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Victoria Redel on Patience and Permission

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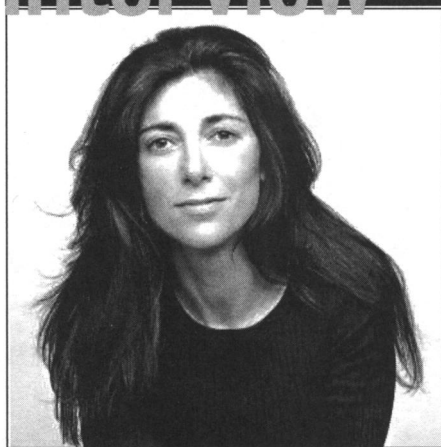
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interview



VICTORIA REDEL

THOUGH VICTORIA REDEL WAS RAISED IN A HOUSEHOLD OF TUTUS, IT WAS THE SLOW-FORMING WRITTEN WORD THAT WOULD BECOME HER ART. INSPIRED BY A SECRET STASH OF ADOLESCENT LOVE POEMS, REDEL WENT ON TO AUTHOR THE NOVEL *LOVERBOY*, THE SHORT STORY COLLECTION *WHERE THE ROAD BOTTOMS OUT*, AND THE POETRY COLLECTIONS *ALREADY THE WORLD* AND *SWOON*. HER NOVEL *THE BORDER OF TRUTH* WILL BE PUBLISHED IN APRIL 2007. READ OUR INTERVIEW TO UNCOVER THE SIX DEGREES OF VICTORIA REDEL — WHICH ACTUALLY INCLUDE KEVIN BACON.

Victoria Redel on Patience and Permission

by Kimberly
King Parsons

■ **On the bulletin board by your desk, you have a slip of paper that says, “You have permission.” What does that mean?**

It’s a goofy thing to write little mantras to yourself but I have done it for different reasons at different times in my life, and goofy or not, I think it’s a healthy thing. What I mean by “You

have permission,” is many things. First it means that there is nothing I don’t have permission to write about; nothing [exists] outside of the act of my sentence-making imagination. I don’t have to fear that I’m not smart enough or brave enough to go somewhere [in my writing].

Certainly, as I move through the world, I move as someone who wants to be a good citizen, a good parent, a good friend. There are a lot of “goods” in my list, and I’m ruled by those things. And they are often the enemy of the writer, because the writer who wants to look like a good person on the page is going to be a lesser writer. I have permission to be every kind of human on the page, that’s what I’m saying to myself.

As the youngest of three sisters, maybe it means that I have permission to be better than my elders. Being the youngest is not a particularly entitled position, so I give myself permission to entitlement.

I think writing is a little like having an illegitimate love child. Everyone might say, “How great,” and “That’s beautiful,” and “Wow, I love that you’re a writer.” But no one — not your children, your spouse, your friends, your lover, your boss — wants you to say no to the movie, the party, the bedroom, the meeting, the grocery store, so that you can take the absolutely necessary time alone for developing your art. I am giving myself permission to take myself away from the obligations in my life to give myself a chance to write.

■ **Much of your work tends to focus on family, specifically childhood. Do you pull from your own childhood experiences or from raising your children?**

I can give you the conscious answer and then there’s the

unconscious answer. There is a story in *Where the Road Bottoms Out* called, “In the North House.” When I was writing it, I was beginning to think about this “we” posse of girls — a plural narrator that appears in the story. I assumed that this gaggle of sisters was somehow based on my merged experience as a youngest sister. These girls are watching and protecting their mother, fearing her abandonment of them. The story takes place on the cliff of the Hudson River. Although the landscape in that fiction has nothing to do with the landscape where I grew up, I believed I was mining the vein of some anxiety I had about my own mother’s availability or unavailability. After I finished the piece, I wondered if I hadn’t unconsciously been thinking about my own flight from motherhood, my own ambivalence. In many ways, I feel that I became a writer when I had my children: The pleasure, the responsibility, the complexity, the amazing richness of mothering. But also a more acute understanding of my own childhood.

■ Did you grow up in a literary household?

