

*Lisa Frand and John Baker*

## **A Conversation with Melanie Rae Thon** *February 13, 2004*

*Melanie Rae Thon is the author of two collections of short stories and three novels, including her most recent work, Sweet Hearts, which is set in the forest and plains of Montana. She has had other work published in Best American Short Stories, The Paris Review and Story. She won the Whiting Award in 1997 and an NEA grant in 1992. Originally from Kalispell, Montana, she received her BA from University of Michigan and her MA from Boston University. She has taught at Harvard University, Emerson College, Ohio State University and at a women's prison. Ms. Thon currently lives in Salt Lake City, where she teaches at the University of Utah. In February, 2004, she spoke with us at the Ridpath Hotel in Spokane, Washington. Our discussion seemed to weave in and out of the common threads that bind writing and the struggle of humanity, including exploration, risk taking and redemption. Throughout our conversation, a fire burned in the large fireplace before us in the hotel lobby, complimenting Ms. Thon's quiet and soothing voice.*

LISA FRANK

Your characters are all very well crafted and complex, and are all very different from one another, with various backgrounds. How do you go about creating characters for your stories?

MELANIE RAE THON

I usually have some questions that guide me. Like with the story "First, Body," I had been to a lecture on autopsy and there was a man there who looked Vietnam vet age. He was an extremely large man and he had an obviously very serious knee injury and it came out in conversation that he actually injured his knee in the hospital. So, I thought, *Wow, there's a story there!* He never said he was a Vietnam vet, he just kind of had that ragged, torn up look and he was about the right age,

so I made those connections and thought, *Okay, Vietnam vet comes back from Vietnam intact, works at the hospital and messes up his knee. How would that happen?* And so it was the explosion of the question in my mind that set me on the course of trying to discover Sid Elliott and his story. But when I work on a short story, I often do two hundred pages of exploration; in fact, in the story, “Little White Sister,” I did fifty pages of exploration in the voice of the woman who dies and who only speaks seventeen lines in the story. So, I did fifty pages of trying to figure out who she was. But I couldn’t have found the seventeen right lines that she speaks if I didn’t know her well, if I didn’t know her background. It [the exploration] brings me close to the people—the characters—and it helps me see them physically and spiritually, and it helps me understand their experiences. So, I have this massive list of questions in terms of exploration. I think now, because I’m getting older, I actually write less. But I think more.

JOHN BAKER

It sounds like a lot of work, but you also talk about the joy that comes in the act of writing. Is that also a big part of it?

THON

It’s a huge part of it. I’m a victim—as much as any other writer—of wanting to have a product, of wanting to have a beautiful story to send out to the world and have people read it. I get into that, but then underneath it all, there is still the thrill of knowing your characters, of discovering their worlds, of becoming more familiar and less afraid. A good example of that is in *Sweet Hearts*, with the character of Flint, who is an outlaw. I have been interested in juvenile problems for a long time and I have visited juvenile detention centers, but I had never been to an adult prison, so I had to go to the state prison and do research for that. The one, huge obstacle in my teaching career at that point was that I had always wanted to teach in a prison, but I was too afraid. I thought they’ll look at me and think *privileged professor, Miss Do-A-Good-Deed* or something. Then, while doing a tour of tribal colleges a couple of years ago after working on that novel for years, I visited the women’s correctional facility, where I taught a class. Throughout that experience, I was so completely comfortable. I walked into the room, and unlike a traditional classroom, all the women walked straight up to me as they came in and shook my hand and introduced themselves. We sat at these little tables and it was just like a group of women getting

together and talking or playing cards. It was very intimate and I felt safe and comfortable, because I thought, *You know, I'm not completely ignorant. I don't know what it's like to really have to live in prison, but I'm not completely naive and small minded*, and so I thought that it's okay for me to be there. And that's what's real, this deep, internal satisfaction of saying, *I'm not so limited, I'm not so naive*. I can go into any place and have that piece of mind.

BAKER

A lot of times we think too much about how our work is going to be perceived, which can be a roadblock for a writer. How important is it for a writer to write unpretentiously, or rather truthfully?

THON

Writers are both incredibly arrogant and incredibly insecure, simultaneously, and those two things are so close, really. They're set up as opposites, but really they slide in and out of each other completely. But as for the pretension—I think that the way I get around that emotionally and spiritually is to do those hundreds of pages of exploration, to spend years doing my research so that I'm not just taking a pose, I'm not just doing something artistic, I'm not doing something in terms of craft, but I'm really trying to understand. And that's not a bad thing—to try to understand—and I think that when we think, *Oh, I'm doing this because I want praise, I'm doing this because I want money, I'm doing this because I want to be famous*, all of that, you know, is ridiculous. But if you're doing it because you want to understand something that you don't understand, that's a good thing to pursue and the writing that comes out of it—whether you get there or not, I mean you try to get there, but you don't know that you will get there—but I think if you do it honestly and you do the explorations and you do the research, you're going to be changed by that. And you're going to come back to your life in a new place, and that's a good thing.

