet, at 25, but I'll keep trying.

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