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# ONE *to* WATCH

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*Interview with Lori Ostlund*  
*by Sejal H. Patel*



Lori Ostlund's short story collection, *The Bigness of the World*, is a compilation of 11 short stories that can only be described as a treasure chest. These protagonists each suffer in a deep way and find their way through Java and Hong Kong and in closets and staring at oceans as they grapple with what love, abandonment, and loneliness mean. Her novel, *After the Parade*, centers on the life of a young Aaron England, who reflects on how his abusive father's sudden death and his depressed mother's equally sudden departure from his life have affected his ability to recognize love when he sees it. What Ostlund's protagonists endure is often tragic—in loud and in quiet ways. And yet, each story ends in the key of hope.

I met Lori Ostlund at the Mendocino Coast Writers Conference in August 2016. I should clarify—I met her when my writer friends registered for her fiction workshop and gushed about this amazing novelist and short story writer who also happened to be an incredibly nice person.

In her gracious interview, she proves the rumors are true.

**Congratulations on both the republication of your short story collection, *The Bigness of the World*, and on the success of your novel, *After the Parade*. And thank you for taking the time to talk to us. Did you imagine as a child that you would be a novelist someday?**

First, thank you, Sejal, for this very generous introduction and for taking the time to ask such thoughtful questions.

I don't know that I was equipped, as a child, to think about life—or at least my life—in those terms. I read nonstop, but I don't know that writing novels was even on my radar as something that one did. In fact, my studies were very much focused on math and science, to the point that everyone assumed that I would become some sort of engineer. I enrolled in college as a journalism major, however, because I knew by then that I wanted to do something with words, and, as you know, I was raised among very pragmatic people, small-town Minnesotans; it wasn't until my first year of college that I even realized that English was a major.

That said, just down the interstate about thirty minutes from where I grew up is Sauk Centre, Sinclair Lewis's hometown, and though I did not know Sinclair Lewis's work as a child, once, as we passed Sauk Centre on a rare family outing, my father said to me, "You know that Sinclair Lewis got run out of town for his books. Maybe someday you'll write a book that gets you run out of town." I was around 12, certainly not thinking that I'd be a writer someday, but my father made being run out of town sound attractive (or perhaps I just heard it that way). Nonetheless, I can't help but consider that one of the nicest things my father ever said to me.

**You grew up in a small town in Minnesota and spent a good deal of time at the hardware store your parents owned. What compelled you to leave small town life?**

The question of why people leave the familiar is just as interesting for me as its corollary—why people don't leave. It's something I think about often and certainly one of my writing preoccupations, and as you suggest here, this preoccupation stems (as my preoccupations so often do) from my own experiences. The truth is that I don't think that I ever thought I would stay, nor do I think that my parents ever believed I would stay, and the question instead became how far away would

I go, or at other times, "How far away can I get?" To be clear, nothing terrible happened to me as a child, but I do think I understood that a much different life awaited me because a different life was what I craved, and in my mind physical miles equated to emotional and intellectual miles as well. Also, my parents were very religious, and though I truly tried to follow suit, it was clear to me that I did not see things the same way they did.

On some level, I think I knew that to gain perspective, both for my writing and for my own understanding of the world, I needed to live in vastly different places, and so, while I started close to home, attending a state school, I went to graduate school in New Mexico, a place I chose not for educational reasons but because New Mexico struck me as vastly different from Minnesota. From there I lived in Spain and Malaysia for 2 years each and traveled a great deal as well, before finally ending up here in San Francisco. In terms of what compelled me to leave, I think that the biggest factor was all of those years of reading, which was either the cause or the effect of my deep curiosity, but I also believe that being gay (though I did not come out until graduate school) pushed me into the world. Thus, in many ways, I believe that books and curiosity saved me, that and the fact that I didn't see a place for myself where I grew up.

**When you did leave, what was the moment in which you realized that the world was much bigger than what you had seen growing up? Was that experience frightening, exhilarating, or a little of both?**

For me, the ocean has always been the ideal metaphor for the world's bigness, though I think that the desert works well also. Because I grew up in a landlocked place—Minnesota is all lakes—I first saw the ocean when I was around 24. I was in graduate school in New Mexico and drove 12 hours to Los Angeles, and I remember being struck, as I looked at it, by the sudden knowledge that the world was vast. It was a lovely moment. What I realized then was that there are those who feel overwhelmed by that bigness, by all that they do not know, and there are those who feel comforted by that bigness because they see that there is so much more to see and know. I feel a great affinity for those in the former camp, but I am firmly in the latter camp.

**How do you handle both the praise and the criticism of your work once you put it out there in the world? Does that feedback affect you as you continue to write?**

When it comes to reviews, both good and bad ones, I have a policy: I read them just once. They are one person's perspective, ultimately, and it seems important to keep that in mind, and the one-read rule is my way of doing so. I've developed a fairly thick skin. With my first book, I received a Goodreads review (accompanied by one star) that said: "Worst book I've ever read." At the time, I am sure that this reader's use of the superlative (the *worst*?) left me sick to my stomach, but I made a point to go back to that review periodically, especially when I was grading papers or reading someone else's work, situations that put me on the other end of the critique, and I found that it always reminded me to think carefully about what I said, not about the feedback itself but the way that I framed it.