Not literary — but my mother was a ballet dancer and she ran a large ballet school, so the art that I grew up around was dance. It defined our household. My sisters and I studied ballet. It was required of us. My middle sister began dancing professionally by the time she was 15 years old. Many of the older generation of Russian Ballet teachers living in New York City taught master classes for my mother, lived in our house on the nights they taught. Our house was thick with dancers — Russian, Spanish, African. My mother also had a repertory ballet company where choreographers such as Percival Borde showcased new pieces. Where my friends had basements with ping-pong tables and dart boards, our basement was filled with

tutus hanging upside down off the water pipes.

■ **When did you become interested in writing?**

I was an avid reader from an early age: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, but also comics and the *Nancy Drew* mysteries. In a family of dancers, the world of books was a private world, almost a kind of rebellion. I'd read and reread books — sometimes six times. There was a time I was obsessed with biographies: Florence Nightingale to Isadora Duncan's *My Life*. I wrote poems, like many kids, starting in early adolescence. But I

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took it very seriously even then. I kept notebooks of poems and early drafts. I had a love of traditional folk

music and, not surprisingly, many of those early poems took the ballad form. My eldest sister had a boyfriend, and when he went off to college he gave her a box of poems he had written for her. I think my sister was over the poems in a day, but I would sneak into her room and read them over and over. They seemed remarkable to me — very smart and full of allusions. They were love poems that had meter and rhyme. I read them all the time, imagining they were "great literature." I think eventually I stole the box from my sister. It was incredible to me to think that someone, someone I actually knew, had written them.

■ **Was your intrigue also coupled with an element of voyeurism?**

Oh, totally. I was the youngest sister by six years, so I did a

lot of looking at my sisters — going into their rooms and watching them get ready to go out into the world. Because of my sisters, I'm still a person who delights in watching women put on makeup.

■ *Loverboy* is about the complex relationship between a mother and son. Do people assume that you are drawing from your own experiences as a mother?

After a reading it's the first question that I'm asked: Do you have children? Is this like your life? And then: Have your sons read the novel? At first I was a bit offended by people's tendency to see what's on the page as directly [connected to] the author's life. Somehow it gives validity to the experience the reader has just undergone in reading. I'm less affronted by it now. People are, I think, frightened after reading that a writer has drawn them into the imagination and made it real, made the reader believe something. The answer I give those people is that, on one hand, my sons are nowhere in the book — that mother is not me and that child is neither one of my grown sons. I didn't fear sending them off to school and into connection with a larger world.

On the other hand, when I thought about what it was to love a kid or how it felt to bathe an infant, I didn't have to go very far. [My son's] bodies, in that sense, are all over those pages. Anyone who has inhabited the parent world and has seen the lingering mother by the kindergarten classroom, or the father who always needs his child to be the brightest, the fastest, has access what the book explores.

I haven't done my work in the novel if most parents can't relate to the best of the narrator. She lives on the

extremity of where we all live.

■ *Loverboy* was recently made into a film. Did you have any reservations about that process?

I really admire Kyra Sedgwick's work, so I was interested and compelled by how she would play the mom. She is astonishing. Both Kyra and her husband [director] Kevin Bacon engaged deeply with the characters and ideas in the book. They were extremely inclusive of me in the process, which is, I've learned, not the usual case with an optioned novel. When Kevin and Kyra and the screenwriter Hannah Shakespeare and I first met to discuss the book, I loved their questions: What's the importance of the guy in the white room? What's the deal with the neighbor mother, Mrs. Yarkin? "Lose the guy in the white room," I immediately responded. "But the neighbor and her boys are essential for the mother's psyche." In that first conversation I began the first step in understanding that I was going to let go. The film *Loverboy* was not going to be a translation of the novel *Loverboy*. Things were going to change, needed to change. It's a letting-go process to watch something become something else — to watch my art become Kevin's art, as the director. There are substantial changes between the book and the film, but he stayed very close to the intentions of the novel.

■ What is it like to see your characters depicted on film?

