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Interview with Brenda Miller

MARCIA ALDRICH

Brenda Miller is an Associate Professor of English at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Bellingham Review*. Her first book, *Season of the Body: Essays* (Sarabande Books, 2002), was a finalist for the PEN American Center Book Award. She has received an impressive five Pushcart Prizes for her work in creative nonfiction, and her essays have appeared in such periodicals as the *Georgia Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Fourth Genre*, *The Sun*, and *Agni Online*. She is the coauthor with Suzanne Paola of a textbook, *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (McGraw-Hill, 2003). Her newest collection of essays, *Blessing of the Animals*, appeared in February 2009 from Eastern Washington University Press. Much of what follows focuses on Brenda's substantial knowledge of the lyric essay, gained through years of explorations in the form, as a writer, teacher, and editor.

In late March 2007, Brenda Miller visited the campus of Michigan State University as the invited judge of the Department of English's annual creative-writing awards event. As part of her campus visit, Brenda visited a graduate creative-nonfiction workshop, where she graciously allowed herself to be interviewed. We had read *Season of the Body* and her textbook, *Tell It Slant*, in preparation for the visit and prepared pages and pages of questions for Brenda to answer. Luckily for Brenda, the interview period did not stretch into eternity, or we'd still be sitting in that overheated classroom with snow banked up to the windows. What follows is an edited version of that session. I'd like to identify the particular students whose questions Brenda fielded so

adeptly: Stefanie Spiro, Laural Adams, Lauren Linsalata, Michael Langdon, Katherine Whitney, Daisy Levy, Hannah Rule, and Stephen Naumann.

SPIRO: Many essays in *Season of the Body* are what we call “segmented.” You obviously have a fondness for various approaches to segmentation. How do you view the relationship between form and content in these essays?

MILLER: The segmented essay sometimes provides a way into material that you otherwise might not be able to approach in a straightforward manner. I sometimes call it “peripheral vision.” You sidle up sideways to your material, and then it isn’t as scary. The story often doesn’t feel as personally attached to you in the way it can if you’re trying to write it as a traditional narrative, which can give the impression that you know something already. The lyric forms seem more predicated on what you *don’t* know yet about your experience. Through the lyric form, you’re working your way towards an answer, and the form itself has a lot of gaps, has a lot of silence built into it.

It also allows you to have a kind of shifting attention that can feel more “real” than narrative. In our daily lives, we rarely experience things as one complete story; it’s always fragmented. The lyric forms can sometimes get at a deeper truth. Of course, even in more linear essays, there can still be room for questioning and diverging and meandering, but they tend to give the impression that it’s essentially a straight journey from point A to point B, especially if there are no gaps, no white space, no room to reflect, on both the writer’s part and the reader’s part. Lyric essays allow a little more opportunity for making surprising connections that you might not make otherwise.

When you write a segmented piece, there are always so many ways you can keep conceptualizing the material over and over, just by shifting the order of the sections. Or, you see a metaphor emerging in one section that you can bring out in another section, and that becomes the overriding metaphor of the essay—you can then go back and shift the other sections to align with that metaphor. It can go on forever. It feels like an unending process. Even when you’re *reading* a lyric essay, it feels like it’s still in process, as though it hasn’t been finished, even if it has a highly crafted quality; it still hasn’t really been put together until you put it together as the reader. And even

if you read it once, you might read it a few years later, and it seems like a totally different essay because now you're picking up on different sections. It's an exciting form.

ADAMS: In “A Thousand Buddhas,” how did you know all the events made one cohesive essay? Is that how you experienced them? How did they cohere during the creative process?

MILLER: I didn't really know. “A Thousand Buddhas” was the first prototype for me of the braided essay, and I wrote it after reading some Albert Goldbarth essays. He's a poet, but also an amazing essayist. If you haven't read it already, Goldbarth's “After Yitzle” is for me the foundational braided essay. “A Thousand Buddhas” was an experiment, a challenge for me to write in this form. I put together a lot of fragments that I had rolling around on my computer. I thought it was an essay about being a massage therapist, and then I saw it was an essay about *not* being a massage therapist, and that's when it really started to cohere, when it defied my own expectations. That's another thing a lyric essay does—it defies your own expectations of what you think your writing is about.

Instinctively, I knew I needed to find some overriding metaphor that wasn't even about my own experience, and what came up was this image of the hands. Once you notice such an image, then you can start highlighting it and using it as a “stitch” between sections. Then it not only becomes an essay about disparate personal experiences, it also becomes an essay about hands and how we use our hands. Not only my hands, but your hands.

