

This interview was conducted by Tao Lin for Bookslut.com upon publication of a 30th Anniversary Edition of Joy Williams's novel *The Changeling* by Fairy Tale Review Press in 2008. If you quote from the interview in part or in full, please provide proper credit.

In your story, Yard Boy, from your first story-collection, Taking Care (1982), and in many stories since, you talk about being enlightened, about seeing things without preconception, which means allowing the possibility that inanimate objects have feelings and thoughts, that everything is relative and arbitrary, and other concepts involving "enlightenment" such as that the physical world is an illusion and that nothing can be "known." In those worldviews "morals" seem irrelevant, or aren't addressed, since they require assumptions and those worldviews tend to not want to assume anything. In your non-fiction, though, you seem to have morals, and seem to be "against" certain things like hunting, cruelty against animals, destroying the environment, etc. How do you reconcile that in your life? When you are making choices in your life, like choosing whether or not to pay more money for food or transportation that won't destroy the earth, what do you think about? Do you more live your life like a work of art (fiction), or like a work of rhetoric (non-fiction) or some other way?

You can get away with a lot more writing non-fiction (I'm not talking lies as has been the trend but attitude) than you can writing fiction. In a work of rhetoric you can take a stand, make a case, inform and inspire, scream and demean. You can't be angry in fiction--it's all about control. You create worlds in order to accept them. You create worlds open to interpretation. Facts have limitations. At the Univ. of Wyoming where I'm in residence for a year, there is this wonderful little geological museum wherein there is THE FLUORESCENT MINERAL ROOM. There are maybe thirty rocks in there sitting quietly on shelves, modest rocks, nice rocks, but nothing lovely or extraordinary about them. But when you flip a switch Press Switch Here--the room goes dark and the rocks blossom into the most intense and varied colors. They are really expressing...something. Now the explanation for this is helpfully posted on the wall: Certain stimuli, such as ultraviolet light, disturbs the atomic structure of certain minerals. The energy released as the structure returns to normal results in the emission of visible light.

And there you don't have it. Far better to have a fictional Yard

Boy, prone to love and awe, come to his own understandings which he certainly would have had if he had been fortunate enough to find himself in the Fluorescent Mineral Room at the University of Wyoming.

When I read your stories I feel that everything becomes more accurately balanced out and then I feel calmer, I feel “better.” There is an attempt, I feel, in your writing, to not give anything more “importance” or “weight” than anything else, and to not “rule out” anything. It is like how a child sees things—without preconception. Or more accurately, maybe, how a robot or tree would see things—without even the preconception of consciousness. Do you write or read to feel calmer, to feel less scared of death and other mysteries, to feel less “bad”?

No.

You write about nonexistence a lot, about being either not-yet-born or "dead," and have been focused on this pretty steadily, in your writing, for more than 30 years—speculating on what it actually is (to not exist), making jokes about it, and "trying out" ways to feel and think about it. Has this affected your life in concrete reality, do you think, as opposed to someone who thinks less, and less creatively and originally, about not existing?

Annie Dillard quotes someone who ventured that "the worst part of being dead must be the first night." The themes you mention are in the new novel I'm working on as well. Back to the non-expressible. I so wish I were smarter! All art deals with the peculiarity, the strangeness of our situation. We do all this stuff--we think, we marvel, we despair, we care--and then we die. That makes no sense. Surely we should be spending our time differently since that is the case, but how? With the injustice, the political stupidity, the destruction of the natural world, it is tempting to believe (in our non-believing) that things are not what they seem, that there is a link between the dead and the unborn that can replenish the void we know awaits each of us and all we love.

What things have made you feel excited in your life?

Excited? Why do you ask?

You said about The Changeling (1978), "That book was just destroyed. It was an awful experience. [...] I felt at the time that some of the reviewers wanted me to die. They just wanted me to stop writing. They were saying, 'We have other writers out there who we have to deal with and all the writers yet unborn, so please go away.'" Your recent novel, The Quick and The Dead (2000), however, received a lot of praise from almost every reviewer and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Why do you think "critics" reacted differently to the two different novels?

