

Interviews

Interview with
Leonora Desar

NEW INTERVIEW SERIES WITH THE BEST MICROFICTION WRITERS

Steven John, Associate & Features Editor, interviews Leonora Desar about her flash fictions in *Best Microfiction 2019*, edited by Meg Pokrass and Gary Fincke, judged by Dan Chaon, published by Pelekinesis

SJ: Please tell us about how and when you first started writing flash fiction.

I went to j-school, or journalism school for long. During my last term, I had this professor. He did NOT say: Go write fiction, Leonora, do well and prosper. But he did give me the tools, otherwise known as *Best American Short Stories*. We were to take its tools for journalism: dialogue, scene-setting, etc. I said, that's nice. Then I wrote about these witches. They did things. I thought: this is amazing.

(Knock, Knock)

Fiction gatekeeper:

Thank you for submitting to our magazine. These witches are not for us.

(!) (Door slamming shut sound)

I kept going. Now there were some sorcerers, a boy who disappeared. He was NOT a sorcerer, he came from this place: Magical Realism County (where sci-fi puts on some fancy clothes)

SmokeLong became my bible. I did everything short of sleeping with it beneath my pillow, and I probably would've tried that, too, other than the whole screen/Internet thing.

I loved flash. I loved its emphasis on language. I'd written my share of bad poetry back in the day, and here was a chance to right a wrong. I wouldn't write bad poetry. I'd write Meaningful Flash. My initial efforts were pretty heavy on the semicolons.

I also liked that you could write it fast (theoretically), and end up with a finished product (also theoretically). It was weird and I like weird, but more than that, there was this Feeling. Often, when I wrote things, it nagged. I'd think, this is weird (✓), this is different (✓), there's a fancy monster, here (✓), but there'd be something absent, an indelible kind of thing. Later, I'd learn the word for this, which was Resonance.

This, this was flash's heart blood. It was like going to see an action or horror flick and thinking it was all about the monsters. Then, a few hours or two later, it hits you. The film's soul. It wasn't those monsters, after all. It was the amazing script, the cast, that music churning in the back. They all added up to something and when you tried picking them apart, well—

You'd have a formula but the magic might disappear.

SJ: In your first two stories in Best Microfiction 'Fire, Ocean' and 'My Father's Girlfriend' your use of extraordinary metaphor is pivotal. In 'Fire, Ocean' your parents are the fire and water, and in 'My Father's Girlfriend' the girlfriend's moods and actions are described with different telephone ring tones. Can you tell something about your creative process—where do the ideas spring from?

I wish I knew where my ideas come from, then I could hijack them all the time. I'd camp out in Leonora Ideaville vs. what I really do, which is to write blindly, hoping something will come.

I spent a year, actually more, not writing. When I came back to it my ideas were in this little waiting area. They became impatient, they said, when is this woman going to get her crap together?

They poured out. It was kind of annoying. I was falling asleep and one would come. Once, it was these two parents dressed in Santa suits.

What are you doing here? I'm asleep.

No, you're not. Isn't that your notebook, over there?

Another time it was a woman. She'd been watching *The Bachelor*.

Then her husband came. He had this shovel and two plots. Burial plots. They watched *The Bachelor*, then he buried her. Oh crap, I thought.

This calmed down after awhile. Now I kind of do the opposite. I go to the diner and write about boring stuff, hoping it'll lead me Somewhere Else. My favorite stories tend to work that way. They begin, etched in realism, and find their way to the magical and surreal—if I'm lucky, that is.

SJ: In your third story 'The Monkey' you venture into surreal territory. How does the short form lend itself to the surreal and abstract, and again, what inspiration do you use to conjure those images.

I tend to write about my life a lot. Unfortunately, my life is kind of typical.

Youth:

-dysfunctional family (✓)

-weird-but-not-so-weird-they're-fascinating parents (✓)

-lots of Longing and Yearning, the desire to be Somewhere Else (✓)

Surrealism is my way of doing that. Of taking what's weird-but-not-fascinating and making it weirder and more fascinating. It's also a way of getting to Something Else, an indescribable Something.

For instance, it's one thing to say: I suck at business meetings. It's another to show how you shrink*, Ally McBeal style—every time your boss gives you a look, or when you show up at your bossy mother-in-law's.