The braided form also allowed me to use my imagination in a way that I had never used it before. There's a lot of fantasy in that essay, a lot of imagination. The lyric essay, as a form, signals your reader that you're creating an artifact of your experience and shaping it in some way. Your aim, your intention, is not to transcribe your experience in a factual manner. You're not reading for the facts in this particular piece, you're reading for the artifice, the artifact that comes out of experience.

ALDRICH: Were the segments you gathered in “A Thousand Buddhas” written over a long period of time, or within a fairly focused period of writing time?

MILLER: I think one of the sections in this essay started as a writing exercise that I did during a class where I was trying to imitate word for word a passage from a novella by Jane Smiley. I was trying to get her syntax, and I was trying to master the long sentence. The scenes with my godson and the birthing imagery were probably written a lot earlier. I drafted that essay for a class at the University of Montana during my MFA program, but I'd been tinkering with it for years and years, and even now, when I look at the essay in the book, there are things I would still change. Do you know about the painter Pierre Bonnard, who would go into galleries where his paintings were hanging with a palette hidden in his coat, and he would change things? Now they call it "bonnarding." I always want to do that with my essays.

LINSALATA: Can you talk about the organization of *Season of the Body* as a series of connected essays? What was it about the material and the writing process that led you to call it a collection of essays rather than memoir?

MILLER: The book went through many different versions before it settled on this particular form, and even as it was going into production, I was writing new essays as well. I'd think: oh, this one really fits; can we put this one in, and take this one out? It was a continual, fluid process for about six months as we were editing the book and getting it into production. The early version of the book was my PhD dissertation, a collection of essays that I called *A Thousand Buddhas* and had a different order. It was much more about being a massage therapist and that part of my life. Putting a book together, as you will probably experience for yourselves, is as much a creative act as writing the individual pieces, and it was really fun. I do this for my friends all the time because I love doing it, especially with poets. I'll just spread pieces out on the floor, shift things around, create whole sections; you can construct a whole different story based on what you leave in, what you leave out, what order you put the pieces in. It can be a little maddening, though, because you're never really finished and you could always have a different book.

Now I have a new manuscript that's under submission that I continually keep changing. This one's a little different. *Season of the Body* has kind of a built-in narrative: there's one central traumatic event, and then it's my recovery and moving on from that event. Even though the book consists of separate essays, a pretty cohesive narrative is created. Whereas the essays

I've been writing lately are more topical and don't have that central narrative event. They do have a lot of central themes that I try to highlight in different versions of the book, but not in the way *Season* cohered. *Season of the Body* was written over the course of 15 to 20 years. Now I'm trying to put together a book written over the space of 4 or 5 years, and it's a very different experience for me.

LANGDON: What authors have informed your style, and what would you say is your ongoing relationship with their writing? Are there authors whose work no longer seems meaningful to you, or you can't read because you feel like you write too much like them?

MILLER: I have an enduring relationship with poets. Poets keep me company in my writing studio, not in person but on the page. I always have a stack of poetry by my side, and I always start a writing session by reading some poetry, often picking a line at random and using that as an epigraph and writing for ten minutes straight to see where it leads. Often it leads nowhere, but sometimes my favorite essays come out of that process. One of those poets would be Mark Doty, who is also a memoirist. I just picked up his latest memoir this morning called *Dog Years*, which is about his relationship with his dogs, and since I acquired a puppy two months ago, all I read are dog stories. I feel like I'm going back to my childhood because that's all I read as a kid. I like having that sense of childlike passion again for reading, which I feel graduate school beat out of me. It's important to go back to what made us want to be readers and writers in the first place; I feel like we can lose sight of that.

Some of the poets—Mark Doty, Jane Hirshfield, Linda Gregerson, any poets who are contemplative and expand the moment for me—put me in that writing space. A lot of my writing is like that as well, expanding the moment and seeing what the moment holds. One of my latest projects seems to be an emerging collection of essays about writing and spirituality and how the two practices are aligned, so I think that's where I'm going next.

WHITNEY: When I was reading your essay "How to Meditate," I was struck by the great divergence between the project of writing and the project of meditation. On the one hand, meditation involves recognizing the illusion of the ego, detaching from it, and bringing yourself back to the space of

emptiness. But writing personal essays often requires delving into the ego and prodding all the layers of its realities. How do you, as a writer who's interested in meditation, see the discrepancies between the projects? Does one trump the other, or do the strengths of both somehow create a complementary relationship? How do you quiet your mind when it's so trained and praised for its eloquence?

