

The Crannóg Questionnaire

Laura Treacy Bentley

How would you introduce yourself as a writer to those who may not know you?

Poetry is my first love, but I'm also a novelist, picture book writer, and a point-and-shoot photographer. I consider myself a work-in-progress and am always open to new experiences and adventures.

When did you start writing?

I wrote a little in high school and kept a journal, but I really began writing in college. I was active in university theatre, and a few of my actor friends were writers. My first poem was published in Marshall University's student literary magazine *Et Cetera*. It is titled 'The Leaf Man', and I still have a copy of it in my bookcase. Someone even drew a sketch to go along with my poem. Seeing it in print for the first time was life-changing.

Do you have a writing routine?

No, I only write when inspiration keeps tapping me on the shoulder or I have a deadline to meet. In 2020 I managed to write just one semi-commissioned poem, published my first picture book that I wrote years ago, and finished revising my second novel, a literary mystery in search of an agent right now. Creating new work has been almost impossible for

me with the constant threat of Covid-19 and our frightening political unrest.

When you write, do you picture somehow a potential audience or do you just write?

I don't picture an audience at all, but in my mind I'm telling my story to one captivated friend. Some TV journalists say they imagine just one person behind the camera, and I think that makes their words more intimate, real, and conversational.

Some writers describe themselves as planners, while others plunge right in to the writing. Would you consider yourself a planner or a plunger?

It's an organic process for me, and I let my imagination guide me. I'm a writer who likes to be surprised and see where the winding road will lead. I identify with EL Doctorow's famous quote: 'It's like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.'

How important are names to you in your books? Do you choose the names based on liking the way they sound or for the meaning? Do you have any name-choosing resources you recommend?

Names are extremely important to me. I choose them intuitively most of the time, but sometimes I look through an old copy of *Name Your Baby* to get ideas or leads. In my psychological thriller *The Silver Tattoo*, the legend of Cúchulainn is woven into the novel. My modern characters are shadowed by warrior heroes and a queen, so the name Cúchulainn alludes to Conor Howland, Ferdiad/Ferdie, Maeve/Maura, and Badb/Bev, etc.

Is there a certain type of scene that's harder for you to write than others? Love? Action? Erotic?

The hardest ones for me to write are violent or death scenes. Since I become all the characters in my novels, I hurt when they hurt and cry when their life ends.

Tell us a bit about your non-literary work experience, please.

My first job was in high school at a five and dime during Christmas vacation. Later, I worked at a big store in the “Notions” department. I even wrote a poem about it called, appropriately, ‘Notions’. I saved all my money and paid my way through college by working summers as an assistant to a dentist and a clerk typist in Washington DC One year I acted in summer stock in Oakland, Maryland. I’ve also worked as a Lamaze instructor and an educator for almost twenty years. I taught speech and English and was a teacher of the gifted in the public schools. As book editor for *West Virginia Living* magazine, I interviewed noted West Virginia authors, including Cynthia Rylant, Julia Keller, and Jeannette Walls.

What do you like to read in your free time?

This year has, unfortunately, brought my reading of novels to a dead stop. I am so consumed with the pandemic and a potential civil war that I can’t concentrate on a plot. I hope that I can return to reading when things are under control.

What one book do you wish you had written?

So many! To start with I’d choose *Fahrenheit 451*, *Rebecca*, and *Station Eleven*.

Do you see writing short stories as practice for writing novels?

I don’t. Short-story writers sometimes go on to write novels, but many novelists never write short stories first. It’s not necessarily a training ground.

Do you think writers have a social role to play in society or is their role solely artistic?

Sometimes one or both. It depends on the writer.

Tell us something about your latest publication, please.

My latest poem ‘Percussion’ appeared in the Autumn 2020 issue of *Crannóg*. My first picture book, *Sir Grace and the Big Blizzard*, was released this summer.

Can writing be taught?

I think it can definitely spark the fire of creativity, but magic is often the wellspring of great writing, and magic can't be taught.

Have you given or attended creative writing workshops and if you have, share your experiences a bit, please?

I attended workshops in the United States and Ireland. Notably, I studied with Carol Frost at the Vermont Studio Centre, with Irish poets at the Dublin Writing Centre, and with Billy Collins at NUIG. I have led writing workshops for West Virginia Writers, Allegheny Echoes, West Virginia Governor's School for the Arts, and at Marshall University, among others.

By necessity, I have always travelled alone, and I think by doing this, the entire experience is intensified. Everything seems more magnified, wondrous, daunting, and important. It gave me the luxury of solitude, reflection, time to write and fuel up for future work.

Flash Fiction: how driven is the popularity of this form by social media like Twitter and its word limits? Do you see Twitter as somehow leading to shorter fiction?

Perhaps, but I think Twitter lends itself more to poetry, especially haiku. Here's a short poem that I published on Twitter a few years ago:

*Is Twitter/simply random poems/compelling us to reveal/and distil
our storied lives/before they all scroll away?*

Finally, what question do you wish that someone would ask about your writing, and how would you answer it?

That's a tough question. Maybe what is my signature poem or a poem that electrifies me with its power, truth, and magic? For me, Yusef Komunyakaa's poem 'Facing It' takes my breath away every time I read it.