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Interview with Jane Hamilton

by Barbara Shoup

Jane Hamilton is the author of The Book of Ruth, winner of the PEN/Hemingway Award for first fiction, and A Map of the World, a New York Times Notable Book of the Year and named one of the top ten books of the year by Entertainment Weekly, Publishers Weekly, the Miami Herald, and People. Both The Book of Ruth and A Map of the World have been selections of Oprah's Book Club. The Short History of a Prince was a Publishers Weekly Best Book of 1998; her novel Disobedience was published in 2000; When Madeline Was Young was a Washington Post Best Book of 2006. She lives and writes in an orchard farmhouse in Wisconsin.

In March 2009, Hamilton was a writer-in-residence at Butler University. This conversation with novelist Barbara Shoup about her book When Madeline Was Young and the newly released Laura Rider's Masterpiece took place before a group of students in Professor Susan Neville's Visiting Writers Series class.

Barbara Shoup: *Timothy (Mac) Maciver, the narrator of When Madeline Was Young, grew up in a Chicago suburb in the 1950s with his parents, a sister and Madeline, his father's first wife who suffered a brain injury soon after their wedding that left her with the mental capacity of a seven-year-old. Now in his fifties, a doctor with a wife and teenage daughters, he considers the meaning of his parents' decision to make Madeline a part of their family as he prepares to attend the funeral of the son of his estranged cousin, who was killed in Iraq. How did this novel begin for you?*

Jane Hamilton: The genesis of the book was Elizabeth Spencer's *Light in the Piazza*, which I saw as a musical when it came to Chicago. It was about a mother who takes her twenty-six-year-old daughter to Florence. She's a beautiful young woman who was injured when she was twelve. She's got the mental acuity of a ten-year-old. The daughter falls in love with an Italian man, the Italian man falls in love with her and, because of the language barrier, he doesn't understand that there's anything wrong with her. At first the mother of the daughter is saying, "Oh, no. This can't happen." But then she realizes that this is her daughter's one chance for happiness, and she manipulates the situation so that the marriage happens. The novella is perfection. At the end it's really about being a parent and how you have to let your child into her own destiny.

When I saw the musical, I had been working on a book for four years and was at the end of trying to make it do something. I knew I had to throw it out. I came home and read [Spencer's] novella. The next day I was sitting next to Connie Tillerose at the Memorial Day parade—I see Connie Tillerose once a year at the Memorial Day parade—and she started telling me about this friend of hers whose twenty-something son had just gotten married and his wife was in a bicycle accident and she was now like a five-year-old, and I just thought, That's it! *Thank you, Connie.* So that's how it came to be.

BS: *How did you decide what Madeline's brain injury would be?*

JH: In the Elizabeth Spencer book, the brain injury was kind of vague, which is harder to get away with now. I'm not a doctor. I read about neurobiology and I read about brain injuries. I had this enormous medical textbook and I got up every morning and went through the whole thing. But in the end I made her illness impressionistic. People who've really been injured as Madeline was often become obese, and I couldn't let her do that. She needed to be beautiful. That was important to her and to the plot. This is the pleasure of writing fiction: Anything is possible—if you can get away with it.

BS: *The scope of When Madeline Was Young is much broader than Light in the Piazza. It's the story of Madeline, of course, but also the story of Madeline's effect on the family and the story of Mac's own life—not to mention a story about the 1950s, 60s and 70s, generally, including Vietnam.*

JH: When I think about that book I remember that my high school boyfriend's mother told me when I was sixteen that I was neurologically disorganized. I'm a little embarrassed by how unstructured it is.

BS: *I think the structure is brilliant. There's no one story; Mac tells everyone's story. The other characters circle through it, each one submerged in his or her life. Mac is the one standing outside, seeing it all.*

JH: He's very passive.

