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An Interview with Sheryl St. Germain

by Allison Schuette

Sheryl St. Germain is the author of six books of poetry, most recently Let it Be A Dark Room: New and Selected Poems (Autumn House Press, 2007), a translation of Cajun poet Jean Arceneaux, and a collection of essays, Swamp Songs: The Making of an Urruly Woman (University of Utah, 2003). Her works explore her upbringing in New Orleans and her continuing fascination with the culture and geography of the area. She has recently completed a new collection of essays, Navigating Disaster, in which she continues that exploration, this time with a focused meditation on loss. Her work has received several awards, including two NEA Fellowships, an NEH Fellowship, the Dobie-Paisano Fellowship, the Ki Davis Award from the Aspen Writers Foundation, and most recently, the William Faulkner Award for the personal essay. St. Germain now lives in Pittsburgh, where she directs the MFA program in Creative Writing at Chatham University, a program with a focus on nature, environmental, and travel writing.

Allison Schuette: Did Hurricanes Katrina and Rita make you re-read Swamp Songs in a new way or confirm truths you discovered in writing about New Orleans?

Sheryl St. Germain: Katrina and Rita interrupted the story I was trying to write. I was in the middle of working on my new manuscript, Navigating Disaster—at a residency in an environmental writer’s colony—writing about gardens, all of which were pretty much wiped out by Katrina. I’d also interviewed my uncle, whose house was destroyed. Half of the things I had notes about were either destroyed by Katrina or so changed that I couldn’t write the book I wanted to. So I kept the first half of the manuscript and then let it be completely interrupted by Katrina. I didn’t want it to be dominated by the hurricane, though. We all have disasters in our lives, but we don’t want to be labeled by them. As bad as Katrina was, it’s not going to be the first thing that comes to people’s minds thirty or forty years from now when they think of New Orleans. I allowed Katrina to Pierce the book. The second half of the manuscript becomes a meditation on loss—loss of the city, loss of my son from whom I became estranged for a while, and other kinds of loss, like the death of my second brother. Katrina was difficult and personal. It’s a hard thing to intellectualize. A number of reporters came to talk to me about the hurricane. At a certain point, I became really irritated. I felt so grief-stricken about the whole thing, it was hard to answer questions like, “What are you going to miss most about New Orleans?” I wanted to say, “My brother with his crawfish boil.” None of it seemed to matter anymore. It was a tough, tough time.

Schuette: Your writing makes it clear that place is important to you, but ironically, you’re still writing about a place where you’re not. How are place and home different for you?

St. Germain: The question of home for me is complicated. New Orleans feels like home still, but if I step back, it’s the place where I was born and where I spent half my life. The other half, however, I’ve not been there. Sometimes I feel like an exile, but if I wanted to go back, I could. I’ve chosen not to. It’s not a lifestyle that I want.

I was just reading today that home is the place where you feel most guilty, where you’ll never be forgiven. If that’s true, then home is connected with my mother and New Orleans. Maybe that’s why I write about it so much. It’s something I’m longing for that I don’t have.

Now, if you think of home as a place where you feel comfortable, where you can kick off your shoes and be yourself, then writing is my home. No matter where I am, if I have my laptop or my journal, I’m home. When I pick up the pen, I experience the most profound feeling of intimacy and acceptance and familiarity I know. Which is interesting...
because it's not related to a place at all. Then again, it's the landscape itself that inspires me. One of the most productive times I had as a writer was at the residency in a writer's colony where my studio was in the Louisiana woods. There was something about the humidity, the flora and fauna. I felt like an indigenous creature. I belonged. I didn't belong in Iowa, where I lived for seven years. That didn't mean I couldn't live there, but it wasn't the place I was born. It wasn't a place I could thrive.

I like the idea that I can always return to New Orleans. Almost every year, I go back for Mardi Gras or Jazz Fest or visit my mother. These holidays are important to me; they're mine. The traditions, the music, the food—they're mine. I'm not living in New Orleans, but I can have some of the culture. I've transformed my house in Pittsburgh. Every wall is decorated with prints from Jazz Fest. I have beads in every room and voodoo dolls. I collect New Orleans music. To honor people or to bless a house, I make gumbo. The whole house smells like roux and sausage and chicken. Everything's okay because now we have gumbo.