MILLER: That's a great question—I want *you* to answer it! Well, when I talked earlier about how the poets put me in a meditative state of mind, it's because usually the poems that I'm drawn to the most are rooted in a pure observational mode. I'm thinking of the poem "The Porcupine," by Eamon Grennan. Or Jane Hirshfield's poems, such as "Salt Heart," where she's recording sensations, recording observations, recording details for the first part of the poem; it's all very concrete, there's nothing abstract about it. It's the observing mind that is very much a part of meditation without the ego interpreting right away. And when I do spiritual writing workshops, we read poems that are . . . I call them meditative, but what I mean is observational and rooted in the concrete world. Because what we tend to do right away is go into the abstract: "What do I think about this?" Instead, in these kinds of poems, we stay in the observational frame of mind, and usually what happens is that there's a turning point where some kind of wisdom emerges out of the observation, rather than the other way around.

In order to observe purely and cleanly, you need to get out of your own way and get rid of some of your preconceptions about what that observation is going to show you, what kind of wisdom is going to arise from this. Let it arise more organically. But I think you're right when you say there is a contradictory impulse going on. Once I have those observations down and can start creating metaphor or interpretation, then the other writing self comes in. It's not so much a matter of having to "be" one or the other, but rather knowing when there's a place for one or the other in your own writing process.

LEVY: There's a question I thought of while you were talking about this observation without the ego. When I was reading *Season of the Body*, I observed that the writer's voice is unpredictable in a really nice way, in a pleasantly surprising way. As I was reading, I had a sense that I knew who the writer was; I had a sense of who her voice was, and then it would just shift a little.

I wonder if that's one of the effects of this observational mode, or what kind of thought you put into developing the writer's voice or persona.

MILLER: Well, especially in creative nonfiction, voice is so important. If you don't have a strong voice, then nobody will want to listen, no matter what form you're using. And again this comes back to our earlier discussion about lyric forms. I think they hold more room for you to have shifts in voice, and to have many different kinds of voices come in, but still be consistent with what you're trying to achieve in a particular essay or throughout the whole book. Perhaps you're getting the idea that I'm not all that intentional in my writing in general, but once I'm drafting an essay and it's going through several drafts, I literally "play it by ear"; I'm listening to the essay to see what it needs, what the rhythm demands.

It's almost like music. I wish I knew more about music composition, but it seems as though there are certain patterns in music that mirror what happens in a lyric essay. I did have a graduate student last fall write an essay comparing the lyric essay to the fugue form, and I said, "Thank you! Someone's finally articulated it for me!" I think we have many voices and we should have a way to allow all of those voices to come out on the page.

RULE: When you come across something that's hard to write because of someone else's position or your own, do you avoid it? Or do you work through it? How do you deal with those moments?

MILLER: I was talking in a class earlier about the state of denial that you have to be in, especially if you're writing a personal essay—a sense that no one's really going to read it anyway, so just go for it. I think my tendency is always to just go right into it. When I'm in the revision stage, though, and I'm thinking about sending it out, that's when all of my armor goes up, and that's when I'll start censoring—or not necessarily censoring, but just being a little more discrete or discriminating about what I'm going to put out there. Especially now that I know people might read it. There's a great freedom in being unknown and being anonymous. I try and keep that mantle of anonymity as much as I can and then decide if I'm going to put the work out in the world or not.

I think one of the mistakes that beginning writers make is to censor yourself too early, before you know what the real story is, because you might write your

way to the perfect metaphor, or to a perspective that allows you to write in a very honest way. I don't think these essays come across as being part of my diary that you're reading; instead, they're shaped for public consumption. And so that shaping creates an artistic distance for me, as well as for the reader.

ALDRICH: Does research play any role in the literary nonfiction writing that you do? If so, is there a specific example you could talk about where research was instrumental in the composition?

MILLER: More and more, research's become instrumental in my work because I've gone from being introspective, as I was in the first book, to being a little more "*extro-spective*" (to coin a word), turning my gaze outward. Now, usually my essays start not with some personal story that I feel I need to tell, but with something I've observed in the world that gets my attention; I start researching and see where it leads. One example of that is an essay called "Opalescent," about stained-glass art. I started buying some stained glass for my new home and realized I've always been attracted to that particular art form, so I started researching Tiffany and Chagall and their work in stained glass. When you do that kind of research, you usually come up with some beautiful metaphors that arise out of it. Especially when you're so caught up and immersed in research, then all these other things that you observe in the world start magically connecting as well. So, of course, for the stained-glass essay, I'm creating a fragmented piece that is meant to mimic the process of stained glass.

