



Author: Gail Taylor

Book Title: *Tornado and Other Seasons: A Collection of Short Stories*

1. Tell us a little about yourself. Where are you from? Besides writing, what do you do for work and play? Any hobbies or interests?

I grew up on a farm in southern Ontario, Canada, where the land is flat and the weather unpredictable. Hence, the title of the first story in this book, "Tornado," and the farmland themes that thread through many of the stories, such as "Caravan" and "The Turning."

My hobbies and interests start with family: I have two grown-up sons carving out interesting lives and a husband who makes me laugh every day. Travel is a passion, and languages. My husband and I try to learn some of the language of each country we visit. Learning another language is also a great way to appreciate more and more the plasticity of English, that scavenger of languages.

2. How long have you been writing?

I am a new writer. I am also a recovering bureaucrat: I spent years working at something else entirely, managing organizations in government. Then, in 2005, I wandered into a Creative Writing class with the idea that it would be a relaxing afternoon. After all, it would be in my mother tongue, so it should be easy, right? As a wag said to me later, "So's nuclear physics." Because that is what it was like, an adventure into another space and time, and I realized I wanted to do this. So I am new to this art.

3. Besides *Tornado and Other Seasons*, what else have you written?

I wrote lots of reports and articles while in government, and, although sometimes accused of creativity, the work was decidedly not fiction. Literary writing is something new for me, and especially fiction. Also, I published some non-fiction articles in the e-zine *Canadian Actor Online*, including one about a trip to England. I would love to do more travel writing.

4. What inspired you to write *Tornado and Other Seasons*?

I like making things up. Each story grew from an image or a setting, or a challenge of some kind. Where and how I grew up finds its way into the stories, too.

Many ask, why short stories and not the novel? The advice of one of my mentors is to "write how you breathe." That resonates with me, because in literary terms, I am a short distance runner, a sprinter, not a marathoner. I like the stringent boundaries that the short story form imposes. It's an unforgiving genre: you get to have one major thing, one major breakthrough, a few characters, not a town.

5. Who do you expect to be the audience for *Tornado and Other Seasons*? Did you have a specific audience in mind when you were writing it?

Selfishly, I probably was thinking of people just like me, readers with busy lives who are comfortable with a short story rather than a tome, people with multiple projects in play, people with challenges of age or health, competence and success, love and loss.

6. Do you identify with any characters in the book? Is any part autobiographical?

Nobody in these stories is me, and yet all of them have parts of my life, both good and bad. The characters are amalgams, both of real people and of people I've imagined. Same with events. The events in the first story, "Tornado," have really happened, but not all at once and not all in my township. "Caravan" has parallels to my birth family, but Marion Stafford and her brood are entirely fictitious. So in that sense everything in the stories is real, but everything is all made up.

Sometimes my characters feel very real. I was rather upset, for example, when Ivy Feine, the smug scientist in one of the stories in this book, "A good Belief is Hard to Find," moved into my place, and made the house larger and better than mine, and put in furniture that was better, even a better piano. Her clothes were better, too. She stayed for quite a while, and, although I felt bad for her, I was glad when she moved out. She had such bountiful intellectual gifts and material comforts—and an empty soul. So sometimes I think that the characters are appropriating my life. Not sure that's a sane thing to admit, but there it is.

7. What part of your book is your favourite? Why?

Picking favourites is a Sophie's choice, but: my favourite character is the little boy Tommy in "Caravan," who has the pluck and intelligence to outwit the adults. He's

the youngest. I wanted to see how the world might look from the viewpoint of a youngest child. Being a bossy eldest child, I had never thought about that before. There are many more years between me and my youngest brother than with the children in Caravan, but the dynamic was similar.

8. Did you struggle with writing any part of your book? How did you work through that?

My struggle is just figuring out how to do this. Writing literary fiction has to be the most complicated, engrossing, difficult and exhilarating thing that a person could choose to do. The big fight is overcoming the lack of faith in myself. Each story is a challenge. I suspect figuring out how to do this is a lifetime endeavour. When I ask established writers if it gets easier, they say no.