I will never be able to return to the absolute freedom I felt in writing my first book, when I had no consistent readers except my wife Anne and no reason to assume I ever would. Now, I do find myself having more internal debates about what goes on the page, and I know that this debate is caused partly by the fact that I have readers; in fact, sometimes the readers who like my work give me the greatest pause because I don't want to disappoint them.

**When you feel stuck in the writing process, as all writers invariably do, what do you do to motivate yourself to keep going?**

This question hits me quite hard at the moment because I'm struggling to get going again with new projects. I have about 100 pages toward two different long projects, but I can't seem to figure out what either is about. I never start out knowing what something is about. I write to figure it out, and as Anne often reminds me, "This is your process. You get frustrated and discouraged and despondent, and then the story starts to emerge. Accept it."

Years ago, I went to hear one of my favorite writers, Chang Rae-Lee, read at a bookstore in Albuquerque, and he said something along the lines of "You need to know when you're not writing because you're thinking and when you're not writing because you're procrastinating." Though he was speaking to the whole audience and really to himself, this advice resonated with

me. I am currently in a period of procrastination, so I force myself to write in stints: I use Freedom to cut my Internet connection for 45 minutes at a time, and I tell myself, "You only need to do 45 minutes." Generally, this mind game works. The other thing I've learned is that when I'm writing along and get stuck, sometimes the worst thing I can do is sit in front of the computer waiting for the problem to resolve itself. Instead, I need to go for a walk or focus on something not related to writing—a museum or concert.

**Is there a book, poem, play, or story that you read again and again?**

I don't reread a lot of fiction, except for Dickens because I love him and he is the best for travelling, but I do reread a lot of poetry, to myself and out loud. Particularly when I feel despondent about my own work or find myself putting the words on the page without regard for craft, I close the computer and read poetry. When Anne and I first got together, we discovered that we both had favorite poems that we went to again and again. In some cases, we overlapped (T.S. Eliot), but we also introduced each other to favorites, which to this day we read aloud to each other: Richard Hugo's "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg," which appears repeatedly in *After the Parade*, and "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold were two of *my* favorites that became *our* favorites. Years later, I brought home a collection called *Crush*, by Richard Siken, and we reread his book at least once a year.

I also feel indebted to Edward Albee, especially his play "The Zoo Story," which I read perhaps 25 times in my early twenties, trying to teach myself about dialogue. I've always been interested in the ways that strangers interact, these intense exchanges that can happen with someone we don't know precisely because there is a freedom that comes with not knowing them, with not having a future together. This theme is what first drew me to Albee's play, and the question I was trying to answer was "How do two strangers meet on a park bench, and in the course of their conversation, how does one end up complicitous in the suicide of the other?" In particular, his work taught me about dialogue as a means of understanding power shifts between characters, and I credit him, and theater in general, with teaching me how to think about dialogue.

I loved how much you think about words and their meanings throughout *After the Parade*. Some of my favorites were when you described “vacancy” as “somewhere there is room for you,” Dolores being Aaron’s mother’s name and meaning “pain” in Spanish, and how the word “hope” can be both about the past and the future.

**How much of Aaron’s logophile nature is autobiographical?**

This kind of wordplay has made the book more difficult to translate, as I have learned from working with my terrific German translator, but wordplay was often my way into understanding Aaron’s character as a boy and is very much based on how I thought about the world as a child. I write a lot of child characters. I like the child’s perspective on the world, the way they see things, what strikes them as important, and when I was trying to figure out Aaron’s character, I naturally went to words. Words—including the ways that children misunderstand words—have always been important to me. One of the things that I like most about writing is the feeling that I will never be able to figure out a way to express all of the things that I want to express. I like the impossible challenge.

**You do a masterful job of toggling between Aaron’s life in the distant past, his time with Walter, and his new life in San Francisco. What challenges did you face when you were drafting the novel in deciding how to tell this story?**

The structure of the book came very late, during that summer of 2013 when I put the whole thing together. I had perhaps a thousand pages of stuff—chapters, notes, paragraphs—but I did not know the story yet, partly because I did not know the structure. I decided that the book was, in part, going to be about the way that Aaron’s past creeps up on him, forcing him to come to terms with it. Once I decided that, I thought about the way that memory works, particularly during periods of transition and emotional turmoil. My feeling was that the past is ever present and that during tumultuous periods, in particular, everything reminds us of the past, that as we walk down the street or go to work or sit at home, images and memories are bombarding us. I wanted to try to recreate this feeling in the book, and my way of doing it was to have Aaron going about the process of living his present life and having the past just “show up,” so that the book was constantly moving into flashback, straddling that line between past and present in order to replicate memory.

