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A Conversation with Karen Russell

Abstract

Hard to believe Karen Russell has been publishing fiction for less than ten years. Her debut story collection, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* (2006), won the Bard Fiction Prize. Her first novel, *Swamplandia!* (2011), was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, earned inclusion in the *New York Times*' "10 Best Books of 2011," and won the New York Public Library's 2012 Young Lions Fiction Award. In 2013 Russell received the prestigious Genius Grant from the MacArthur Foundation and released a second collection of stories, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*. Russell's writing has also been honored with the National Magazine Award for Fiction and the Berlin Prize. A novella entitled *Sleep Donation* is due in 2014. While visiting Butler University in the Fall of 2013, Russell sat down with *Booth's* own Luke Wortley for a conversation about geography, Jim Shepard, and the Super Soaker of metaphors.

(Editor's note: This is an excerpt of the full interview, which will appear in our next print issue, Booth 7.)

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by Luke Wortley

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(Editor's note: This is an excerpt of the full interview, which will appear in our next print issue, Booth 7.)

Luke Wortley: *Your stories (and, by extension, *Swamplandia!*) have a tremendous sense of place, and each story, particularly in *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, seems to be set in a different location. Do you travel in order to fully capture that specificity?*

Karen Russell: That's the funny thing. It's pretty matter-of-fact; it's not actually ironic or a winky joke or some kind of New York metacognition. It's all in the water. Everything I've written up until recently was set in Florida or some kind of Florida of the mind. I truly think that that first collection – maybe there are two stories that aren't set in some Key West of the mind. So, no, I don't really travel, though maybe I should.

LW: *“Children's Reminiscences of Westward Migration” clearly isn't set in Florida. What happened there?*

KR: At a thrift store near my house I picked up a book off a table called *Women's Reminiscences of Westward Migration*, and as you would imagine, it was pretty grim; even as a travel log it was pretty depressing. The body count was around four to a page. It was almost like reading a Wile E. Coyote comedy if it weren't real history. Because it's just stoicism paired with the worst events you can imagine – and it's relentless. It had the narrative arc you'd often expect in a novel: overland migration and a series of very brutal Wednesdays.

LW: *Then you return to the frontier in Vampires in the Lemon Grove with “Proving Up.” Did you ever travel West or anything?*

KR: No, but I feel like I should do that. This is already pretty exotic to be out here in the Midwest. I mean, I went to school at Northwestern, but that's already a different ecosystem than whatever you guys got going on here.

LW: *Yeah, it's really flat.*

KR: I was thinking Florida is like that. Well, it may not be the most meaningful coincidence that, yeah, okay, they're both flat, but I think there's something about the way space works. Someone was saying something that I thought was really beautiful – that here you're sort of like a prognosticator, that you can see the weather coming toward you. That's just a mean trick, where you have a sense of the imminence of an event, and it's unstoppable. It's like foresight, really.

LW: *It sort of reminds me of “The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979.”*

KR: Yeah, I got a little obsessed in that last collection with that gulf. I was watching this movie, *Meek's Cutoff*, by the screenwriter Jon Raymond. The ending, you could argue, is dissatisfying if you were going at it from a pure movie-

watching standpoint, but I thought that it was one of the most pleasurable endings I've experienced in a while. And that's exactly what makes us think that there is something inevitable – that there's an inevitable surprise, and it's en route. It's a weather feeling. I think that the closest analogy I know for it outside of the body is just, you know, thunder rumbling, gathering, and it's unforeseeable exactly what kind of damage it's going to do. But it's en route.

LW: *A lot of your stories push the limit of that “tidy ending.”*

KR: Yes! I hate tidy endings. Life doesn't give us very tidy endings. I really like Flannery O'Connor's endings. Even if I lived to be a million, I would never be able to do what magic that woman does in her writing. She's such a good model.

LW: *You cite her and George Saunders a lot, and I love O'Connor as well as Faulkner. I was curious as to whom else you continually refer?*

KR: It's so funny that you mention Faulkner. Can I tell you a dirty, dirty secret? I haven't read that much Faulkner. If you're doing anything regionally, there are certain zip codes where if you haven't read Faulkner, then it's like punishable by death, like you should put your pen down because you're not licensed. So I read *The Sound and the Fury*.

