

Interview with

Shawna Lemay

Canadian Women Reading and Writing
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Shawna Lemay is the author of five books of poetry: *All the God-Sized Fruit* (1999), *Against Paradise* (2001), *Still* (2003), *Blue Feast* (2005), and *Red Velvet Forest* (2009). Her first book of essays is titled *Calm Things* (2008). She has a BA in Honours English and an MA in English, both from the University of Alberta. *All the God-Sized Fruit* won both the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award and the Stephan G. Stephansson Award. She has two blogs: *Capacious Hold-All* and *Calm Things*. She lives in Edmonton, Alberta with her partner, Robert Lemay, a visual artist, their daughter Chloe and their well-walked black labrador retriever, Ace.

CanWWR had the opportunity to interview Shawna Lemay (S.L.) on June 5, 2009 at the University of Alberta.

CanWWR (Patricia): Welcome Shawna. And thanks for being part of this interview. As you know, we're talking and discussing, together, the connection between women's reading and writing, and we have a series of questions for you today. I'm going to begin with a question about your reading in childhood. Were you a reader? Are there specific books that you remember?

S.L.: I was a huge reader, actually, but I was also a huge horse lover. I would say probably half of what I read as a child had to do with horses. So, *The Red Pony*, *The Black Stallion* series, a lot of probably obscure little pony stories that you probably couldn't find anymore.

CanWWR (Patricia): What was the appeal?

S.L.: I had horses, so that was part of the appeal. You're able to live through these characters, and you go out into the field and experience it with your own ponies and horses. *The Red Pony*, though, I was thinking a lot about that last night because my horse died when I was a teenager and *The Red Pony* was the first book I read that I realized there could be sadness in a book, that there could be a tragedy.

CanWWR (Patricia): Kind of a turning point then.

S.L.: It was a huge turning point. I remember not reading for quite awhile after that, thinking that I felt very betrayed.

CanWWR (Patricia): Literature can hurt. (Laughter)

S.L.: Yes, that this horse could die—and I kept thinking, “There has to be more. Where is the rest of the story? Where is horse miraculously brought back to life?”

CanWWR (Patricia): Alas. Were there any restrictions placed on your reading as a child or did you have kind of carte blanche to read whatever you wanted?

S.L.: My parents have grade eight/nine education and they said, “Here's your library card. Go to the library.” The librarian didn't put any restrictions. So I just had the whole library...

CanWWR (Patricia): So the library was really your classroom. I mean that's where you really learned, in the library.

S.L.: Yes, the public library was the place. I remember walking down to the public library all summer long, every two days, to take out the maximum amount of reading material, hoisting it on my red wagon (laughter) and just making my way home.

CanWWR (Patricia): In addition to the horse stories, are there particular memories of childhood reading that are still very, very vivid for you?

S.L.: Yes, it's very intense. I remember summers, making tents and lying outside in the shade, in a shady spot to read my book.

CanWWR (Patricia): Especially if you're blond. (Laughter)

S.L.: Yes, a very shady spot. Summer equals reading in my memory of my childhood.

CanWWR (Patricia): Wonderful.

CanWWR (Devorah): Was there a moment when that reading switched to a desire to write? Did you just always write? Was there someone who encouraged you to do it, or any moment that made you feel like you had to write?

S.L.: I think I always wrote. But I think I was a very shy person.

I think I hardly existed for people. I was off to the side so they let me do my thing. So I did write a lot, but probably no one ever thought to encourage me to write. I think it wasn't until high school—and running into a couple of really great language arts teachers—that writing seemed to be a possibility that way. But I never imagined that I wouldn't write. I don't know if I thought of it in terms of becoming a writer. I didn't have that background or language or the people around me that would have couched it in those terms. But, I knew I would always write something. I never, never thought it would be possible to be a published author, although I'm sure I never knew what that meant either.

CanWWR (Devorah): So when did that shift happen?

S.L.: I think in high school, because I had a couple of really brilliant teachers who did encourage us to write. They brought extra Shakespeare into class for us to read, for those of us who wanted to. Yes, that was very lucky. You don't realize how lucky you are to hook up with the right teacher at the right time.

CanWWR (Devorah): Do you have a writing community? Or are you more isolated? Has writing in isolation or being part of a community been part of your experience of becoming a writer?