**Walter, Aaron’s longtime partner, believes that someone who is gay can only be true friends with another person who is gay. Aaron does not believe this. Do you think that being a member of a group, whatever it is, allows you to access a piece of fiction from that voice in a different way?**

I like this question a lot because it contains various strains of questions that I think about a lot, both as a writer and a person. Like Aaron, I do not believe that we can only be our truest selves around others who belong to the same marginalized group. Yet I understand why people from marginalized groups turn inward, toward others who identify similarly.

**Most of the protagonists in your short story collection are female. When you decided to write *After the Parade*, why did you elect to make the protagonist male? And in a broader sense, what advice would you offer to writers when they are writing about a perspective that is different from their own, be it in a gender, class, sexuality, race, or ethnic sense?**

I don’t think that I have room to do justice to the question here, but certainly a lot of writers have recently addressed the question of writing beyond our own identities quite well. To answer your first question, I never made a choice to write a male character. The character I began to write was Aaron, a boy who was sensitive and more comfortable with words than action. At the time and in the place where I grew up, boys like Aaron were called sissies, and when I began to write Aaron’s story, it was in many ways more about my desire to look at the means through which people are made to feel marginalized.

In terms of writing Aaron, I have the experience of growing up gay in a small town in the 1970s but not the experience of being a man, and I worried about this at first, thinking, “What do I know about being a gay man?” Often, my students have asked me for advice on how to write a character of the other gender, and I always tell them that they need to start with the character and not the gender: Men are not all one way and women another. If you try to write A MAN, you can only end up with generalizations, stereotypes. You must create a person. I do think, though, that writing about a man helped me to separate myself from the character in key ways. Aaron and I share biographical details, but I liked having a clear distinction in my own mind early on.

### **How do you balance your writing commitments with the regular business of earning a living?**

All writers face this struggle. There are days when I do not write because I am earning a living, but I also know that I write best when my life feels balanced and my emotions are stable, when the world outside my window is not looking overly attractive and my life feels, for lack of a better word, routine. Even though I might complain mightily when other work takes over and I find writing getting squeezed out, I also know that having a schedule is necessary for me, especially a schedule that takes me out of the house on a regular basis. I'm also a spurt writer, meaning I don't write every day, but once I settle into a project, I work at it consistently. My way of approaching a longer project (i.e., a novel) is to spend several years writing whatever strikes me on a given day without regard to structure or big-picture concerns and then to find a period of time when I can really settle into the project and hold the whole thing in my head. From May until August 2013, for example, when I was putting together *After the Parade* from the various chapters and paragraphs and notes that I had compiled over the preceding 13 years, I wrote around 70 hours a week.

I have mainly chosen to earn a living as a teacher, though I think that teaching and writing pull from a similar place—that is, when I walk into a classroom, I have that same sense of nervous creative energy, not knowing what will happen or what I might need to respond to. I love that, and it's why, even though I sort of fell into teaching in graduate school, I've continued to teach. Around 20 years ago, I fell into a bit of a funk after years of teaching composition—my days had become a blur of rising at 4 AM to grade, doing so all day, going off to teach in the late afternoon, and coming home around 10 PM. During that time, I did not write at all, and we were also constantly broke. Finally, in 1996, Anne, my wife, and I moved to Malaysia, where we also got caught up in non-stop teaching, and when we left at the end of 1998, I drew up a contract that we both signed, the gist of which was that we would never teach again and that we would prioritize our writing. We kept the latter promise, though not the former. When we returned from Malaysia, we brought with us a container of furniture and set up an Asian furniture

store, and for 7 years we ran that business, traveling to Indonesia and Korea each year on buying trips. Oddly enough given the hours we kept, we both were able to get a lot of writing done. It was during that period that I started *After the Parade* and began most of the stories that would appear in my first book, *The Bigness of the World*.

Ultimately, while we loved so much about the store—the people we met, our involvement in the community, the furniture we sold—neither of us has a keen drive to make money, though we accept that we need money to survive and to do the things we enjoy. Anne began to miss teaching and went back to it part time, which meant that I spent more time at the store, and around this time we began to feel increasingly that we wanted to live in a city again, and so we closed the store in 2005 and moved to San Francisco, where I went back to teaching. I did consider doing something else, something less draining than teaching. The mailman who served our store was a cranky guy whom we both liked. He told us that he was a painter, and one night, we went over to his house and looked at his paintings, and given how prolific he seemed to be, I began thinking about becoming a mail carrier, but when I asked the cranky mailman for his advice, he said, “You're way too idealistic for this job,” which still makes me laugh.

I returned to teaching and have no regrets. Now, however, the balancing act involves factors beyond just teaching and writing. My writing commitments include blurbing books, judging competitions, and serving on panels, and I also volunteer as a mentor for the AWP mentor program, all of which I consider necessary activities. During a crucial period in my life, a period during which I could not get anything accepted by journals and had decided to stop writing and instead get a proper job, I learned that I had won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, which was how my first book was published. This would not have happened had those 2 people—the screening judge and the series editor—not taken the time to read my work carefully. I hope to never forget how important it was to me that others pulled me from the slush heaps and gave me support, and I consider it necessary to do the same for those coming after me. ↪