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Posted on Tue, Jul. 25, 2006

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Opening chapters

Alicia Conroy and Patti Frazee, who both live in Minneapolis and began writing seriously as adults, are celebrating publication of their debut fiction. Conroy shows her skills in her short-story collection, 'Lives of Mapmakers' (Carnegie Mellon University Press, \$16.96), and Frazee tells of heartbreak among circus folk in her novel, 'Cirkus' (Alyson Books, \$24.95). They will read Wednesday in a Local Motion program that showcases writers who teach at the Loft writers center.

PATTIE FRAZEE: GYPSIES IN A SMALL TOWN

When Patti Frazee was growing up in a small Nebraska town, Gypsies would camp at the local lake every summer. Grown-ups told Patti, who was working at a grocery store, that the Gypsies would try to divert her attention while she was making change.

But Frazee never had any problem with the Romani, whose visits she enjoyed.

"I was intrigued by their dress, their relationships to each other," Frazee recalls. "I was already the writer who wanted to stand back and people-watch, not worry about making change."

Frazee drew on those childhood memories when she began writing "Cirkus," her poignant and sometimes-magical novel about "freaks" working in a Czech circus traveling through the American Midwest in 1900. (Frazee's mother is Czech.)

Mariana is a Gypsy fortuneteller married to the circus' manager, Jakub. Mariana is afraid of the show's freaks (also called "anomalies"), but she is half in love with Shanghai, a fire-eating dwarf who pines for a trapeze flier. Shanghai doesn't realize Mariana has cast a spell on him so he will forget his former lover, now married to someone else.

Into this emotional mix come conjoined twins Atasha and Anna, who share two arms and three legs. Atasha and Shanghai fall in love, while Anna pines for Jakub. As the circus moves through small towns, the characters become enmeshed in cruelty, sorrows and sweetness, fueled by Shanghai's surprising secret.

Frazee spent two years researching circus history, including visits to the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wis.

"The librarian at Baraboo told me a Gypsy fortune teller would never have been part of a circus at this time, because religious groups were watchdogging circuses, and a Gypsy would have been a symbol of a low-end circus," she says. "But I didn't want to give Mariana up as a character, because she was complex and challenged me as a writer. So, I decided to give the problem to her, and this fueled all sorts of conflict I never would have expected. Mariana ends up in the sideshow, stripped of her power."

Frazee says Mariana feels like an outsider, both in the circus and because the dominant culture was afraid of Gypsies.



CHRIS POLYDOROFF/Pioneer Press

Alicia Conroy, standing, and Patti Frazee pause on the grand staircase of the Open Book literary building in Minneapolis, home of the Loft writers center, where they teach.

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"That part of Mariana is me," Frazee says, recalling her feelings of being an outsider as she tried to hide her sexual orientation while growing up in conservative Nebraska.

"I knew I was different when I was really young. I used to watch Rock Hudson movies and think, 'Now, if I was Rock Hudson, I would do this to get Doris Day. I was always a tomboy, never dated, never wanted to talk about boys.'"

Frazee holds a college degree in theater and worked at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in Williamstown, Mass. Among the aspiring young actors she read with was Peri Gilpin, who later played Roz on the television show "Frasier."

"I always wanted to write, but I thought I wouldn't be able to make a living at it, and I didn't have the knowledge or experience to write fiction," Frazee says, explaining why she turned to the stage instead of the page when she was younger.

"Writing was also very personal to me in that part of my life, and I wasn't comfortable sharing it with other people. Theater, for some weird reason, seemed easier to me. I could express myself without making myself as vulnerable as I need to be in writing."

Frazee came to Minneapolis in 1990 to check out the local theater scene, and she felt at home as soon as she arrived. Two years later, she had a bad bicycle accident that ruptured her spleen and put her in the hospital.

"That was a wake-up call," she says. "I was battling depression from physical pain and the grief of losing an organ, and I started re-analyzing my life. I knew I needed to change my career path and come into who I was. That's when I came out (as a lesbian), thanks to a support group at Chrysalis women's center." (Later this summer, she's moving into her partner's South Minneapolis home.)

Frazee also got serious about writing, eventually earning a master of fine arts degree from Hamline University, where her work was praised by local authors/instructors Judith Katz and Mary Rockcastle.

"Cirkus" was originally written as a play, but Frazee had a hard time figuring out how to stage a production featuring a fire-eating dwarf and three-legged conjoined twins. The story really came alive when she realized it was a novel.

"Cirkus," which Frazee pronounces seer-koos, is published by Alyson Press, known for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual writing.

"They want 'Cirkus' to be a crossover book that appeals to a wide audience," Frazee says of her publisher. "They want to put it in the hands of someone in Iowa, in Oregon, in Nebraska."

PATTI FRAZEE

Age: 43

Childhood: Grew up in Fremont, Neb., daughter of the late Robert Frazee, a salesman, and Joan Frazee, nurse's aide and secretary. Three sisters, two brothers.