Taking a feeling and making it literal, I thought. That's the ticket. In my world, cheating fathers become literal, on-fire, Phil-Collins' loving monsters. In "The Monkey," darkness between a couple becomes tactile. In this case, a domesticated monkey who likes game shows.

Surrealism works for the short form. The long form. Hell, Kafka said, it works for the novel, too. Even my diary entries traffic in the surreal. Maybe this is my way of trying to spice things up.

* I'm talking literal, actual shrinkage here. Think *Honey I Shrank the Kids*. Or *The Fly*, wait, no, wrong movie: *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. My point: the feeling here (inside) becomes manifest here a(external).

SJ: I couldn't do this interview without picking these two superb opening sentences from 'Fire, Ocean.' telling us all we need to know about the character.

"My father comes from fire. At night I can hear his steam, twisting his irises into candlewicks."

How important is word economy with forming a character or setting a scene. Can we expand a little in writing flash?

Expand a little but trust the reader. Don't exposition-dump. Have fun. The last thing is the most important.

By fun I mean, what excites you? I like humor. Metaphor. I like taking it down a notch, meaning I don't want to get too ahead of myself. I used to try being a Serious Literary Writer. This was not fun. As a consequence, my writing wasn't much fun, either.

By having fun, it's a win-win (sometimes). You write what you love. Editors publish you (maybe).

SJ: Once you have your initial draft down on paper, please talk us through your editing routine.

Editing is my Voldemort. If I think or talk about or analyze it too much, I make things worse.

I think editing can be like Jennifer Grey. Her nose job. You can make the sentences seemingly more lovely, more in ratio. You can have beautiful things happening at the sentence level, but then something happens. The indescribable, indecipherable thing gets taken out. The magic, if you will. That's my big beef with editing.

Also: in flash, editing at the sentence level is a (!@?). It's like doing construction on a tiny house, or better yet, a tiny dollhouse. Once you overhaul the toilet, there's the kitchen, and once you do the kitchen there's the kitchen sink, and the window and the tiny tulip bushes outside.

Deconstructing/changing one thing can immediately and powerfully affect the other.

My favorite editing advice is to rewrite a draft: from scratch. I absolutely hate this. But it's really great advice. I got this from Nancy Stohlman, she advises that you don't even LOOK at the original when rewriting. You start fresh. Terrifying, right?

When editing, I try not to think about the sentences. I try to think about the way they make me feel. Is the *Dirty Dancing* effect there, the mojo, or is it just doing the cha-cha with the boss' son?



SJ: You often write about your characters sexuality and sexual 'foibles'. How should we as writers approach sex in short fiction. What are the 'do's and 'don't's?

I'm actually not so great with sex stuff, writing it, that is. I tip-toe like it's some Boogey monster. I write about its chin, its poignant look. I say: wow, Sex sure has it going on!

In other words, I act like I'm 12. 13, tops.

My advice: don't be scared like me. Sit in the Boogeyman's lap and eat some candy. Be honest—always. This is the most important thing. Not necessarily about the you-know-what, but the emotion, the absurdity. Is it all orgasms and roses? Or is it more like FARTS and roses?

Also: you don't need to rewrite *Deep Throat*. Be specific, but discerning. An artful, handicapped detail can mask a SCOTG (Serious Case of the Giggles).

SJ: Your own writing career started at a young youngish age. With the benefit of hindsight, what single piece of advice would you give to a young person looking to develop their craft?

Have hubris. Being a writer is oscillating from here:

I'm God's greatest gift!!!

To here:

Land of Suckatude (and Eternal Stench*)

Try to err on the side of God, or hubris in this case. It might be the thing—the only thing—that gets you through those first weeks, months, years, of rejections.

PS: You might want to keep this to yourself.

What NOT to do:

Dear editor:

I am God's Greatest Gift. Please publish this.

Sincerely,

Me

Have hubris but don't be an asshole.

