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Remembering Gina Berriault

by Marianne Rogoff

Near Sequoia movie theatre in downtown Mill Valley, in the space now occupied by Champagne French Bakery, I shared many lunches with the late, great Marin County writer Gina Berriault. I was her student then (MA in English: Creative Writing, SF State, 1983) and she was my thesis advisor, a one-to-one mentor relationship that did not involve a classroom full of other needy writing students. I cherished this focused attention: all about me. The professor's long fingers often reached up to move her straight, dark hair away from her face so she could emphasize a point with serious eye contact; her body language was self-contained and knowing, her fashion sense elegant, subdued. At that time, the place was called Sonapa Farms and had more of an old-fashioned coffee-shop ambiance, darker; we nicknamed it "The Dive"; people might even have been smoking cigarettes in there along with their BLTs. My thesis collection was called, what else, *True Stories*, inspired by my rollicking, dangerous childhood, and Gina Berriault not only took the time to read and critique my overwrought drafts, she showed up, bought me lunch, gave me books she thought I should read, and acted like my writing was worthy of her care and time, the stories mattered, and the thing to do was persevere.

To those who know her work, Gina Berriault is considered one of the great 20th century masters of the short story. Robert Stone has called her stories "among the wisest

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and most heartbreaking in American fiction.” (Go here for details of her many accomplishments: <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/23/arts/gina-berriault-73-an-author-of-deft-novels-and-short-stories.html>) *Three Short Novels*, a new book out from Counterpoint Press, is a beautiful repackaging of Berriault’s masterpiece novellas: *The Son*, *The Lights of Earth*, and *Conference of Victims*. The list of previous copyright years in this 2014 collection stretches back to 1962 yet the stories do not read like dated relics, they resonate in the timeless way of the literary lions whose work Berriault admired: Chekhov, Gogol, Dostoevsky, et al.

As a writer, when I read I am always wondering, how does the writer do this? How does she manage such a macro yet intimate lens? I believe this is the master’s secret. The classic 1966 story anthology *Points of View* includes Gina Berriault’s famous story “The Stone Boy” among those very lions, along with women masters like Dorothy Parker, Shirley Jackson, and Katherine Anne Porter, a prestigious club. Like them, Berriault understood that the heart of a story is not description, or action, or dialog (though they matter, and her dialog is deep). What matters is, who is telling me this story? Why? What kind of narrator is this? What can I learn from spending all this time with these characters, inside their secret longings and unexpected pleasures?

Henry James long ago established point of view as the key to the writer’s art, “the central intelligence that filters the story.” “*What* a story is about is partly a question of *how* it is told,” say the editors of *Points of View*. Berriault’s new book contains three quiet stories on subjects that could have been delivered loud. (This was her style in person as well.) A lesser writer would have hyped this kind of material and made it scandalous (*The Son*), or tawdry, another celebrity-infidelity tale (*The Lights of Earth*), or

political suicide melodrama (*Conference of Victims*). In each instance it is the narrator's perspective that saves the subject from being trivialized, and that's the literary gold: sharp, often painful observations of self and others that indicate how each person in a story contributes a little something different to the mix with their backstories and baggage, what they bring to the table.

One reviewer describes Berriault's characters as walking "that fine line between the merely flailing and the fully lost." But without condemnation or agendas: "She takes the time to note not as a voyeur but with true empathy." That was my personal experience with the great writer as well. She *saw* me, she *got* me, she was *kind*. Her manner of teaching was generous, like her writing. We met at "The Dive" a handful of times. We talked like grownups at a time when I knew so little about the brilliant world I yearned to join. I'm glad I had her all to myself, as I did not want to share her in a classroom with others. Readers of her writing will experience a similar feeling of being her confidante, as she gently reveals the deep dark layers of what's really going on.