BS: *But his attachment to the family is so strong—and he tells the story in a wondering tone that conveys his need, finally, to understand what happened when he was young. He moves in and out of time, but the timeframe or “now” of the novel is the short period of time between the time he learns that his cousin, Buddy, has been killed in Iraq and the funeral and its aftermath. Was the funeral a part of your original idea for the book?*

JH: Probably not. I must have started the book in 2003, so it was right after we went into Iraq. I had trouble writing fiction after 2001. It felt like such a [foolish] thing to be doing. My stories just felt like—who cares? I knew pretty early in the writing that I wanted to find some way to talk about war and how it is that families talk about war. How people get stuck in their own corners and can't get out. Their point-of-view never changes, so the fight never changes. I guess the Iraq war just fell into it—and then Vietnam, which was essential to the novel because Mac lived through it and was deeply affected by it.

BS: *Generally, how do your main characters develop?*

JH: Hearing the voices is key to the beginning, really listening for them—being ready to receive. And writing down the lines. I think I'm going to remember them, but I don't. So now I write them down.

BS: *It comes more as sound or rhythm, then? You hear them before you see them?*

JH: I think I see the character in his place first, and then the voice starts soon after.

BS: *Was there a conscious decision to make Mac the main character of When Madeline Was Young?*

JH: I can't really remember. I think voice happens at an intuitive level. Who knows? There it is, that voice. I do like writing from the point of view of men. I like trying to imagine our gender through their eyes.

BS: *I was fascinated by what Mac seemed to regard as the incidental nature of his own life, as he told the story. For example, at one point he dispenses with a period in his life with a sentence that begins, “For two years, as a conscious objector, I...” The information just serves as a transition to the next part of the larger story.*

JH: It all comes back to Willa Cather, of course. She has a great line, which I can't quote, about how the artist's goal is to cut away everything that's extraneous so that what's left are only the bare essentials. But what remains is

made of what you cut away.

BS: *Generally, the transitions in this book were very effective in moving the reader from one level of time to another. One I particularly admired was, "Mikey O'Day must have come to our doorstep in 1963, a few months before Kennedy's assassination. The Fullers, then, had been on the east coast for nearly three years." I love the way it so deftly completes the Mikey section and returns the reader to the strand of the Fullers' lives, sort of like Chutes and Ladders.*

JH: I was reading *Brideshead Revisited* when I was working on this book. He starts chapters saying things like, "In May, the gillyflowers were in bloom and Oxford..." And you just see it immediately. I remember thinking, Oh, that's good to make note of.

BS: *Was there anything that surprised you as the novel evolved?*

JH: I was so spooked by having worked for four years on the novel that didn't work that I showed *When Madeline Was Young* to my editor early on. I don't usually do that because I want it to be mine. I don't want anyone to tell me what it is until I know it myself. But I needed her to say, "Yes. You're a writer. It's fine."

She read it and said, "This might be crazy, but I think Madeline needs a boyfriend." This is the beauty of a great editor. The minute she said it I thought, yes! I could see the whole thing. I'd considered it. It was in my mind, but it probably would have taken me a long time to get there. So she saved me a lot of time.

What surprised me was my character Mikey. Somehow he's the glue that holds it all together. Without him, the book was just a series of vignettes.

BS: *I love Mikey! The image of this goofy-looking guy and the beautiful, elegant Madeline just going at it all the time is hilarious. He must have been fun to write.*

JH: Oh, he was. He's fat and he loves sex. He sings songs.

BS: *I also love Mac's Aunt Figgy. Her gossip answers Mac's (and the reader's) questions about his parents and about some of the events of his childhood and, better yet, she often says what the reader is thinking about Madeline's place in the family.*

JH: Mac's second wife was the one caring for the first wife. She was a do-gooder, and I knew there had to be a foil for her. Someone saying, "You know, you really ought to stick that girl in an institution!" I think of Figgy in relation to a high school friend who married a man that was a million years older than

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she was and who had a very high position in one of our more recent administrations. She changed her political affiliation to be married to this man. I thought it was such an interesting situation to find yourself in. How did she do it? How would she have felt if her son had to go to war? That's where Figgy came from.

BS: *Your minor characters are wonderfully idiosyncratic and...right there. Would you comment on the role of minor characters in a novel?*

JH: Music is often important to my characters. I can't imagine going through life without music, it's such an essential element in [my] life. So it seems important to give music to my people. In the same way, our lives are made so rich by the people around us that I want to give my people that, too. It makes it interesting and fun to write.