NAUMANN: I was wondering, and I have to be cautious with this question, don't read too much into it, but do you ever embellish anything in your essays? To what extent is the essay real? Do you change people's names? What about the order of events in a day?

MILLER: Well, I am a liar, and I think we all are liars. A lot of the work in *Season of the Body* is embellishment—it's fantasy, it's imagination, it's creating artifact out of experience and shaping it for that purpose—and I hope in most cases it's not betraying the reader or sacrificing the truth. I just taught Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and the one thing everyone picked up on so strongly was the concept of "story truth" versus "happening truth," allowing

for the idea that stories may have more truth than what actually happened. *Season* contains a lot of story truth. For example, “How to Meditate” is not a transcript of one ten-day meditation retreat; it’s many meditation retreats combined together, with some of the feelings that I experienced embellished for the purpose of the essay. Especially when it’s humorous, I think you can get away with embellishment and exaggeration a lot more.

ADAMS: Are there some audiences for creative nonfiction that are more concerned with factualness than others?

MILLER: Yes, but who are they? I think it depends on what you’re writing for and what you’re reading for. If it’s for a book that’s more research-based and you are reading for information, you don’t want that information to be wrong. There is an audience for a type of book where research and a solid sense of fact are more important than in a lyric personal essay, where perhaps we’re not reading for fact, we’re reading for something different than information.

ADAMS: Are readers of personal memoir more likely to be upset to find out it wasn’t completely factual?

MILLER: Yes, but then again I think it depends on why the writer is choosing to not tell the truth. There isn’t anything at stake for me in combining many different meditation retreats into one. I mean, do you feel betrayed? No, probably not. With the James Frey experience, people felt they were getting some kind of help with their own problems, and when they found out that his problems were not what they appeared to be on the page, they felt betrayed, because they felt like they had been given a gift that was now tainted. If I were to make up the fact that I had had miscarriages or that I was childless, those are some crucial elements to *Season of the Body* that make for some pretty strong connections with readers. I did not make up those things, but if I did, I think people would have the right to be upset, because that’s a “happening truth” that needs to be true for the story to occur. Even in *The Things They Carried*, the truth is there was a Vietnam War and many people did experience the kinds of things O’Brien talks about in that book. If that wasn’t true, it wouldn’t have the same kind of effect. If you’re presenting your work as nonfiction, there has to be a lot of nonfiction in it. And at the same time, you have to be

a sophisticated-enough reader to know when to suspend your belief about some of the things that are happening.

ALDRICH: Can you talk a little bit about how you chose to cast *Season of the Body* as a linked essay collection rather than as a memoir?

MILLER: Well, I can't say I really chose the form—it chose me. It's a form that comes naturally to me; when I try to write a book-length work, I find sustaining that kind of narrative is not one of my skills. I'm much better at the sprint rather than the long-distance marathon, and the essay lends itself to that. I can't say I was making a deliberate choice not to write a memoir, it's just how these pieces emerged, and they are so discrete that I think it would be very difficult to put them together as one continuous narrative. One book that walks that line so beautifully is Bernard Cooper's *Truth Serum*. Have you read that?

ALDRICH: I have, and it's subtitled "Memoirs."

MILLER: They're called "memoirs," I call them "essays," my students always call them "chapters." I think that book can be read more as a memoir than my book can. It's a gorgeous example of a collection of essays working as one cohesive narrative.

ADAMS: What makes an essay literary?

MILLER: I think for me it's about having many layers of meaning and metaphor. Metaphor for me is the key. Most of my essays, if not all of them, have one central metaphor that's really driving the pieces. After much revision, I find the metaphor to hold them together.

ALDRICH: We are curious as to when form comes into play in the writing process of your essays. For example, when did you decide to put "How to Meditate" in the second person?