FRANK

In *Sweet Hearts*, the narrator is a deaf mute and the aunt of the protagonists, which is an extremely interesting choice in many ways. What makes a character a good narrator?

THON

I didn't have Marie as the narrator until after I had been working on

the novel for about three and a half years. I was lost, actually, in terms of who was telling the story. I had all these pieces from different kinds of perspectives and I hadn't pulled it all together. It was terrible. I could've presented it that way, I suppose. *It's post-modern, everybody. It's cool, you figure it out!* [Laughter breaks out.] But I really feel passionately, you know, about helping my reader understand my world. It's really very old fashioned, I know [laughter]. And then I went to Montana to live alone and do research right in the area [where the story is set]. I wanted to live on the lake in the area where the motel was and it was during that time—you know, I was alone all the time, I was silent all the time, and the sounds that I heard were really minimal, they were limited to natural sounds mostly, which was glorious, except for by choice when I would go out into the intrusive world—that I started to hear the voice of someone who couldn't hear, and that was fascinating to me. She'd been a character in the novel, but she wasn't the speaker. And then there was a day when I was walking along the river and she started speaking to me fiercely about her father and she had a very passionate voice. And I thought, *There it is. There's where the heart in the story is.*

BAKER

How important is it for a writer to be or to become uncluttered and uninhibited and unshaped by the mainstream culture? Do you think it's important to have a view or an understanding of the culture and still try to become as uncluttered and uninhibited as we can as writers?

THON

I like moving between the two. I have many stories that have urban settings and I am painfully aware of the culture and our current dilemmas and I just really finally have to withdraw to really do the real writing. But it's almost impossible to live that way and I'm not sure that it would be good ultimately. I mean, I really like moving between the polarities and being exposed and then having my space.

FRANK

One thing I've really appreciated in your writing—in *First, Bodies*, as well as in *Sweet Hearts*—is your willingness to experiment and take risks. But with that also comes the willingness to fail, which I feel is underrated and can also be a good thing, because you ultimately learn from your mistakes. Can you talk about your willingness to take risks?

THON

I think every story is a failure, that our vision is like way up there [holding her hand high above her head] and that through our revisions, we kind of go like that [starting with her hand down at her head, she slowly moves it up, but stops when she gets only half-way extended] until we only get to here and then we go, I'm not going to get any further with this piece. There's no way I can get to the vision of it, which is always far beyond what you can render. But you've learned something on the way and you go back into new material from a different perspective, and so from my viewpoint, everything's a failure. So, why not take the risk? [Laughter] But it's the same idea as the exploration, that if you're going to learn something, if you're going to hope to become more compassionate through your work, through your exploration, then you have to take risks. And I also really believe—and you know, scientists say this—that we only tap into, at most, about a tenth of our imaginations and that's what I see with my students all the time. When they're trying to make things fit and make things work and to tell a story and do it the straight way, their minds just clamp down. And as soon as they have an exploration to do, as soon as you say, "Don't worry about the product, just go," suddenly their minds are on fire, you know, and they're going in twenty-five different directions at once and then you've got two hundred pages and somehow you have to make sense of it. That's kind of a drag, you know [laughter] and it's hard to figure that out, but I think better to have the two hundred pages and never make the story than to do twenty pages that are precise and perfect and well crafted and didn't get you anywhere.

FRANK

If you have a piece that isn't working, how do you know whether to keep working on it or to pitch it?

THON

There were a few stories along the way that I pitched, and certainly very early in my writing, everything got pitched eventually. But now what I discovered is that if I stay with it long enough, it morphs until it becomes a story that is okay, one of those okay-failures. If it's not working—first of all, that language...I always tell my students, "There is no "This is working, this is not working," which I just find annihilating—but if I reach a point where I think, I can't make this story make sense for myself, then I think, there's something in here that's the heart

of it that I can take out and I can use that as the core to transform it into something else. So, eventually, if I stay with it long enough, it becomes a story I want to tell.

FRANK

That's something I need to learn a little bit, so I appreciate that [laughter].

THON

But I think what I said about pitching stories early on...What I always tell people is that nothing that I wrote in graduate school became part of my published work, with the exception of a story that I actually started as an undergrad that was in completely different forms as an undergrad, in grad school, and then finally in the published version, which ended up as a totally different story. But nothing that I generated in graduate school became part of my published work. All of that was learning.