BS: *Elvira, the teenage girl who's an avid Civil War re-enactor in your novel Disobedience comes to mind. Her obsession is compelling—and also creates terrific tension in the family.*

JH: People have said, "I wish she'd have written the book because she's so interesting." But she couldn't have. She wasn't an observer; she wouldn't have had that much to say. She needed to be observed.

BS: *Would you talk about the kind of revision you did for When Madeline Was Young?*

JH: First, I wrote many drafts, and then I gave it to my editor, as I said, and once she'd put me onto Mikey O'Day, then the path was clear to finish the book. I always write many drafts, up to the bitter end, but if the structure is fully in place, the words follow. After the form there is rewriting, then shaping the sentences, filling in details, and understanding more about the characters. Writing *A Map of The World* was a dramatic lesson in wandering around in the soup of a story because although I had the beginning, and the last lines, I didn't know what would fill up the middle.

When I wrote *A Map of the World* I wrote four distinct novels with the same beginning—with different outcomes. I didn't realize that Alice had to get into deeper trouble before she came out of her original trouble, which was the drowning of the child, until the fourth incarnation. In the first one she went to a Sufi community in upstate New York, nothing happened. Second, she left her husband and went to Michigan. Third, she went to her own home in Illinois where the father was an alcoholic. I knew nothing about alcoholism. I couldn't figure out how to make her better and get her through it.

What finally triggered the real book was an article I read in *Harper's Magazine*

about a woman named Kelly Michaels, who was 22 years old at the time. She had been convicted of abusing many, many, many little children in a day care center in New Jersey. She was in jail for six or seven years, and then she was exonerated. It was so chilling. I read that piece and I thought, this is the perfect trouble for Alice. Also, having the luxury to explore that kind of injustice that happened on so many levels that you can't get yourself out of the hole was really interesting and horrific. A nightmare. At the same time, Alice Goodheart loved being in jail because she was able to pay her pound of flesh.

BS: *How many pages were abandoned before you got there?*

JH: Many pages. And garbage bags.

BS: *I don't think that's uncommon, do you?*

JH: No. I'm always amazed when people really know how to do it. It would be so comforting; today I'm going to work on section 2-A. Then there's going to be 3-B. But that doesn't work for me. I remember being at Ragdale back in the day. Lawrence Block would come with his little typewriter and he would sit down and he wouldn't speak to anyone for three weeks. You'd hear, clack, clack, clack. Then he'd be done. He'd look up and say, "Is there a party tonight?" He'd been writing the book in his head for nine months of the year, he just came to Ragdale to type. I said something to him about the fact that I write a jillion drafts and he asked, "How can it be all of a piece?"

Everyone has a different way. Somerset Maugham said, "There are three rules for the writing of a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

BS: *Having revised and revised until you found the solution that finally made A Map of the World, how did you know it was right to let that other failed novel go? The one you worked on for four years. And wasn't it depressing?*

JH: At the point when I packed it away it was really a joyful thing because I couldn't do any more to it and it didn't feel good. I had been just about to hand it in and I called my editor and said, "This just isn't going to happen." She said, "This is very brave." I thought, no. It would have taken more courage to send this bad thing out into the world that I hated. *I hated it.* And one of the things I could not imagine was doing public readings of it because I hated it so much.

BS: *Your new novel, Laura Rider's Masterpiece, is very different from your previous work. To quote Publishers Weekly, "Laura Rider and her husband, Charlie, live in Hartley, Wis., where they own and run Prairie Wind Farm. After 12 years of marriage, Laura decides to stop sleeping with Charlie, and although lovemaking is his 'one superb talent,' she's convinced she's 'used up her quota.' Also, Laura has a secret fantasy: to be an author. After she meets local public radio host Jenna Faroli,*

Laura decides to write a romance and encourages a flirtation between Charlie and Jenna, an experiment that she thinks will help her write her book."

What in the world was the genesis of this book?

JH: I was teaching writing on a cruise ship...