S.L.: Well, my writing community happened here at the university, so that's why whenever I come onto campus, I get a tingly feeling, I think. But when I took my first English class, it was Bert Almon who was my professor, and then I ended up taking poetry through him. My writing community is actually still some of those people I met in that first class. And it's expanded from there. I would say the university has been really the crux of my development as a writer. As obvious as that sounds.

CanWWR (Devorah): I think you're the first person that we've interviewed to mention it that way actually.

S.L.: When I came to university—university had never happened in my family before. I was the first person to go and get a degree, so it was a foreign country for sure. So everything that I learned here is what I've taken into my writing. I mean, even this most recent book, [Red Velvet Forest], started with thinking about what my MA thesis would be.

CanWWR (Devorah): As the first person to go to university, did your family take your wanting to be a writer seriously, or did they think it was a nice idea, but not really a serious one?

S.L.: I think the first couple years that I was here they just thought I was fooling around, and just wasting time. But as the years passed I did okay, I didn't flunk out or anything. So they thought, "Oh, okay, maybe she's a little bit smarter than we thought." So then, yes, they started to think that it was a very lovely thing.

CanWWR (Patricia): Can I just interrupt for a second? The first class that you took with Bert, was it a literature class or a creative writing class?

S.L.: The first class I took with him was called English 100 at the time.

CanWWR (Patricia): Oh, really, so it would be an intro to literature, from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf?

S.L.: Exactly. That was a life changing moment for me.

CanWWR (Devorah): We don't do Beowulf to Virginia Woolf anymore.

S.L.: Oh no, that's sad.

CanWWR (Patricia): Many things have been lost.

S.L.: Yes, that was the life changing moment, that one, single class. And then Bert said, "Why don't you try Honours English," which knocked me off my chair. And so even that mentorship began from that moment. Again, very lucky.

CanWWR (Lindsay): Now maybe we'll move on to your writing process. What would be a typical writing day, if you have one? I'd really like to know to what degree is it collaborative between you and your husband [Robert Lemay] and his artwork, and to what degree is it independent?

S.L.: Well my writing day seems to always be changing. I've always staked out a little bit of territory one day a week. The thesis experience was wonderful because it meant I had all this time to myself, to concentrate on just this one project. So that's an amazing experience right there. But these days, I'm working part-time again. It's always, all of my writer friends, especially the women, we're always trying to juggle work—what's the right job—could we possibly get a grant once in a while? You're constantly juggling your kids, the job, the dog, in my case now, and family life, with writing. And right now I'm actually just having a heck of a time balancing all that out. There was no grant, so therefore I have a job. Because my partner is an artist, he understands that if he doesn't give me that one day a week, I'll go insane and he doesn't want that. (Laughter) It's not pretty. So luckily we do have that understanding. I try to turn off the e-mails, turn off the Facebook, and just get all those voices out of my head. That takes about an hour, and then I'll sit down with my friends, also known as my books, for another hour, and then I'll sit down and write at the computer. I'm writing a prose piece right now, so I'm more on the computer. Whereas with poetry, I'm always sitting with a paper and pen. I miss that actually. I really miss writing on paper.

CanWWR (Patricia): Why do you think you can write prose directly onto the keyboard, and poetry longhand? Is it a different

process?

S.L.: I think it is for me. I have started off writing on paper; I guess I shouldn't say I don't ever. But I'm at the 200-page mark, and it's so big and unwieldy, that I can't actually go back and forth, obviously. So it is easier right now to work on the computer.

CanWWR (Patricia): It is. I understand that.

S.L.: But I do have a feeling for paper and ink, which is maybe why I'm working at a stationary shop right now. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): Which one?

S.L.: Notable's. So I'm learning about pens. I wrote an essay for someone during my Master's thesis, Ted Bishop, about the alchemy of the book, which I think eventually I will end up turning into a book as well. So there's endless fodder that I got out of my Master's thesis. I probably will be able to write four books out of the research and thinking that I did in that period. So, none of it was wasted at all.

CanWWR (Patricia): Something about women educating women too, I'm sure.

S.L.: Indeed. (Laughter) Well actually very much so. But that's a whole other topic.

CanWWR (Amy): I find that really interesting. I'm not sure anybody else has said so directly, "I sit down with my books and I read and then I immediately write and that's really important."

CanWWR (Patricia): They're kind of meditative prelude, are they, to writing?

S.L.: Oh exactly. That's precisely the way I describe it.