9. What is your writing process like? Do you outline or plan as you go?

I write as I live: organized sometimes, but largely messy. Once the mulling is threatening to over-boil the pot, I hit the computer, sometimes starting with pen and foolscap first. An outline at first is very rough, and then takes shape as the story emerges. I try to capture the feelings and the sensibility of the story, the turmoil of the characters. First drafts are driven things: they command attention like a newborn, waking you in the night, stealing the limelight, making you miss a meal/miss a bus/forget a boiling pot.

Torture is the first draft; bliss is the second. Once there is text on screen or paper, the editing is the reward for the insanity. That's when the 'hard play' begins, following sturdier rules. There is finally something to test and taste. Structure is almost the last piece. That's the shaping and cutting, thinking about the arc, seeing to the reader's need for surprises and solutions and satisfactions. Then the next pass is an eye to language, and that's where it never seems to end. Copyediting is an addiction.

So it starts with the characters and their story. Then it's telling others about the story. Solving one problem at a time: getting the story, then sharing it. If that sounds organized, it's not: paper in archaeological layers on every surface, note slips stuck on things, ideas roiling in my head.

10. Where do you get your inspiration and ideas?

Sometimes setting is the impetus. For example, "The Turning" came into being because I was yearning for a hot sunny day in the middle of a dreary Canadian winter in February, shivering in a basement where the heating system was not yet working. Running west on a highway to Chicago in midsummer heat seemed warmer. "Puzzles" grew from the responses to a death in the family.

Sometimes an overheard conversation is the trigger. "Night Class," for example, is a mix of lectures and overheard conversations from several events, but with an ironic twist.

Sometimes it's a technical challenge: can you write a story with two intertwined narratives, two points of view ("Caravan"); can you write a story in which one of the characters has lost the power of speech ("Puzzles"); try something Agatha Christy-esque ("Night Class"); try monosyllabic speech; do it all in the present tense. Sometimes it's an image: I imagined cherry pie splatting against walls and "The Turning" came into better focus. Ideas abound. The trick is to corral them.

11. How much time do you devote to writing, and how do you schedule that time into your day?

Demanding newborns set their own schedules, sometimes. That's what a new story is like: it may demand attention at three a.m. That's why the decision to start a story is a big one. Sometimes a story comes to surface easily. "Puzzles" wrote itself quickly, whereas the road trip story, "The Turning," took its time.

12. Have you ever struggled with writer's block? If so, how do you overcome it?

I struggle with 'writer's logjam.' When the drafting is going on, there are so many ideas, events and troubled characters that it is tough to sort them out and ask them to wait their turn. When a character becomes particularly insistent, they get my attention. But yes, blocks happen when I can't see what the character is doing next, when there is a pillar blocking the view. So I do other things. That's when the procrastination list comes in handy. I get lots of other projects done while I'm mulling.

13. What are you working on now?

Right now, I am very excited to be working with a trusted mentor on my next project. It is a new experiment in writing, and I do not know yet what shape it will take at the end. Maybe short stories again, or a novella. Not a novel, that's certain. In the words of my teacher, I 'breathe' like a short story writer.

14. Do you have any advice for other authors?

For me to provide advice to writers is presumptuous, and especially since literary fiction is a matter of taste. Maybe that fact can be shaped into a word of advice: You have to be true to yourself and your own taste, and make your own aesthetic decisions.

Secondly, for anything as tough as this, get a mentor. In fact, get several. Listen to them all, even the contradictory views. Stir the advice and opinions into the cauldron of your own sensibilities, and then make the choices that most closely match "how you breathe."

When you think a thing is finished, set it aside for at least a couple of weeks before you show it to anyone. With me, there is a 'cooling-off' period where the joy of the creation wanes to something more civilized, and I can gird myself for the critical review. I find there is reward in delay—one of the few places in life where procrastination pays.

Finally: lots of paper. Use cheap, recyclable paper and use it back and front, up and down. I write on the computer, but structural editing for me still requires print, unless we are at the finishing stages.

For someone who said she couldn't provide advice, I seem to have a lot: integrity and mentors, patience and paper.

15. Is there anything else about you or your book you'd like to share?

I had fun writing these stories and I hope readers enjoy reading them. They are about loss and love, families and work. I hope people find parts of themselves in here.

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