The late 70's were a tough time for women novelists. We were supposed to be feminist, engaged, angry. It was really, weirdly, a very conformist time. (Of course, Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon came out around that and she avoided those problems profoundly and beautifully.) The Changeling is about a guilty young drunk named Pearl on an island with feral children. The prose is lushly stark and imaginative, the method magical, even demented. Feminism did not need a guilty drunk! The Quick and the Dead had larger, more charming and annoying characters and a bigger theme. It's a better book. It was published in 2000, a millennium baby. Maybe people were more willing to contemplate the straits between the living and the dead. Still, the critics didn't like it that much.

Throughout the 70's and 80's there was a term, "K-Mart Realism," or "Minimalism," that journalists used for a group of writers you were sometimes mentioned with—Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, Frederick Barthelme, etc. Did—and are—you interested or excited by work from that "group" of writers?

Of the ones you mention, it's Carver who's the stand-out, and he very much disliked the term minimalism as it was applied to his own work. The editor Gordon Lish was the maestro of minimalism and under his uncanny pencil, many an ordinary story became a very good one. Minimalism as a productive style can be very affective, alarming and satisfying, but I don't think there ever was a pure strain of it. For a time, it was just a kettle into which many a strange fish was flung. Now with America's mininiaturization of not irrelevance in the world, it might return to the short story in grim and freshened renewal. Certainly the days of the giddy blowhard are over. I hope.

I feel like your writing has become more concrete and less abstract over time. There are more scenes and more of a narrative, I feel, especially in your last two books, *The Quick and the Dead* & *Honored Guest* (2004), than in your first books, specifically *State of Grace* (1973) & *The Changeling* (1978). I like your writing more with each new book. It seems funnier and calmer now to me, I can picture things easier, the sentences feel to me more interesting like you spent more time selecting each sentence that is allowed in each story. I feel like most writers become more abstract over time, you seem like the exception to me. Do you ever think about this? Why do you think you became more concrete over time, or do you not think (or have not thought about) that?

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~~xxxxxxx~~ A writer always seeing pitfalls inherent in a skill he thinks he's already mastered. You write, you change, everything changes. The pressures on language fail to evoke the desired effect. The "gift" you feel you may have undeservedly received can't be used for everything. The dependable friend has become untrustworthy. Your ear goes, or confidence that the delivering word will appear, erodes. You get sick of fulfilling your characters, your ease with Time evaporates. Endings, beginnings, impossible. Strategies change. It never gets easier, that's for certain. Abstraction in fiction is supposed to be bad, but it can be just the struck match that illuminates. Much of a writer's work is to unexpress the expressible as well as the opposite. And the "concrete" is essential to both.

At the end of one of your essays on writing you said, "None of this is what I long to say. I long to say other things. I write stories in my attempt to say them." Is there mostly just one thing that you long to say, so that you try, in each story, to "say it all," to express that one thing, or are there different things that you long to say, each requiring a different story?

The conundrum of literature is that it is not supposed to say anything. Often a reader can enjoy a story or novel simply because he can admire the writer's skill in getting out of it.

In Corinthians there is this passage: Behold, I show you a great mystery
~~XXXXX~~: we shall not all sleep but we will all be changed...
in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye... This is one of those terrifying Biblical passage, though not as terrifying as many others, that addresses the unspeakable heart of our human situation and commands us to be aware. The best stories, I think, always contain this annunciation of awareness, no matter how cloaked. Emerson said, "No one suspects the days to be gods." Stories can't be gods of course. Maybe little godlets.

Do you have an "ideal" that you strive for (some already existing story, novel, movie, or song that you think of) when you write a short story? A novel?

No. The first note must be sounded and why have it be another's? To name an ideal and then seek to riff it anew is an exercise for writers' workshops.

What story or novel writers, if any, do you feel are (or were) trying to "get at" the same things you are?

I can tell you who I admire greatly--writers who always move and trouble me---Sebald, Coetzee, DeLillo. They are rigorous, merciless novelists of great beauty and integrity.

Do you like to be around people and go to parties and drink alcohol?

Not really. I'm shy.