The film was shot close to New York City, which allowed me the chance to visit the set. The first day going out to New Jersey, I got lost — a genuine sign of my anxiety since I've an excellent sense of direction. As John Dunn, the costume director, brought me out to the field where the scene was being filmed, I felt nervous and shy

— what’s a poet doing among movie stars? John pointed to a boy running about trying to catch butterflies. And there was Paul [Dominic Scott Kay] in a plaid lumber jacket — and he was — how was it possible? — the visual incarnation of my imagination.

The scenes filmed that day never appeared in the novel *Loverboy*. The mother brings her son to a field to show him how to whisper his dreams into the ears of sheep — a Bedouin teaching. This notion appears in the novel, but only as a clause in a longer sentence that points to the mother’s life long attraction to knowledge. In the book, the mom shows her son exotic and original things — Stravinsky, art — but not a sheep field. This conflation of the clause and her desire to bring him the exceptional elements of life made what I saw filmed [that day] have a rightness — a sense that while I hadn’t written that scene, the scene was born entirely out of my novel. It had integrity.

■ **You studied poetry at Columbia University. When did you make the transition to fiction?**

To be honest, I still primarily see myself as a poet. Yes, I’m a fiction writer. But my first love, oldest love, truest love, is poetry. I took one fiction class at Columbia, but I really began writing fiction a few years later. At the time, I thought they were long, unwieldy poems; it took me a while to figure out that it was prose fiction.

When I started writing fiction, it was at a point in my development that I began thinking more explicitly about language, which feels a little ironic to say as a poet. I’d begun thinking about the possibilities within a sentence — the syntax of sentences, little pieces of grammatic potential, the music of a sentence. I wanted to push the sentence. And in my first stories I was having the chance to learn something new. The writing in *Where the Road Bottoms Out*

is much denser than the writing inside of [poetry collection] *Already the World*. I tried to pull back in *Loverboy*. And in *Swoon* the language is, in some ways, plainer still, because I wanted to rid myself of metaphor. I wanted to witness a thing as itself.

■ What makes a good sentence?

All great fiction writers have an attention to language on the level of poets. It's not just about a certain poise in a sentence, because we all know people who can write a pretty sentence. The sentence has to contain a sort of inevitability, an authenticity. Authenticity is tension, balance, poise and authority. We all recognize good sentences. If I ask my class to find the best, essential sentences in a page of writing by a classmate, they usually all choose the right ones — the original sentences, the ones not bloated or borrowed. Usually the writer picks the right ones, too — the ones made uniquely by a specific writer.

■ What are the biggest mistakes young writers make?

Maybe speed. Maybe forgetting sentences and thinking too much about plot. Maybe wanting the book deal more than the real deal art. Maybe trying to sound smart or cool rather than going for the heart. But maybe the biggest mistake is the fear of making a mistake — trying to sound like something they think writing sounds like, becoming approximate and safe rather than original and dangerous and thus a real contender.

One of the things that has surprised me as a creative writing teacher, and I may have been guilty of this as a young writer, too, is when students say, “Oh, yeah, yeah, I’ll clean up the writing later.” To me, that’s ridiculous. There is no later. It’s got to be now, or it

isn't going to happen. What you say and how you elect to say it impinges on what you've already said and what you can say next. There is sometimes a desire to get to the end, to rush ahead, to have speed. I don't want my students to get stuck, but I want them to slow down enough to notice the possibilities inside of the language — the quirkiness, the acoustical possibilities, the puns, the rhythms of a sentence. It makes writing so much more fun.

■ Do you write slowly?

Way slow. Sometimes I feel glacial. Although one of the joys for me when writing poetry is that I can often take a poem through its initial arc in one sitting, and that's a pleasure.

There are oodles of work afterward. I may have to dismantle the

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poem entirely. But there's great pleasure in that first gesture. Fiction-wise, I'm very slow.

On the other hand, my writing time is limited by the obligations of raising children and teaching. I have very set times to [write], and I try to be rigorous about keeping to my schedule. I can't wait around for "inspiration." I just have to claim it. Like most parents, I suspect, I've written under circumstances I could have never imagined prior to becoming a parent — like writing with a sick kid watching videos in the same room. For a long time after I had kids, I thought, "Oh, now I know what they mean when they tell women artists not to have children." It seemed almost impossible for me to have a child, have a job, have a partner, and try to be an artist. I

could see very quickly the priority that was going to be lost. I used to joke that I became a fiction writer to claim more space for the work — just to make it longer and say, “Look, I’ve got to put more words on the page and I need the time to do it.”

