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Arktoi Books

AN IMPRINT OF RED HEN PRESS / P. O. BOX 3537 / GRANADA HILLS, CA 91394 / (818) 831-0649

A Conversation with Catherine Kirkwood author of

Cut Away: A Novel

In this novel, you deftly braid the lives of three very unique and different characters. How did you manage to enter so deeply into the mind of each one and tell their story through the first person point-of-view?

Point of view is an exploratory tool for me. It's not uncommon for me to re-write a piece from first person in third person, or vice versa, or—when I get stuck—to break from one point of view and move into another. Getting into a character's head for me is a matter of sifting the story through different points of view and different verb tenses to see what falls away and what stays essential. Once that is in place, I look for the point of view that tells the story best. For *Cut Away*, first person point-of-view allowed me to create a deeper sense of inchoate yearning in each person—a felt experience of absence—and this was very central to the story's mood.

Alexandra is a transgendered person who lives as a woman but refuses surgery. In the novel, she's faced with quite an extensive amount of discrimination from her community and pressure to undergo complete physical transformation. What obstacles did you overcome as an author to give yourself the authority to write her story?

If we write only about what we know and what we have experienced I think we miss the most exciting part of fiction—the chance to discover a story that comes from a place deeper inside, a place that can't be explicitly named. For me, researching a subject or a type of person is useful in making things credible to the reader, but the most important part to me in understanding the character is understanding what draws me, personally, to want to live with them in my head for years. Alexandra is someone who still lives in my head; she is a very compelling character to me and, because of this, I wrote her story.

But it is not that simple. This question of authority is complex and followed me doggedly from the moment I conceived of her character until the story reached near final form. Voices from the transgendered community are silenced by those who are not transgendered, their stories are rewritten by those who are not transgendered. As someone who is not transgendered, I walked a very fine line in creating a character who was authentic, one that did not contribute to stereotyping or silencing. I had some help from some fantastic transgendered writers. Most notable are the works of Rachel Pollack and Kate Bornstein that helped me understand that claiming one's gender is an act of enormous passion. It was this which woke me up to what I was drawn to in Alexandra's character and helped me follow a vein in her development I did not foresee at the outset—that she was not only claiming her own gender identity but also a physical construct of that gender which transcended norms. This passion to continue becoming what she knows to be herself is beautiful to me. Once I found this part of her, I began listening more closely to the beauty and vitality of her story, rather than trying to write what I thought she should be about. Does that make hers an authentic transgendered voice? That's debatable. But when the shift happened, I felt I had maybe not authority but a kind of honesty in myself that made the risk worth taking.

When asked to describe your book in a sentence, you say that it is “about whether identity resides in the body, whether changing the body changes our identities, and whether such a change brings us closer to or further from truth of who we are.” This is certainly true; this is precisely the central core of issues in your novel. So tell me: after you've been through the process of seeing each character through this story, what is your answer to some of those difficult questions raised by your novel?

(Continued on back)

The trick to writing *Cut Away* was to let go of thinking I would find an answer to this question and to instead focus on exploring the deep yearning that runs beneath the desire to be one's true self. I think we are impressionable beings. We live in a world where the possibilities for change are constantly in our faces. We are also inundated by images of what we should or could look like from the clothes we wear, to body shape. We are saturated by the luxury of living in a culture of self-engrossment, one in which the question "who or what is my true self" can be asked. Possibilities for change are so accessible, so easily consumable. For many people, although not all, the fact that we can change at least on the surface I think goes a long way toward creating need to do so, and then we are stuck with trying to figure out what that need means to us. In the end, I suspect our identities—at least in the U.S.—are shaped more by this need than any action we take to fill it. But there's a silver lining—there are those rare few who see through the clutter of possibilities, grab hold of what matters, and make something meaningful.

*You authored a book in 1993 called **Leaving Abusive Partners: From the Scars of Survival to the Wisdom for Change**. Could you briefly talk about this book? And has the work you did for this text influenced or informed the writing you've done for this novel?*

That work came out of interviews with survivors of domestic violence from research for a doctorate in Women's Studies. I think in some ways I was asking the same general questions in that research that I am in *Cut Away*: How mutable is identity? Do we have the power to change our identity or are we simply constructing or deconstructing an immutable identity? In *Leaving Abusive Partners*, I was concerned with how women revisited their experiences of abuse through an evolving perspective, gradually redefining their experiences and responses within the context of being survivors rather than victims. This was the way in which they transformed aspects of shame and degradation that once seemed to define who they were. In *Cut Away*, I ask the question in a different way and I take a little more license in looking at instances in which transforming identity may be more about self-delusion than empowerment.

There is another way the two books are connected. I remember when I started studying Women's Studies how exciting it was that the discipline asked questions that weren't asked anywhere else. I remember looking at the books and thinking if I read them all, I'd have the answers. I would be able to figure out something essential. To an extent that was true, but in my own research and writing, I found myself more drawn to subtleties and uniqueness of the stories women told me than to the generalities I could pull from their similarities. For example, I would be fascinated by dream imagery or simply the tenor or rhythm of a woman's voice when she spoke of certain things. None of this could be quantified or addressed adequately in a theoretical framework—or at least I was not capable of doing so. For me, this is where fiction shines. It has the ability to characterize felt experiences and allows unanswered questions to reside within our understanding of ourselves. In many ways, my frustrations with writing *Leaving Abusive Partners* made me look for other ways to contribute my perceptions to the world. That way ultimately became fiction writing and *Cut Away*.

This is your debut novel, and the third edition published by Arktoi Books. One of the goals of this imprint is to publish lesbian authors in order to involve them further "in the conversation." What does this mean to you?

There are gates that open to a writer once her first book is published. It's like getting a graduate degree in any other field. As a novelist, you may or may not need the degree but once you have the published book, you have credentials. Being published is a ticket to being asked questions like this, for example, to having an audience, to teaching, to speaking on literary discussion panels. It is a very real invitation to join the public discourse which shapes our understanding of literature and its evolution.

The idea of "the conversation" also speaks to how writers write. My best writing is almost always inspired by something someone else wrote. I read a book, get fascinated by how something was accomplished and then start looking at how my own writing achieves similar goals or falls short and why. Or I just get a rhythm or a mood off something I've read and it inspires my own work. I don't see how I could write without the conversation that goes on between written works. That my novel is available now to other writers, and may influence others' work in the same manner that mine was influenced, is tremendously gratifying. This is another very exciting way in which Arktoi has involved me further in the conversation.

Title: *Cut Away*

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Publication Date: April 1, 2010

ISBN: Trade paper 978-0-9800407-9-1

Price: \$18.00

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Distributed to the trade by:
Small Press Distribution
1341 7th Street
Berkeley, CA 94710
(800) 869-7553
www.spdbooks.org