**Schuerer:** In Swamp Songs, you engage a hypotential critic who is accusing you of "mythologizing, romanticizing and anthropomorphizing" the swamps. Is there something to this critique—what are the legitimate dangers of writing about place?

**St. Germain:** There is a famous section in Walden where Thoreau is looking at red and black ants fighting. He goes on for two pages imagining one as Achilles and one as some other great Hector, completely anthropomorphizing. The passage reveals much more about Thoreau's imagination than it does about the ants. But that's interesting too. As long as we understand that when we mythologize, we reify ourselves and our culture, it's okay.

I am aware that I have to be careful because I'm not living the every day reality of New Orleans. Even though I talk to my mother often, I'm not there. I have the lens of the traveler. There's something good about that and there's something you have to watch out for. With distance, you can appreciate things a bit more than those who are caught up in the day-to-day struggles, but you tend to romanticize because you remember all the good stuff.

We need to understand nonfiction as a kind of fiction: not a lie, but my version of the swamps isn't everybody's version of the swamps. Sometimes, I'm interested in the swamps metaphorically to represent what I don't want—to fall in or drive into like my sister did. Other times, I'm interested in it literally—the swamp about which Greg Gannett, the Cajun writer, photographer, and woodworker taught me. Both can be there; you just have to be careful. Do your research. Get the facts. Don't use the swamp as a metaphor if you don't understand what a wetland is.

**Schuerer:** Reading from your work as a whole—Going Home, Journals of Scherezade, Swamp Songs—I get the sense that there's this mass of experience continually presenting itself to you: family dynamics and upbringing, love/lost love, desire and its close proximity to addiction, the landscape in which these occur (including culture and food), and how the body fares throughout the experience. All your chosen metaphors for exploring this experience are organic, suggesting that the experiences are inextricably related. Do you write to highlight and emphasize the connections or to pursue the experiences so they don't simply clump together?

**St. Germain:** As a writer, I approach things out of love, not intellectually. I love gumbo. I love my mother's garden. I can intellectualize these things and see them as complicated nodes, but it's really...
If I want to reach more people and the subject is complicated enough, I’ll write prose because the essay is very public, like a performance. The poem, on the other hand, always feels like its written to a beloved. It’s like whispering to someone; it’s intimate.

my inexpressible love that shows me how complicated they are. I think about these subjects as the eye of something and then untangle it. I’m not a linear thinker. You can see my origins in poetry. Things tend to grow; an essay develops from an idea you had to do research on gumbo, to learn about all the different cultures that contributed. I didn’t know any of that growing up. I just knew that gumbo was something that I loved that tasted good. When I write, I like to look at something that seems uncomplicated on the surface but that reveals itself, under examination, to be layered and textured.

Schuette: Does that mean you start with metaphors? You mentioned in another context that you wanted to figure out stuff about your family and the wounds that you felt, but it sounds like the images come first and lead you into family stories.

St. Germain: I think they come together. In my mind, we don’t invent metaphors; they’re already there. As a graduate student, I was in a fiction class working on a story about how my father used to pull our choir boys around Christmas time, and one year, inexplicably, one of them didn’t have a head and he put them all out anyway, including the headless one. I didn’t intellectually understand metaphor as a child, but I knew that I was drawn to the image, and my instructor said, “That’s a natural metaphor for your family, Sheryl.” I hadn’t put the two together, but I realized the missedness, the woundedness, the display of it all. It’s not just explain, but I trust there’s a kind of natural intelligence to the world. It’s what draws me back again and again to the polluted lake I didn’t understand as a child. As an adult, I look at the things that continue to draw me, and then I think about why that might have been, almost like a psychoanalyst. What is it that draws me in? What is so provocative about a polluted lake or my mother’s messy garden? I try to think about each part of it and bring my imagination to it.

Schuette: What about the persistence of the material? Clearly, writing about it didn’t make it “go away.” Over the course of your books, stories get told and retold in new forms and contexts. Your mother’s cooking, your father’s affairs, your brother’s death, your own lost loves—all these events occur in poetry, then in essays, in the context of place (New Orleans), and then in the context of persona (Scheherazade). What does this reiteration bring for you?