Education: B.A. in theater from University of Nebraska/Kearney; M.F.A., Hamline University, St. Paul.

Publications/awards: Work published in Water-Stone Review; honorable mention, Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice 2005 Emerging Lesbian Writer's Fund

Advice to writing students: "Let your imagination go wild. People need to let themselves write and try not to edit or censor. Writing is a muscle; you have to practice."

ALICIA CONROY: 'STORIES THAT GO OFF KILTER'

Alicia Conroy's short story "Mud-Colored Beauties of the Plains" may be the first ever written about a Midwestern river mermaid:

"All over, the creature was an olive-tan color, from hair to tail, slightly deeper at the tail-tip. It surely wasn't a picture-book mermaid — there was no brightly scaled trunk, no whale-like flipper, nothing voluptuously female and human ... "

That's Conroy's description of Twee, the creature who is found in the nearly dry river by schoolchildren, learns to speak and hunger for knowledge and is returned to her cold habitat.

"Mud-Colored Beauties" is part fairy tale, part cautionary tale about the environment and

our treatment of other animals. It is one of the most mythic of the 11 stories in Conroy's collection, "Lives of Mapmakers."

"I am fascinated by writers who have a perspective that ties their collection together," Conroy says. "I don't know that I'd put mine in the top 10. Once I started picking stories for the collection, I noticed it has a loose theme of exploration and discovery and finding your way in the world. Sometimes, the theme is very literal. Other times, it's more psychological or emotional. Several stories explore how you tell a story in different modes in different voices."

The most realistic story in the collection is "Bad Hand," in which a man with a deformed hand is infatuated with a store clerk while discovering how to relate to other people. The most mythic is "Women Who Dream of Corn," about brown-skinned fruit-pickers who dream of standing tall and being planted, like cornstalks, instead of stooping and moving constantly. The title story is literal and figurative, as it tells of explorers and the maps they made.

Conroy worked in nonprofit communications and public relations in the Boston area for 13 years after she graduated from Mount Holyoke College, but writing was always in the back of her mind.

"I have been scribbling away since I was 9 or 10, always writing in some fashion, whether it was for the high school or college newspaper or writing essays," she recalls. "I got away from writing fiction in college and came back to it when I was out of college for a couple of years. I had applied for M.F.A. programs in my 20s but didn't get in. So, I took writing classes through community ed programs and in little local workshops. I came back to thinking that it would be good to put concentrated time into writing."

Conroy received her master of fine arts degree in 2000, found the teaching market competitive and decided to move back to her native Minneapolis. When she met Christopher Schmid, to whom she just got engaged, she "decided to stick around." She has been making a living teaching English at local colleges and doing freelance magazine and business writing.

Early versions of several of the stories in "Lives of Mapmakers" were written when Conroy was in graduate school.

"When you are in school, there is an emphasis on short pieces because they are easier to craft, discuss and complete," she says, explaining why she turned to writing short fiction.

"Stories come to me in two ways. Most frequently, I'll start with an image or a strong character that comes from a semiconscious or unconscious place, and I am writing to see where it goes. Once I see where it's going, hit some dead ends and work around them, I go back and craft and shape the story. Occasionally, I get the gift of seeing the whole span of the story early on. But that's rare for me."

Conroy says her stories' path to publication should be encouraging to emerging writers.

An earlier version of her collection was being circulated by her agent, drawing a lot of compliments but no takers.

"I started looking at the collection and realized some of my strengths are stories that go off kilter in different directions. So, I pulled some of the realist ones," she says. "I sent the manuscript over the transom to Carnegie Mellon, and six or seven months later, I got a letter saying they'd publish it. So, there is hope for the unagented writer."

Conroy is enthusiastic about teaching a new course at the Loft about using myth to inspire writing.

"Myth has always been a powerful inspiration to me in often unconscious ways," she says. "I think that connection to deep-seated ideas about transcendence and mystery is what we miss in contemporary realism in writing, which is devoted to psychology and material culture. Jung would say you can't see or represent the transcendent. So, what do you have? Emblems, motifs, story as old as humanity."

Mary Ann Grossmann can be reached at mgrossmann@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5574. ALICIA CONROY

Age: 42

Childhood: Born and raised in Minneapolis, daughter of the late Lawrence E. Conroy, University of Minnesota chemistry professor, and Nancy Conroy, free-lance

photographer. Brothers: Ethan, St. Paul; Peter, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Education: Graduated from Marshall-University High School; B.A., Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Mass.; M.F.A., Bowling Green State University (Ohio).

Publications/awards: Short stories in literary journals, including Ploughshares, Puerto del Sol, Ontario Review; 2005 honorable mention from Pushcart Prizes; College of St. Catherine Denny Prize for distinguished faculty writing; 2006 Jerome Foundation Travel Grant.

Advice to writing students: "Read a lot, different kinds of writers. Write a lot and try to find writers or readers who respect your work and can give helpful feedback."

What: Alicia Conroy/Patti Frazee reading

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Open Book, 1011 Washington Ave. S., Mpls.

Cost: Free