BS: *Oh, boy. I think I see where you're going with this.*

JH: I've been very lucky to be able to teach in institutions with terrific, thoughtful, serious students who are real readers. This population on the cruise was not. I'd never been on a cruise before. There's much to say about the cruise, but I'll just say that . . . I wanted to shoot myself. It was a dispiriting experience. My friends, the other teachers, and I had this huge argument one night about whether life was tragic or comic. There were just so many things about the cruise that seemed to me because of my mood to be tragic, but how could you not think they were comic when they were so over the top?

I'd just been on a book tour with *Madeline*. It's *hard* to go around with a literary novel right now, so I really needed to cheer myself up. I was interested in these cruise people. They seemed to have no awareness that there has ever been a print culture; they seemed never to have read a book. But yet they desperately, feverishly wanted to be published. Do not pass Go—just straight to publication. They weren't particularly interested in feedback, so I really understood what Jesus meant when he said, "Don't cast your pearls before swine." That's a really complicated thing. It can really let the teacher off the hook. Oh, you're swine. I'm not going to care about you. But I felt that I could have done handstands on the table, and they still would have said, "But how do I get published?"

What else to do but come home and write a comedy about a woman who's never read a book but wants to write a romance novel?

BS: *The book is very funny, but it's not only funny. There's something really ruthless in the way that Laura keeps taking things and using them—which mirrors a crucial part of the creative process. Writers are ruthless.*

JH: I feel very ruthless. I try not to use my relatives in my work—but, oops, there they are. They won't mind, so I imagine. Elvira, in *Disobedience*, the Civil War re-enactment girl, is pretty whole-cloth my cousin's child. My husband gave a bit of his genetic material to Howard in *Map of the World* and he *loathes* Howard. There's some of him that runs through everything, and I think it's unpleasant for him.

The novel I'm working on right now is about an apple orchard, three

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generations of a farm family. It's set in Michigan, it's not *really* about his family, but . . . I can't not write it.

BS: *Because there's something in the material that you hope to be able to understand?*

JH: Oh, yes. But mainly because it's just so rich. It would be such a waste. It would be like walking past a gold mine and saying, "No, not for me."

Jane Smiley wrote an essay called "Can Writers Have Friends?" She talks about the problem, and says at the end that she hopes if anybody ever writes about her she'll remember the thing she says to people: "I used some of your details, yes, but I really was not writing about you. I was using your details to explore an idea entirely different from you." Which is actually true.

I would like to think that I bring great sympathy to my characters and show them in a lovely light—and that's not a bad thing. On the other hand, I've written a couple of books where people come up and say, "I saw myself. You put in me there." And I don't know what to say. You were nowhere on my screen? Or, well, thanks?

BS: *There's such urgency in the way you talk about your work.*

JH: When I was younger, I had these books that felt urgent. I didn't know how *A Map of the World* was going to resolve and yet I had to write the book. I had to write the book. But I didn't have the time and space. I had to fight for it. Now I don't have that issue anymore. I have my day. I have a certain calm about that. But there's also a certain energy that isn't there anymore.

As I get older I think writing novels is just an incredibly privileged way to spend my time. I feel so lucky to get to do it. The painter Morandi said, "My goal is to enjoy the solitude that my work requires." Which sounds kind of lame, but that's what I've come to. And I would feel very lucky to be able to continue to do that.

BS: *Do you think that creative writing can be taught?*

JH: I would say that the students that I've had who have seemed to exhibit real, raw, unbridled talent—you just want to not ruin them. Stay out of their way. I think that you can alert people to technique and help them become good readers. You can help them develop depth. The great mystery of being a teacher is that you cannot predict who's actually going to do it. Who's going to have the drive, who's going to pull it together? Which, in a way, is what Laura Rider is about. Laura Rider hasn't read a book and wants to write a romance novel. I wouldn't be surprised if she really did it.

Barbara Shoup is the author of six novels and co-author of two books about the creative process, *Novel Ideas: Contemporary Authors Share the Creative Process* and *Story Matters*. Her young adult novels, *Wish You Were Here* and *Stranded in Harmony* were selected as American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults. *Vermeer's Daughter* was a School Library Journal Best Adult Book for Young Adults. Currently, she is the executive director of the Writers' Center of Indiana, an associate faculty member at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis and the University of Indianapolis, and an associate editor with OV Books. Her most recent novel, *Everything You Want*, was published by FLUX in 2008.



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