St. Germain: When you’re young, you have a particular understanding of something that changes as you get older. In fact, one of the things I love about getting older is that things you once took for granted, you don’t anymore. Maybe I’ve thought all these years about my father in one way, or my brother, or my culture, and then one day I wake up and for whatever reason—one day the sun is shining, the particular way my face looks in the mirror—I see something different because I’ve changed, I’ve become older. There’s also something different about rendering it in prose as opposed to poetry. Prose provides more room to articulate connections. Threads and narratives get attached to an image in the essay. I am a narrative lyric poet, but the narratives are really short. The essays in Swamp Songs are much longer and much more complicated and have more information embedded in them. For example, the first two pages and part of the last page of “Communion” used to be a three-page poem—I still have that poem—and it says something, but I didn’t have the room to say everything that I wanted to say. Sometimes, when I’m doing a reading, I’d read that poem, and sometimes when I read that essay, I’d just read the first two pages and the last page because it works together as a whole, but all that stuff in the middle, it’s really stuff that I want to say too: stuff about gumbo and how it came about and the oyster and the bread pudding—that used to be a poem as well. Prose provides a way of relating and punting images in a different context. When you write a book of poetry, the poems might be connected, but they are not. When you write a book of prose, it’s a little bit, but not that much. It’s difficult to connect them in the way that you can connect things in a prose piece.

Schuette: Or the reader has to do it, and you don’t know if they’ll do it quite the way you want. Maybe an essay gives a little more control.

St. Germain: It does. And I also want an audience. I’m not a difficult poet. I make an effort to write accessible poetry. A Cajun woman sent me an e-mail once and she said she had my poem “Cajun” on her refrigerator. She’d had it up so long that the typeface had worn away and she couldn’t afford to buy another copy and could I please send her one. I was so happy, happier than if I had been published with a huge press and a million people had read my book because that’s who I’m writing for. Sometimes with poetry, I worried the audience was just not there. People wanted to reach were never going to read a poem. The lyric essay started for me when I realized I was writing these long poems and they were getting longer and longer and the line breaks were becoming arbitrary, and I thought, these are not poems, they’re essays. But then I thought, no, they’re really poems. My aim is the same, so what makes it an essay? It’s longest. It doesn’t have line breaks! What’s the distinction? I argued with myself for a while, then I thought if I can’t fake people into reading it by calling it an essay and in my mind it’s a really a poem, that’s great.
Schuette: I’m interested in these connections between fiction and poetry, in particular the tension between narrative and lyric for you. An early chapbook, Going Home, was largely driven by narrative, but The Journals of Scheherazade seven years later relies primarily on lyric, and then Swamp Songs seven years after that combines them in the essay form. And, in fact, you end that collection writing, “Maybe I should stop searching for an overarching narrative... maybe my story is lyric, not narrative.” What does it mean to choose lyric over narrative, or why would you say, okay, maybe this isn’t about finding a narrative then, maybe it’s about letting the lyric stand?

St. Germain: In the essay “Whips and Unruly Women,” I was trying to understand my own life history with men, and how I hadn’t managed to stay with one man, a failure in our society. We often tell that story in popular myth and culture, the story about the couple that goes together throughout the world, and I didn’t have that narrative. I realized, instead, that my experience with the partners I’d had were like poems, discrete poems on a chain. The narrative form felt slightly imprisoning in some ways.

So often we’re forced to tell our lives in the form of a story: this happened, then this happened. When someone walks up to you, they say, “So what’s your story?” They don’t say, “So what’s your poem?” That implies this beginning, middle, and end, and I didn’t feel like I always had a satisfactory story that I could tell. Schuette: Is it something you see about the book as a whole, too, that experience comes into play for an earlxt? Because, from reading Swamp Songs, it feels like you desired a narrative to give your life sense, at least for a time.

St. Germain: I just taught Walden again, in it. Thoreau is this thirty-year-old kid really, a Puritan, desiring spiritual transcendence. He doesn’t want to drink or eat meat. He wants this Spartan-like existence, and yet, he’s also this person of physical, sensual existence—eating, drinking, fucking. In Walden, he goes back and forth between these two versions of himself, abolished, and that’s one of the things that makes Walden interesting. So I would answer by saying, “Yes, I have both these desires in me—lyric and narrative.”