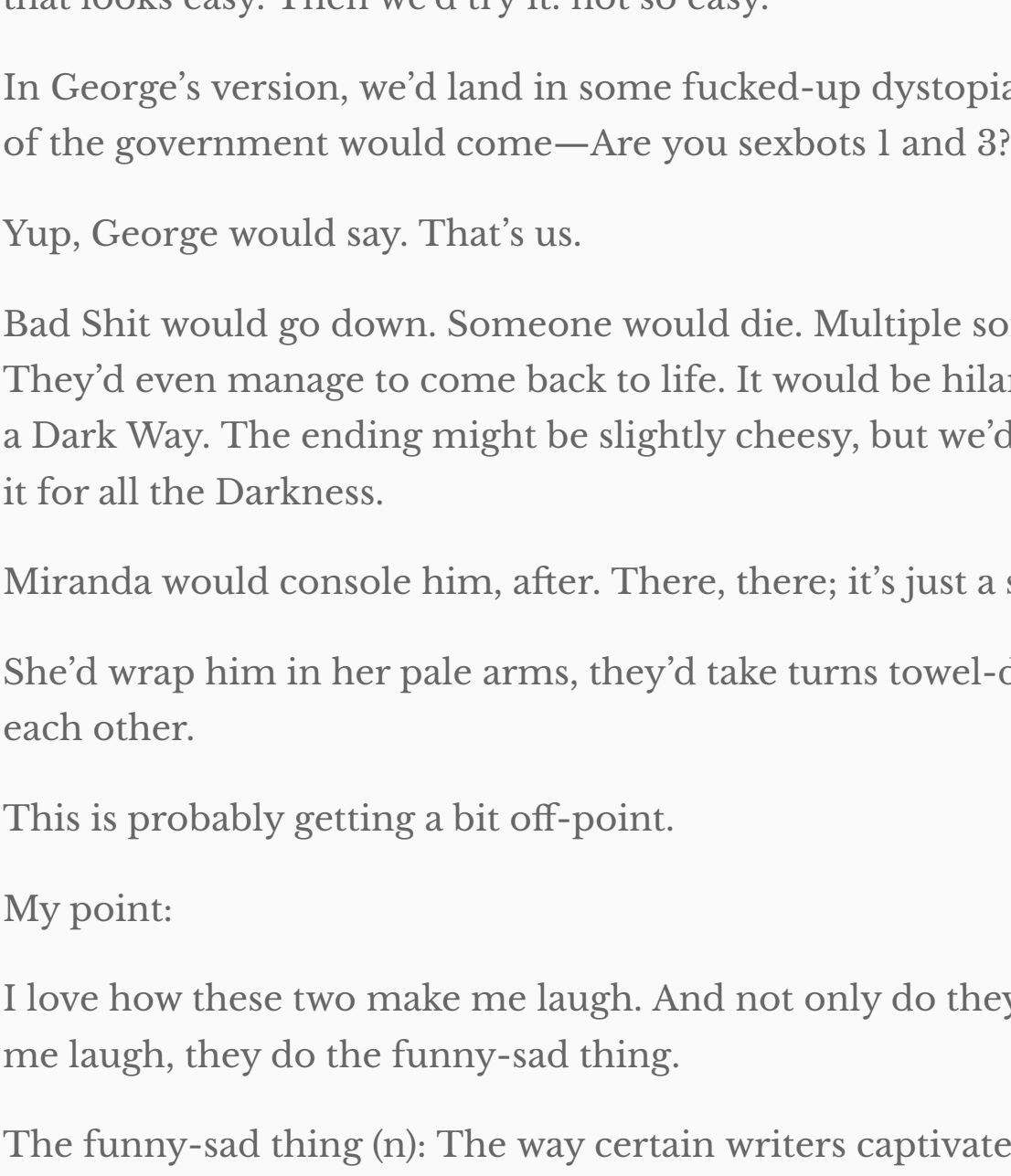
Also: writing's magic. This is both good and bad. Good: magic is awesome. Bad: you can't always control it.

You don't plan it, it plans you. That's why it's important to read. A lot. I had this professor, he had us do "copywork," meaning he had us handwrite stuff we liked. This was to drill those magic rhythms in our heads, and the great thing was, you didn't need any drawing talent.

Identify what you love in writing. Keep it close and imitate it and sneak it beneath your pillow, at night. By identifying what we love in writing we get at what we want to do. We may not sound like our heroes, but we may end up sounding more like us.

PS. This doesn't mean plagiarize. Don't do that.

Imitating 101: That writer is funny, I wish I could be funny.



We can:

a) read and say, a-ha! Writer X used a lot of absurdism/juxtaposition, that's a craft too!! (Wheels turning. Flashbulb!!!)

-OR-

b) We can just read her and have fun. I actually think this works best—By reading we subconsciously internalize good stuff.

* Eternal Stench Place: Where I still take yearly sabbaticals.

SJ: Are you a morning lark or a night owl writer? Do you follow any strict writing routine?