CanWWR (Amy): So you read things that you like and you want to, not imitate necessarily but—internalise

S.L.: Right, I'm trying to internalise certain cadences and phrasing. I'm writing about art forgery right now, and so I am actually trying to incorporate people's cadences and voices and sometimes phrases into what I'm writing, so it's even more important to immerse. And just get that rhythm internally, so that you can, in this case, replicate it, because that's part of the pastiche business that I'm working with.

CanWWR (Patricia): And how do you draw the distinction then between borrowing and replicating a cadence? How do you draw the line?

S.L.: I think that's what the whole project is actually about. That's the question. Where do you draw the line? When do you become a forger? How far can you push it? How much recogni-

tion do you have to give? In some instances, I do directly quote, and I also give the source. In other cases, it's blended into the mix. So, there will be a phrase by Virginia Woolf, that someone who knows Virginia Woolf will probably pick up right away. But maybe the average reader will just think, "Wow, Shawna Lemay's brilliant." (Laughter) So, in the end, I think I have to come to terms with how to notate who I've stolen from, borrowed from. And I guess what's the difference between stealing and borrowing and referencing and paying homage to?

CanWWR (Patricia): Well precisely, don't we do that all the time?

CanWWR (Devorah): And at the end it doesn't look exactly the same.

S.L.: No, I think it can't. It's always going to be coming through, filtered through, your sensibilities.

CanWWR (Devorah): Yes.

CanWWR (Amy) My question is about your current reading, which we've been talking about somewhat already. But we're interested in what you read now? Do you still read the pony stories?

S.L.: No, I do not read the pony stories. (Laughter) But I do wonder how it's all interrelated. I've been recently reading [Gaston] Bachelard. It is so strange that I didn't come to Bachelard until a couple years ago because he writes about the reverie of childhood. A lot of the things that he says speak directly to Red Velvet Forest and the themes that I worked through there, about the dream world of the child coming to bear on the dream world and the solitude of an adult. It's almost like he was reading my mind or I was reading his mind, at certain points. So that's a recent find. But books that I keep coming back to are *The Stream of Life* by Clarice Lispector. That's my touchstone book. I thought I might have abandoned it at some point, but it seems to become more important to me instead of less important. So that's a really good one. Kristjana Gunnars's *The Rose Garden* is a really crucial book for me. The way that she talked about the book being like a consumer item. As soon as I read that I thought, "That makes sense." My whole world of reading all of a sudden made sense. Because as a kid, even, the idea of re-reading a book wasn't there for me. It seemed to me that you weren't smart enough if you had to read the book twice, right? That was a feeling I think I had as a kid.

CanWWR (Patricia): It was due at the library, so you had to take the book back.

S.L.: That's true too. That's true too. So it seemed wrong to me somehow as a child to re-read a book. But when I read this bit in Kristjana's *Rose Garden* about the way we are taught to read, even by the publicists of publishing companies. And I've worked in bookstores, so there's that consumer model of reading—just go onto the next book. But to sit and read one book

for years, or every year to read the same book a couple of times, that was pretty radical thought for me. I guess a lot of people, maybe they just know that. For me it was this really critical moment where I realized, “Yes you can read a book backwards, you can read it forwards, you can start in the middle.” And that’s what I do, when I’ve read it all through, I can dip into this book at any point, and be completely immersed and happy.

CanWWR (Patricia): Can I just return to the Clarice Lispector book for a moment? Why do you think it’s such an important book for you? Is it the style? Is it the way of entering a consciousness and flowing with that consciousness? Is that what really appeals to you?

S.L.: It’s that and I think that she does things in that book that I didn’t think books could do. So I think it opens up in me a possibility of what can be written. It doesn’t have to have a standard plot. And that frame of mind that she’s in where she’s flowing from one thought to the next. It’s poetic but it’s also just the thoughts that she has. She can just throw a bit about a turtle in the middle out of nowhere. Or go on for five pages about flowers. So that, to me, is really important, especially with the work that I’m writing now.

CanWWR (Amy): It sounds like you don’t really abide by generic restrictions or anything like that. You read pretty widely across genres— fiction and non-fiction and poetry.

S.L.: Yes, I pretty much always have a novel going. I always have a book of poetry going. That’s another thing too. I think I thought when I was younger that you had to read one book at a time. And I’m always reading about ten at a time, at least. Coming from where I came from, all of those things are just radical ideas, that you could read more than one— what a concept.

