

Odd Ducks

by Patricia Lawson

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Interview by Opal Roberts-Baca

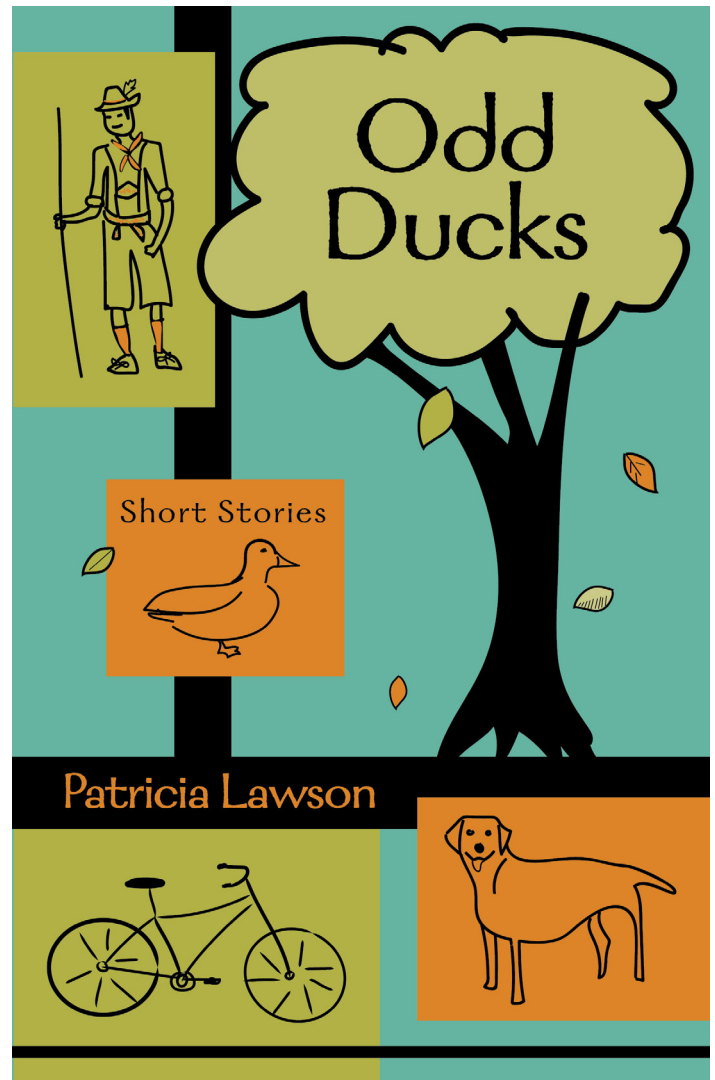
Question: Susan Cain once said, “society has a cultural bias towards extroverts,” but you have described yourself as an introvert. In a world that seems to be growing increasingly extroverted, what are your thoughts on how it feels to be an introvert who writes fiction, and do you feel this perspective helps to shape the characters in *Odd Ducks*?

Answer: Yes, I would call myself an introvert. I like alone time, don’t enjoy large groups as much as smaller ones, etc. I am sympathetic towards introverts and relate to them.

Q: You have resided in Kansas City for most of your life, and the stories in *Odd Ducks* are also set there. What is your relationship like with Kansas City and how does fiction give you and your readers a different opportunity to view it?

A: I had some actual place in Kansas City in mind for the stories. I’ve lived in the KC area all my life—in midtown Kansas City, Missouri, in Raytown, and for some time in various locations in the urban part of Wyandotte County, always in working class or some level of middle-class locations. My characters tend not to be wealthy, but middle class or below, educated or not. “Brighton Green” is an invented suburb, but I had actual Kansas City suburbs in mind.

The locations in the stories may be composites—for example in “Butterfly Man,” I was thinking of a certain schoolyard, large and flat with enough space for a community garden and another school’s fire escape. Also, I was thinking of kids I worked with in the community garden I have volunteered in for a long time in KCK. That story started because other master gardeners and I were working with kids in the summer, growing vegetables, doing crafts, etc., and in some cases the parents had to urge them to come. Once they



got there, they seemed to enjoy things though. And I decided to make conditions a little harsher in the story and have people in charge who were more controlling and less tolerant.

Q: Often I see a dichotomy between how your characters feel (i.e. isolated, depressed, brooding, so to speak) and the general light-hearted tone of your stories, which at times border on absurdist comedy. What draws you to comedy?

A: Why the comic tone when the character is suffering? Humor, I have read, involves some distance. I think I read that Woody Allen, for a time anyway, came to see humor as inferior because of that distance and turned to drama for a couple of movies, e.g. *Interiors*. Usually a reader puts some distance between himself and a character, but comedy increases the distance. With humor it may be easier to judge someone because the predicament isn’t as awful as in tragedy, where one often feels for the character because he/she will die or blind himself or cause someone’s death. In a comic

story the reader thinks, “Oh, he or she is really stupid, messed-up, naïve,” but I hope the reader sees the person sympathetically too, maybe as a loving parent sees a child who isn’t at his/her best. I hope so because I feel for the main characters and want the reader to at least like them or feel a little sorry for them while recognizing they have problems. I also think the reason I’m drawn to humor is that it takes the edge off things.

