

Q & A for *Reconciliation* by DOROTHY SPEAK

To what extent are these stories/characters the pure product of imagination and to what extent the product of observation?

I don't think any fiction is written out of thin air – i.e., pure imagination. In my case, most of my stories, because they are character-driven, begin with a character very loosely based on a person I have known or heard about – some essential element of their personality, usually an undermining one, that will ultimately bring them down. For example, in “Clemency,” the protagonist's obsession with things military eventually destroys his marriage and his career. Sometimes the conflict bears a slight resemblance to fact; other times it will be purely invented. There are, of course, exceptions to where a story begins. In “Surcease of Sorrow,” the departure point was a newspaper account of a car accident. I then selected someone I know to be the protagonist. My question: how would such a terrible event affect the life of this particular woman? Always, to discover the motives and emotions of a character, the writer must search deep within herself/himself. This is why it is said that all fiction is to some extent autobiographical.

Are any of these stories what you would call “autobiographical?”

There are two stories in this collection that come out of my childhood. “A Penny to Save,” was inspired by a friendship of my father's, a man I vividly remember, transformed here into a sexual predator. But for me this story was equally about post-war poverty and unemployment, the landscape of the Victory Home neighbourhoods, the popularity of the yoyo, skipping songs, the innocence of youth, and my own father's rebelliousness. In “Your Youth So Tragic,” I wanted to recreate the gulf between older and younger sister that I experienced as a child in a family of seven children whose births were spread out over eleven years, as well as the latent desire to rebel against the taboos of the Catholic Church. Church and family were the two big influences in my life. More than any other stories I've written, these two portray where I came from.

You have written both short stories and a novel. How does the writing of these two forms differ? Which do you prefer?

I like to compare these two narrative forms to bodies of water. Short stories are like lakes, self-contained, free standing, finite, yet rippling with intensity. A novel, in contrast, must flow like a river: long, relaxed, meandering, with many vistas along its shores. I was very conscious of this big difference when I began to write my novel, *The Wife Tree*. It is a whole different way of seeing Life itself.

When executing a novel, the author approaches the writing every day over several years, knowing the plot, the setting, the characters and the world in which they live. It's a relief to have this familiar territory to turn to every day. With short

stories, on the other hand, the writer must reinvent all these elements every time a new story is begun. It is a lot of work, and there is much trial and error. This is why it takes so long to write a story collection. There is something very satisfying about sticking with one character over many years. It's like having a good friend on a long-term visit.

Your stories have been called “dark.” What is your reaction to this?

There are times when I look back at my stories and think that they are pessimistic. Other times I think: well, this is what people can be like, so why not write about it? I am just as interested in the less admirable qualities of human beings as I am in the admirable ones. We all have our dark corners. There are a lot of ugly realities in this world – war, genocide, torture, rape, child abuse. Isn't what I write about mild compared to these? Most people, sooner or later in life, face a big challenge – failure, divorce, illness, loss, death. I can't ignore these important events.

How do you think your writing has evolved since your first collection?

Thematically, my stories have “matured” as I've aged, that is, fewer of them are now from the perspective of a child and more are about middle-aged or older adults. This is both a question of bringing one's experience to bear on one's characters' lives and the evolving interests of the writer. I believe that my style is sparer now, perhaps less textured, the language plainer, the techniques less influenced by the dictates of writing classes. A couple of stories here – “Do No Harm” and “The Prime of His Life,” please me because I find them less artificial in their structures and rhythms and therefore more like real life. I would like to strive more for this effect.

Who have been the biggest influences on your writing?

My parents and the lives they lived have been the biggest influence on my work. Both grew up on farms during the Depression, endured World War II, and, as the parents of seven children, always faced economic stresses. I see their lives as difficult, but I know that they did not share this view. My perspective on my roots could account for the seriousness of my subject matter.

Are there any writers who have shaped your work? Who do you read now, for inspiration?

Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant and Elizabeth Spencer were all models for me when I began to write. Now I like the stories of the American writer, Ann Beattie, because they are loosely structured and seem to me to feel like real life. I also like Ellen Gilchrist's stories because of their humour.