MILLER: Well, that particular piece just emerged in that voice; it wasn't a conscious decision. I think I'd probably been musing on the form since reading Pam Houston's "How to Talk to a Cowboy" and Lorrie Moore's collection of

stories called *Self-Help*. Both of those count as fiction, but I'd been thinking about how to use the instructional voice in nonfiction. And so much of my work, as you know, is trying to articulate spiritual issues, how to write about spirituality in a way that's fresh and original. Form is one way to get at that. The minute I had that phrase, "how to meditate," I had the voice, and the voice carried the momentum of the piece. It was one of those gift pieces where you sit down and write it in 12 hours and it's done. The form itself created the piece; it didn't feel like I was creating it. But then I got cocky and started writing all these how-to pieces. I wrote an essay called "How to Give a Massage" and it didn't work at all; it was a total failure. Some material lends itself better than others, and I don't think you can know that until you've tried. But none of the effort is wasted. Much of the material from that failed essay I refashioned into the prologue of the book, minus the second-person perspective.

ADAMS: You like epigraphs quite a bit. They frame the essay and point the reader in certain directions. Do you write a piece and then find the right epigraph, or do you just have this collection of epigraphs at home that spur you to write?

MILLER: I wish I had a collection of epigraphs! My fantasy job (this is going to sound so stupid)—there's a magazine called *Real Simple*, and they have all these little quotes throughout it, and I want to be the person who finds those quotes. I love quotes, and yes, I've been accused of overusing the epigraph, because I do. But this is another aspect of the lyric essay: how are you going to give your reader just enough of a foothold to get into your essay? You've got to have a strong title, and sometimes an epigraph will just do it for you, someone else's voice pointing the reader right into the essay. I encourage my students quite a bit to use these tools. For myself, it varies. I already mentioned that one of my processes is picking a line of poetry and writing from it. Sometimes I'll actually use that line of poetry. An example is in the essay "Split." The exercise in class was to randomly pick a line from an Anne Carson poem a student provided and write from there, with no expectation or design. It was fun to see what everyone had done. That line seemed essential and formed the epigraph to the piece. In "Basha Leah," conversely, I wrote the piece and then found the epigraph. I didn't trust my reader to understand what I was getting at, so I put a little nudge in there at the very beginning about prayer—this is

going to be about prayer. The interesting thing, though, is that most readers read right over the title and the epigraph and go right into the essay, and not until later do they go back, or if they're confused, then the title and epigraph can provide meaning in retrospect.

ALDRICH: Do you think that the publishing world expects creative nonfiction books to have a narrative cohesion, what they call a narrative hook rather than be a collection of essays written over a period of time? Is it much harder to find a publisher for a collection of essays, even if the essays collected are prize-winning?

MILLER: That is definitely the case. You'll see writer's guidelines that say "no collections of miscellaneous essays." I love the word "miscellaneous"; I am a miscellaneous person. I wrote a whole essay on the word "miscellaneous"! We tend to see it as a diminutive word when actually it's quite wonderful. It's all the things that don't fit into one category coming together and finding commonality. I am a miscellaneous author, but I think it's very difficult for a publisher to market that kind of work.

No one wants essays; you can't even say the word "essays." They have to be memoirs or meditations or chronicles—anything but the word "essays." Not having a solid center where a publisher could say in ten words or less what the book is about makes it very difficult. And that's a problem I'm having with my current collection. I try to spin it all kinds of ways, but it's pretty obvious it is really a collection of whatever has been on my mind for the last four years. That's what E. B. White did. He's my hero. Both E. B. White and Joan Didion wrote in an earlier time when there was room for the social observer. Their essays are propelled by intelligent voices that were pretty much just observing us and giving commentary on ourselves and the world we live in. I don't know if there's much room for that anymore in the publishing world, although one of my favorite books right now is Adam Gopnick's *Paris to the Moon*. He's got that kind of observational voice, and he turned his gaze on New York in his latest book. I guess maybe there is still room for it, but it's hard to establish yourself as that kind of authority.

SPIRO: Do you feel like there are parts of your personal mythology that have yet to be expressed in your writing?

MILLER: That's a really good question. I think all of our books reveal our personal mythologies. My mythology in *Season of the Body* is about me as a childless woman and what that means, and all the essays center on that theme. And I think that's what I've been coming up against with the essays that I'm writing right now—what is the mythology I'm exploring right now? As I'm talking to you, I'm getting the sense that it's the mythology of myself as a spiritual person. So what does that mean and how does that play out in many different areas of my life? Oh good, now I'm getting a sense of how this book is being shaped! I think when we hit what we might call a writer's block is when we've worked one personal mythology to death and the next one hasn't come yet. It's kind of a creation myth, right? How we've been created and how we get to where we are now. We're always recreating ourselves.