CanWWR (Amy): What about Canadian women writers, specifically? Do you find you read mostly women? Or does it matter? Or do you find you read a lot of Canadian writing? Again, does it matter?

S.L.: It matters a lot. And I do tend to read mostly women writers. And I do, very much, try to support my contemporaries. We were talking about Facebook earlier, which is a very strange little world, but it’s excellent for connecting Canadian women writers. And the world of the blogs too is another whole thing that didn’t exist for me even a couple years ago. But I really want to support my contemporary writers, people that I’ve become friends with on Facebook and a lot of friends that I have, I met them maybe once briefly or haven’t even met them in real life, just in cyberspace. Which sounds really bizarre but it’s been great for me to connect with women writers, and has given me a lot of confidence in what I’m doing. And I feel like I have a support group, which sounds too new-agey. But I do feel like we have similar interests and that we are able, in the whole apparatus that surrounds contemporary writing, to be there for each

other. It’s meant the world to me. And I know, given the conversations I’ve had online, that it’s made a huge difference for other women writers. Those who are sometimes more isolated geographically than I am. Not that Edmonton’s the centre of the universe. But a friend of mine lives in Creighton, Saskatchewan. So it’s a community that you can build up.

CanWWR (Amy): There are more places in Canada that are isolated than not, I suppose. So just to know, in other words, that there are so many other Canadian writers out there, who are writing good things.

S.L.: Great things!

CanWWR (Amy): There are a lot of you.

S.L.: Wonderful stuff. I think it’s really hard sometimes to read people who are your contemporaries because it’s hard to situate them. So you’re reading them more as friends and I wonder how that type of reading also changes your perspective. But I think it’s difficult for anyone— whoever’s writing book reviews in the newspaper— to write anything about someone who’s writing now.

CanWWR (Devorah): I’m curious about the creative writing community within academia as opposed to the creative writing community outside of academia. You were in the academy and now you’re not. So any comments on that? On the way it impacted your writing?

S.L.: That’s a really interesting point, because I always think I’m somewhere in between. There are the writers who are completely outside of academia, and I was there for a little bit, but not for too long. But I do feel I have a lot of affinity for the people within academia and respect them. I think it goes both ways. We all have respect for each other as writers. The people that are teaching in universities or colleges have a slightly different network and there’s a different connectivity between them than those of us who work at stationary shops or don’t work or don’t teach. We do connect in different ways. I sometimes feel slightly out of the loop, because I’m not part of the university. I’m still trying to come to terms with all that because I do feel very close to a lot of people; a lot of my friends teach at universities. I don’t like to pit one against the other but there is a different milieu that’s going on. It would be interesting to maybe suss that out a bit more.

CanWWR (Patricia): But you probably feel you have a foot in both worlds, don’t you? The world inside the academy and the world of the stationary shop.

S.L.: Yes, that’s true.

CanWWR (Patricia): They’re not disconnected necessarily.

S.L.: They're not at all disconnected. The more you go along, the more you realize how connected they essentially are. As far as my writing, though, I realized at a certain point that my writing would be better if I were on that side of the line, rather than [the academic] one. But that's not true for other people. I think there's that cliché or the thought that people in academia don't write poetry as well as those outside. Maybe there's the reverse snobbism. But I think it's very individual and what works for me is to not be here. But there are obviously wonderful things being written by people who teach at universities. You can't make any generalization.

CanWWR (Patricia): Anything else?

S.L.: You had asked about the collaborative aspect of my work. I didn't quite get to that part of the question. There is a huge collaboration between my husband and I but I think it's a lot more organic than anything else. We usually don't sit down and say, "you do this and I'll write about that." Much more organic.

CanWWR (Amy): Do you find that sometimes you spontaneously come from a similar source or come to a similar conclusion?

S.L.: I think so, because we're both looking.

CanWWR (Patricia): Perception.

S.L.: Right. Because we're in the same universe, we do end up looking at the same things and talking about how we're looking at them. And so that is what, I think, filters into our work.

CanWWR (Patricia): Who chooses the covers? You or Robert?

S.L.: Oh, I do. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): That was quite definite. (Laughter)

S.L.: Yes, but he's very happy to let me use whatever I like. There's actually only been one book that hasn't had one of his paintings on the cover. It also comes out of the book naturally. The choice seems to be almost obvious. With The Red Velvet Forest, it was obvious that it had to be the red velvet painting.

CanWWR (Patricia): Well, thank you very much Shawna.