I used to think I was a night owl. I'd stay up late late, writing and scribbling, marveling at how much energy I had. Then I quit coffee. Turned out I wasn't a night owl so much at all. I was a cranky pigeon.

This question is making me realize how much I need my act together, routine-wise. I have tons of stuff. In diaries. My phone. I stole these greeting cards my husband bought. Well, I repurposed them. I had this idea, it was 3 am, I had to write it. NOW—

So I wrote it over Santa. He was unthrilled. (Santa was, I never told my husband. If you're reading this, sorry!)

Now maybe because of karma, I can't read any of it. It doesn't help that I have lousy handwriting.

It's like having pieces of yourself scattered. An arm here. A leg there. Now, of course, instead of organizing, I'd rather make it a story.

SJ: Flash fiction writers now have a bewildering choice of online literary magazines and competitions where they can submit. How to you go about making the best choice? Should we carefully target our approach, or is the 'scattergun' the safest way?

Targeting is good. Not only in saving \$\$\$ but in hedging a good outcome. Read the stuff you love. Submit there. Some of the best advice I ever heard on this came from *River Styx*'s (don't submit there, not if you don't love the work.

There was a very cool journal that used to reject me. I tried writing cool, to please them. They saw right through me: "This woman is so Uncool. Let's steal her lunch \$\$\$"

I tried again. I wrote something even cooler. Nope, they said. Still not cool. I tried NOT being cool, hoping it would have the opposite effect. It didn't. Eventually I accepted things. I was not cool. Weird maybe, but uncool. It was the worst; the stoners don't like you but neither do the geeky math kids.

I knew what I'd have to do. My goal, journal-wise, would be this:

-Weird/funny but totally unhip

-Self-deprecating

-Big fan of The List

-That, or very gullible/more easily deceived.

SJ: If you could pick your writing Godfather and Godmother (past or present) who would they be and why?

George Saunders and Miranda July—

I imagine them in a room somewhere, taking baths. George says, can you soap my feet Miranda, and Miranda says, not on your life, George. They wear old-timey swimsuits and bathing caps. Sometimes he reads the paper. She smokes an old-fashioned cigarette. They bounce ideas off each other, talking about the weather, the state of the world. They want to understand each other, badly. He makes a joke. She laughs. They get bored and play water polo, which is essentially ping pong in a bathtub.

In Miranda's version of this story, nothing much would happen. But we'd feel Profound Connection, the language would be extraordinary in a completely unobtrusive way. We'd think, man that reads easy. Then we'd try it: not so easy.

In George's version, we'd land in some fucked-up dystopia. Agents of the government would come—Are you sexbots 1 and 3?

Yup, George would say. That's us.

Bad Shit would go down. Someone would die. Multiple someones. They'd even manage to come back to life. It would be hilarious, in a Dark Way. The ending might be slightly cheesy, but we'd forgive it for all the Darkness.

Miranda would console him, after. There, there; it's just a story.

She'd wrap him in her pale arms, they'd take turns towel-drying each other.

This is probably getting a bit off-point.

My point:

I love how these two make me laugh. And not only do they make me laugh, they do the funny-sad thing.

The funny-sad thing (n): The way certain writers captivate readers by disguising something Incredibly Deep using humor. It's poignant, it's profound, but it never says it, I'm profound.

George: I'm just some guy with a mustache who says "like" a lot.

Miranda: I'm just someone who bathes with George, here.

But they're wrong. They're lying. Funny-sad, that's what these two are up to. They take the Deep Thing and put sweets in it, not unlike a mom who wants you to take your vegetables.

Here, little Leonora. This isn't broccoli. It's chocolate.

Leonora Desar's writing has appeared in *River Styx*, *Passages North*, *Mid-American Review*, *Black Warrior Review Online*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Wigleaf* and *Wigleaf's* Top 50, and elsewhere. Her matchbook piece "My Father's Girlfriend" is forthcoming in *The Best Small Fictions 2019*. Three of her pieces were chosen for *Best Microfiction 2019*. She won third place in *River Styx's* 2018 microfiction contest, and was a runner-up/finalist in *Quarter After Eight's* Robert J. DeMott Short Prose contest, judged by Stuart Dybek. She lives in Brooklyn. She writes odd and sometimes practical advice for *New Flash Fiction Review*—[Dear Leo](#)

Features & Fiction Editor – Steven John