■ **What do you gain from an MFA program that you wouldn’t have writing on your own?**

I had a great time getting my MFA at Columbia for all sorts of reasons, including a needed move from a rural area to New York. I got time, which is nothing to scoff at.

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It wasn’t that I didn’t have to work, I did. I tutored for the SATs

and then I taught at Columbia in the Language and Rhetoric program. But writing and reading came first, and that was glorious. [It gave me] a chance to be in a community of teachers and young writers [who were] talking, thinking, eating, drinking poetry. I felt myself entering a life in writing.

I had the chance to study with remarkable people. I studied with Joseph Brodsky. I studied with Stanley Kunitz. I studied with Derek Walcott, Stephen Dunn, Carolyn Forché, William Matthews, Dan Halpern, Philip Levine and Richard Howard. Many of these poets were my literary heroes. I couldn’t believe I was in the same room with them. God knows, I was 23 and I didn’t always understand half of what they were saying to me about my own work, about the demands and rigors of the poem. I was painfully aware of how much I didn’t know. Still,

it was thrilling to be taken seriously and wrestle with concerns and ideas of poetry.

I remember showing C.K. Williams a group of new poems. He pointed out a tendency in the endings of these poems that he said worked very well for the first poem, but by the end was not only repetitive but a flight from a more substantial movement into poem. I honestly didn't know what the fuck he was talking about. I'd thought the closures were kind of smart and lofty. The poems had "gone over very well" in workshop. It was many years later, when I was making a poem and reached for this old gesture, that I heard Charlie Williams's warning and finally saw clearly what he meant.

I've been lucky to continue friendships with other poets that were in the program with me or right before or after me. A community developed, a tribe. We know each other's work. We've seen its emergence and change. I love that we are still trying to make things that endure on the page.

■ **When writing, how much do you consider the reader?**

I believe it's my job to care about the reader. I'm engaged in an exchange with the reader and I'm aware of that. I'm asking them to stay with me even if where I'm going is uncomfortable or difficult. That's a trust. I also think of it as a seduction. I've got to create a true chemistry. Look, there are times that I become aware that I'm writing in a way that's self-indulgent, maybe pleasing myself with little in-jokes, maybe selfishly clever sentences that aren't advancing anything in the work. That's private act as opposed to an act of seduction. And well, to push the metaphor — hopefully at my best moments, I'm pleasing myself and the reader at the same time. I have to respect the reader —

her intelligence, her capacity to detect bullshit. I might be writing for my best possible reader; my reader might include Shakespeare, by which I mean we write into history as well as into contemporary and future relationships.

■ **Can you talk a little about your new novel?**

The Border of Truth takes place in two periods of time — 1940 and 2003. Half the book is in the form of an epistolary novel — a 17-year-old boy stuck on a ship that's being returned to Europe is writing to Eleanor Roosevelt. As much as he wants her help, he wants to talk about cinema and girls. The other section concerns a woman, a translator. The novel explores the secrets inside of families and how those secrets shape us, whether we want them to or not. It questions the importance of knowing or not knowing what previous generations have done. It is also about immigrancy, refugees and the first generation. Both my parents came to the United States from Nazi-Europe. My mother and her family lived in Paris under Nazi Occupation, saved really because my grandfather, who was born in Egypt, had Persian passports through his father. My father's family came in 1940 and he was a great resource in the writing of this book.

■ **How do you know when a work is finished?**

Yikes. I'm pretty sure I'm never quite finished. Even years later, I find myself wanting to pencil changes into published work. I'm saddened by lapses in the work, missed opportunities, the places where I've closed a sentence off too quickly or added unnecessary beats or words. The completed work is always incomplete. Sometimes I dream the next work will be complete.

Sometimes I love the open possibility in believing I'm growing as a writer — risking real failures and hopefully creating some work that is durable and true. ■■■