Actually, you'll think this is funny. So my sister moved out to Monterrey, and she's living by the ocean, which sounds amazing to me, but she complains that seals wake her up every morning. And here I am thinking that sounds really nice. She says it sounds like goddam Benjy from *The Sound and the Fury*. Just sounds like every morning my alarm clock is a million Benjys. So there's this existential alarm clock of seal barks and this applauding, this meaningless ovation. And the sea just crashing. I was really proud of her.

It's an incredible book, but I feel like I can't actually talk to anybody about it because, you know, it's too late. You can't be like, 'Casablanca is a fine film. Has anyone heard of the postal service? It's amazing!'

I just feel like his (Faulkner's) drafting process . . . I mean, we talk about process, right? But the word “process” seems like such a fraudulent word for whatever he did to get that book. I hope that it involved lightning rods. He's just a very freakishly-shaped antenna for something.

LW: *Besides Faulkner?*

KR: Well, I'm on a Latin American kick right now. I'm sure you'll appreciate this – that I take the effort to read those guys, you know, in Spanish. Do you know Horacio Quiroga?

LW: *Yes! He was the writer that made me start writing stories.*

KR: Now that's a weird portal to creative writing, I'll say that. That's so interesting. Yeah, he was someone that I really admired. His work just had that extra shimmer around it; it was so many degrees outside my native space – all those jungle stories! He's certainly rare, though. Certainly not on everybody's radar. But, of course, I do love the guys that *are* on everybody's radar like Cortázar. I've been teaching those stories. To me it feels, when I read some stuff now, that, via some channel, even if they're not consciously aware that he's an influence, that he just set us all up to think about different stuff. Like the multiverse. And, of course, Borges. Al Gore is totally lying when he says he invented the internet. Obviously Jorge Luis Borges invented the internet...I mean let's consider the source. Although it is weird sometimes to read all these English writers routed through him, routed through *Martín Fierro* and all that.

It's like another frontier, right? There's this strange animatronic violence. A lot of that got in my bloodstream. Doesn't it feel like that, though? That something is in a state of dormancy, like someone's waiting on a prairie for, like, generations and here comes a silhouette and you're now activated. There's a weird passivity to that violence. There's a special strain of fatalism in those works. It's sort of beautiful and terrifying. Like the meager labyrinth or something.

LW: *Have you considered writing about Latin America?*

KR: I get shy about it. But I used to take high school kids abroad with my best friend. Actually a lot of the stories in *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* were influenced directly because we took these kids on trips to Spain and Cuba and Australia.

Like there's that glacier story ("Accident Brief, Occurrence #00/422"). We flew up to this glacier in New Zealand. I'd never skied, you know; I was from Miami. My friend was like, "You'll be fine. We'll just take a heliplane."

I didn't know what I would see there, but I remember the blue, and when you stabbed the ground it would bleed this sort of heaven-light. Occasionally there will be some setting where you're like, "Well, I'll have to return here." You get this

feeling like all of the possibilities are vibrating at once. Whatever that feeling is, that's my favorite.

LW: *That is nice, and it leads us into the next question. Are you cognizant of the language choices you are making as you're writing? You have so many surprising word choices to create unique and memorable images. Do you just put it all down and then go back and think to yourself, "What's the most surprising language choice I can make?"*

KR: It's so funny, because there's always a real tension. I'm revising something now, and it's always humbling to me, because stuff will come back from an editor, and I'll realize that I still have not developed the keenest sense of when it's like wearing all your jewelry at once. Like whether it's ostentation or when it's appropriate. I think sometimes it's almost being too permissive. In a generative stage, a lot of that, for me, is intuitive. A lot of it is pleasure-fed. I'm a weird dork, too, right? Like sometimes I'll want nineteen different metaphors for one cloud. The literal-to-figurative ratio can kind of skew figurative for me. So sometimes in revision, I'm like, "Whoa. Okay."

LW: *You actually have to scale it back?*

KR: Yes, because it would just be this Super Soaker of metaphors. Nothing would ever happen; it would just be aggregating analogies. I was looking at this revision, and it's reading much better on a macro-level because the pace is moving better. Thankfully I have this tough-love editor, because there's some stuff that I love that's gone, stuff that gave me a lot of pleasure. I'm like, "But what about the orphaned body of an animal?!" It's gone. It's like a pet cemetery or something. So next time I write a story about a kid stuck in a big shell I'll have all this conch imagery.

Luke Wortley, after a series of head injuries, forgot calculus and quit wanting to be a doctor. He ended up with a B.A. in Spanish and is currently working on an M.F.A. in Creative Writing at Butler University.