BAKER

I'm glad to hear that, actually [laughter].

THON

Many people do publish a book right out of graduate school, their thesis becomes their first book. I know a few people like that and I think, *Well, bless your hearts, lucky you* [laughter].

BAKER

You must've encountered some self-doubts, like What am I doing writing? But when did you know that writing was your calling, your vocation?

THON

In my first semester in college, when people asked me what I was going to do, I said, "I *am* a writer, which was incredibly silly and naive on my part [laughter]. I had no idea what that meant. I had written very, very little, just bad adolescent poetry and it was just totally silly. But was true for me—and what has always been true—is that I could not live, I literally could not live, if I didn't do it. I couldn't survive in the world. The world was too tumultuous, too confusing. My sorrow was too deep for me—and that's the adolescent poetry still seeping out

[laughing]—to survive. So, I didn't ever think of it as a choice and I think that a blessing, really. One of my friends said he had a choice, he could either be a thief or a writer [laughing]. And for me it was like, I could either be a waitress or a writer and I was a waitress for thirteen years. It's made my mom crazy as you might imagine, but I just never thought I'd do something else, you know, and I didn't publish for a long, long time. I just never thought that was an obstacle. I think I was really lucky that I grew up in a different time period. People now—your age—are under a lot more pressure to make money, to be successful, to get your careers on the road. I was a waitress for five years straight after graduate school and never during that time did I think I was making a mistake. I thought, *I'm becoming a better writer, you know, I'm not publishing, but I'm becoming a better writer.* I just kept doing my work.

FRANK

The daily experiences also seem to help with writing. All the boring, mundane stuff and interactions with different people.

THON

Yeah, everything goes in there.

FRANK

Yeah, even all those lost years, as I like to call them [laughter]. Not lost totally, but...

THON

You can learn to love anywhere, you know, and ultimately it's about who do we love and who are we trying to love and you don't have to be in some prestigious job to figure that out.

BAKER

I've heard writers say that our work as writers and artists really should be not to glorify the human spirit, but to uplift it, and from reading your work, I would guess you would say the same thing, but I'd like to hear what you have to say about that.

THON

I would be hesitant to say that artists and writers *should* do anything. People have different views on making art. But I think for myself, what I'm always trying to do in my work—for myself—is to learn to love

more intensely, to learn to be more compassionate toward people of whom I'm afraid and people with whom I'm intimate. And for me, that happens in my writing, that's how I get there. The product, the writing itself, is the bi-product. The quest for me is to make my life bigger, so I hope that when readers read my work, they feel that it opens them to feel more compassion and less fear, and the possibility of loving more people or loving the people whom they love with greater depth, greater openness. Many people say my work is "dark" and every time they say it, I can feel the dagger. And I think, *Oh, don't you see the joy? Don't you see that these people—no matter what their circumstances—they're trying to love, they're trying to stay alive through their love however difficult their lives are, however much they've suffered.* All of my people are trying to love, and people who say my work is "dark" never buy that argument. But that's what I hope that my work does. Once again, with thinking of the work as a bi-product, I think that for me, the work that I do helps me go into the classroom, helps me be with my family, helps me go into the prison. So, the work is at least doing the work on me—slowly, slowly, slowly, with many falls backward [laughter].

FRANK

This is in connection with what you just said. Before I actually ask the question, I'm going to first apologize for using the word "dark," [laughter] although I think you'll forgive me when you hear the rest of the question. *Sweet Hearts* is a really dark story, but all the characters—no matter how bad their sins—seem to have a strong desire for redemption, a desire which leads to hope, which in turn lends itself to a more hopeful reading of the ending, which I ultimately find to be more interesting. Can you talk about redemption and its place in humanity and in your characters?

THON

I think that if we're seeking redemption truthfully, not some sort of *I'm going to make amends and then everything's going to be alright*, but if we're seeking redemption in the sense of repentance, and repentance meaning literally turning, and that turning isn't one turn of conversion, like *Okay, now I'm going to be a good person*, but the constant turning into new situations, and facing new situations with love and openness and trust and to behave decently toward other human beings and other living creatures, as soon as we honestly begin to seek redemption, we are redeemed. It's just like as soon as we seek God, we have already found

God, whether or not we understand that, whether or not we recognize that. As soon as we begin to turn into that place, the process has already begun and hope is eternal in that motion as long as we keep reminding ourselves that it's not okay to feel like, Okay, I'm safe, I made it. I experience this like a hundred times a day, that feeling of relief, when understanding washes over me, and that feeling of despair, when I feel my heart close toward someone, where I start to judge someone or I start to need something from a friend and then am disappointed by them. That kind of closure keeps me from seeing. So, it's constant and a constant reminder to keep turning and turning and turning.

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