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CONVERSE COLLEGE
from Let It Be A Dark Roux: New and Selected Poems

by Sheryl St. Germain

Carnival: an Ode to New Orleans

So your house stinks, really bad, and the inside, even the furniture, is covered with mold, it's like everything has grown another skin, furry, yellow, black, and you remember that sometimes when you walked in the Quarter late at night you used to smell something like this—a mix of rotting seafood, spoiled beer, and urine—and there's something almost familiar about the stink of your ruined house, as if this is the base smell, somehow, of the heart of your culture, the mold a mask that reveals something that was always there.

Maybe your house has to be gutted, and you want to hire someone to scrape the insides out because you can't stand the smell or the pain of being bound so intimately to this wounded thing, but you can't afford to hire anyone, so you're doing it yourself.

Maybe the roof or walls of your house have fallen in. Maybe your house looks as if it's had a heart attack. Maybe it's just lost itself into the attic. Maybe another house is on top of yours so that it looks like the houses are fighting, and all of a sudden you can't remember the last time you made love or were happy, though you think of yourself as a happy person, you are from New Orleans, born and bred, how could you be otherwise, and you think you would like to have some kind of hallucinatory, fierce sex with someone, right this very minute, right on the muddy floors of your house, you think you could lose your anger into it, enjoy your bruised heart into it.

Anger and sadness are breeding, though, and don't help with the gutting of your house, and you think it might be better to make some gumbo and light up the case, like Ann Sexton says in that poem, instead of dreaming of having sex with someone, and anyway there's no one around to have sex with.

And you're not so bad at the gutting, it reminds you of eating crabs and crawfish, you're good, because you've been working at cleaning crabs and crawfish, at dismantling them and scraping out any piece of sweet meat that might be hiding in any secret part, and that's how you have to hunt out the mold now, it's how you have to scrape and pull and be relentless. So you hold your breath and nose and think about cleaning crabs as you work.

Maybe your house has drifted into the middle of the street and has to be bulldozed because it's rejoining the flow of traffic of journalists who want to photograph your house. You think about how hard the waters must have hit your house if it is to have been wrenched from its moorings like this, and you remember how you felt after being punished a long time when you were a kid and your mother finally said okay now you can go outside. How you bolted, exploded out of the house. You think the waters must have moved like that when the levees failed.

Maybe you've lost books or clothes or furniture or photo albums, maybe you've lost a refrigerator, a stove, a computer, your mother's wedding ring, your childhood piano. Maybe someone you love has died. Maybe you did not recognize the body when you saw it.

But it's spring, it's carnival, and you're sick of mourning and sick of cleaning and gutting and sick of not having sex so you wrap yourself in blue tape and call it a costume, and you walk around upriver with a sign that says FEMA called, Beans will arrive in April. Or maybe you and your friends dress up like Dutch Indians and walk around with signs saying New Orleans needs Strong Drinks.

Maybe you put a toy helicopter on your head and disguise yourself as a sand bag, or maybe you design a float for your levees called The Corps of Engineers, and you are almost happy.

Or maybe you just show up, as you always do, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, and stand around on St. Charles, waiting for the parade. Maybe you think it's important just to show up, as if showing up proves you believe something about this shattered city and your wounded house, though you're not sure exactly what it is you believe, and when the first float rounds the corner and you see the beads whipping through the spring air, all that color and shininess lighting up the sky, your heart almost stops, it is like seeing someone you love again after a long, long time, and you wriggle your way up close to the float, you put your hands up and you yell as loud as you can, you scream, you shout, you almost lose your voice, you are trying to get God's attention or maybe just trying to get the attention of someone who will make fierce love to you, hit me, hit me with some beads baby, you're waiting for your hands like you've been entered by a hoodoo spirit, you get your mojo working, you get your grits going, dry dry dry, right here, me, me, you're reaching for the noiling sky, for the beads that will change your life if only you can catch them, if only you can hear the sound of them hitting your hand, hard, the sound that means someone threw those useless, shimmering, indispensable things right to you, right into the palm of your hand, and you are shouting for your house, for the heart of your city, for the gone ones, throw me, throw me something Mister.