Q: In the short stories “Odd Ducks” and “Her Religious Advisors,” title character Carol often finds herself grappling with issues of faith and belief. It appears the more she contends with these questions the more questions she ultimately comes up with. How did you as a writer find a way to depict a serious subject like this with humor?

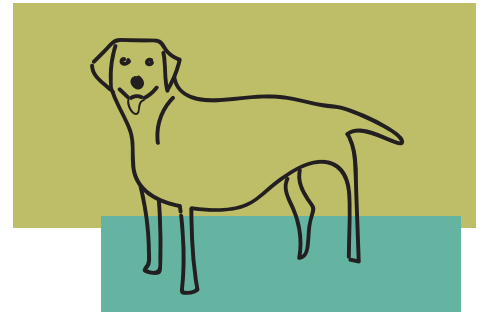
A: I am interested in religion though I wouldn’t describe myself as religious. It would be comforting to know God is looking after us, and sometimes I pray that God will look after someone I care about though I doubt if prayer has any effect on things. In the past, if someone asked me to pray, I would say, “Well, it will be an agnostic prayer,” but now I just say “sure,” and I try to pray, but it’s an odd prayer, like “God if you’re up there, please . . .” I have written some stories about religion, but they are inconclusive about what is known.

Q: Many of the stories within this collection feature characters in childhood and adolescence, what is it about these subjects that interests you?

A: I think many people write their first stories about ideas/people/events from their early years because those early memories are stronger. We are more vulnerable then and we are figuring things out. My adolescence was happy but not without the problems that plague other adolescents. In high school, I wanted to be popular and never was. College was a lot easier because those goals weren’t that important. Still, I joined a sorority my junior year in college, just because I could. I had finally made it. The sorority went national, but that meant having to adopt the new sorority’s restrictions about minorities, so two friends and I voiced our opposition. One of those friends dropped out on principle. But I had already decided to drop out so I could be with a guy more, which made taking a moral stance a lot easier.

Q: How do you think your experience as an English instructor has influenced your writing?

A: I taught both composition and literature classes at Kansas City Kansas Community College and felt I had to get a good grip on a story or poem before I could teach it, and so by teaching I think I learned more than I would have if I were just studying the story to pass a test. I also learned more about writing by teaching writing. And by teaching at KCKCC I made new friends who loved to discuss literature and talked about why they liked or didn’t like a story or poem. Philip Miller was one of these friends, and he eventually asked me to join the Collaborators, a writing group. I’m still a member of the group and of the Diversifiers, a group of women poets. The Collaborators and later the Writers Place were good places to share work and hear others’ work. I don’t know if I would have kept on writing fiction and poetry had I not made several friends with similar interests.



Q: Which writers have had the most influence on your work?

A: I’ve been influenced by reading *New Yorker* stories as well as novels. William Trevor stands out and more recently, George Saunders, especially his story collection *Tenth of December*. Other writers’ stories which were influences were Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” and Alice Munro’s “Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd,” which both have connections with “Miss Mauve and Miss Green.” The idea for the long list at the opening of “Butterfly Man” is stolen from Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried.” I felt better about copying technique after reading an essay by Orhan Pamuk in which he writes that when he was younger, he read for the story and now reads to see what he can use.

A group of people, not generally writers, who were influential is my first immediate family, who collectively are a main reason I like to write comic stories. My mother used to write light verse. She had a great sense of humor and loved to gossip about neighbors and others. She was very interested in what motivated

people. My father was witty and droll and made funny observations about neighbors and people on TV. My brother used to write more serious poetry, but he had and has a wild, far out sense of humor in conversation. He used to call and speak in different accents and create various characters. My sister speaks bluntly and uses a lot of profanity. Once I told her “don’t sweat the small stuff.” She said, “This past year I didn’t sweat the small stuff, and now I’m in deep shit.” Like my mother, she has a great appreciation for people’s foibles. My kids are funny, and so is my husband, my daughter-in-law, and my grandkids.

Q: Which of your stories was most difficult to write?

A: Of the nine stories in the book, the ones that were harder for me to write were the ones that have less physical action. In “Biker” and “Adventures in Learning” people travel somewhere, and the physical journey suggests possibilities more easily than when the protagonist stays put (as in “Miss Mauve and Miss Green”). With that story, I had to keep asking, “Now what happens?” when with other stories, the actions just came.

Q: Do you have any other projects you are currently working on?

A: I have been working on a novel about a woman, not of sterling character. I started it perhaps five years ago and came to a stop about a third of the way through. I picked it up about a year ago, wrote another third, and now I’m at another dead stop. I got her to a foreign country where she gets in trouble, and I’m not sure what will happen to her before she can get home. Then I kind of know what will happen. I also have worked for some time on a story that really interested me at first. It has to do with a house. I don’t know whether the character is going to go crazy or not in the house and how crazy, and I have mulled over the story for so long I think I’ll just have the house fall on her and put her and me out of our misery.



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