

The following is an interview with Karen Salyer McElmurray, author of the memoir *Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother's Journey*, as well as numerous essays and three novels. Karen has won many awards for her writing, including the AWP Award for Creative Nonfiction, the Lillie Chaffin Award for Appalachian Writing. Her novel, *The Motel of the Stars*, was Editor's Pick by *Oxford American*.

A collection of essays, *Walk Till the Dogs Get Mean*, co-edited by McElmurray and poet Adrian Blevins, appeared in Fall, 2015. In all her work, McElmurray explores life's complications and uncertainties with a voice of strength and heart, sure to enchant her readers.

SE: In your memoir *Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother's Journey*, a novel about your life after giving up your son for adoption at age sixteen, and the event in which you finally get to meet him some thirty years later, you establish with italics memories that you believe could be imperfectly remembered, or speculations about other's thoughts and experiences (such as the section about magic with your mother and grandmother). Obviously, in nonfiction writing we're often asked to record events exactly right or not at all; yet you pushed the typical confines of the genre and created an award-winning memoir. Can you talk a bit about your decision to include the italics – the imperfect memories – in the book?

KM: As I thought about your question this evening, the phrase I am focusing on most is “record events exactly right or not at all.” That’s an amazingly complex description—events right or not at all—when it comes to the situation I encountered as mother who relinquished a child to adoption.

In the first place, as a sixteen year old girl (in a time and place where I had little to no support for understanding concerning my own sexuality, concerning birth control, concerning pregnancy, concerning my own body (abortions were not yet legal in Kentucky), I was living in a maze of circumstances that seemed to have no “right” or “correct” definition at all.

As a product of a Southern Baptist heritage, sex and its “consequence” of a pregnancy were defined for me by a god I was taught to fear, not love. The women who were my role models (mother, grandmothers, aunts) were a difficult

inheritance of depression, anger, voicelessness, powerlessness—with the odd woman who ran off to choose her own life (be it Big Lawyer in the North or Go-Go Dancer in Atlanta). Those women were forever after spoken of with the odd mix of perplexity and disapproval and envy.

I had no idea how to make choices I could trust, ones that would set future events going on some right path, whatever that was. I caught hold of a choice like I was drowning. I surrendered my child to a state supported adoption like that was all happening to some other girl—a movie of a life I wasn't really living yet.

Fast-forward a million years, to when I was a thirty-some year old woman who was suddenly beset with dreams about birth. Weird ones. Births from my side. Births in dank cellars and from the palms of my hands. Crazy birth dreams, and inexplicable cramping from my womb that made me wake up hurting, my sheets wet with water that smelled like salt. I was writing a novel then, one partly about a woman in the 1930's who runs away to be a tap dancer and leaves her daughter behind. That woman, I finally knew, was me, and to stop being crazy and finally understand the dreams, I began to take a hard look at the girl I was before. The girl and the boy I surrendered.

But how to take that hard look? No facts existed. I couldn't remember the birth date. I couldn't track it down in some office somewhere. I couldn't write a courthouse and get any facts at all—still couldn't in the state of Kentucky, with their sealed records. I couldn't ask my own father for a birth date, since he claimed he didn't remember his own history, no less the birth date of a grandson we never spoke about.

Facts. Dreams. Crazy hurting. What was the real truth in all of it?

How to translate dreams and less than half memories and inexplicable body memories into a narrative that was true? Was there any truth at all?

Part of the way wrote this state of me was the italics. Originally, those italicized pieces were all in second person. I wanted to speak to myself, back then. To that girl, then, with her confusion, her clarity, her lack of it. I wanted to speak to all the other girls out there from that era I was living in as a teenager. All us lost "you's," then. And me, a grown woman, living alone, sorrowing. I addressed her in second person too. And my mother—her, another you. Her young life, her own lost young woman self. She became a you I spoke with. And along with all that, the reader was

a you. I wanted you, that reader, to walk around in the head and heart of a girl become a woman who birthed a son she was supposed to forget.

A recording of events, right ones. The story I made was as fractured, as multi-layered—as imperfect (or ultimately as perfect as it could be) as the experience itself.

SE: In *Surrendered Child*, when you finally get to meet your son Andrew, there is a great lead up to the actual interaction. You write of every uncomfortable moment when he and his “sweetheart” Jennifer were running later than expected. You give great details of the nervous straightening and cleaning of your home and the way you bit your nails until they bled. Then Andrew arrives and we get a physical description, but you leave the details of your first words with each other to the imagination of the readers, saying, “You must decide how it was or choose to see how it wasn’t, your own reunion story.” I think it was an intriguing choice to leave that moment, the novel’s most intense climax, to speculation. Can you tell me about how you made that choice while writing the book?

KM: The simpler answer to that question is that I did not yet know how my reunion with my son would be. I had written the memoir (my own experience of the birth, my childhood, the surrender and its aftermath) and the book was awaiting publication. In the midst of that, Jennie, my son’s then girlfriend, found me on the Internet because of the memoir. Part of it was advertised on website, and that part had as its title “June 21, 1973,” which is Andrew’s birthdate. Jennie saw that, and she saw my photo. She wrote me and asked me if I’d found my son and the world I thought I knew, the one I’d written and lived to that moment, flew apart. The decision of the publisher was that I add an epilogue—the aftermath of the book. I added that one-day only because I did not yet know what the future would bring in terms of a new connection with my son.

But in terms of writing the actual words we said that night of the reunion. I could have. I could have written the bottles of wine we drank. How we walked in the woods the next morning and sat shivering in cool rain that began to fall. How I fumbled with the stick shift on my old Honda and the engine died and Andrew and I sat, saying nothing.

All that happened. I remember the tiniest of details that I remember.

But what it felt like happened with that one long day waiting to meet him was that a second part of my life was opening up and I had no idea how it would unfold, yet. I

wanted to create a scene with an ending I did not know, the very way I hadn't known him and didn't yet know how our lives would intersect. Still don't, really.

A dozen adoption reunion stories I now know are still unfolding. The one student I had whose birth mother doesn't want to know her, not really, but hasn't said no entirely yet. The poet I know who looked for her birth mother, only to find out she was a long-dead nun who left behind a journal with hints only of who her father might be. All those stories, found, but not finished. Waiting to be understood. Mysteries of histories and lives and hearts.

And I wonder more and more, the more I have lived the years since finding Andrew, if there is any ending at all to an adoption reunion. There is what we imagine. What we find. What we long for and what we stumble upon. I honestly do not know if any of the worlds ever meet like we want them to. I couldn't write the conversation at the end of that long day of waiting to meet him. I could only imagine the end of the narrative.

SE: You frame your memoir so perfectly. You open with a beautiful and graceful child about to endure an experience too mature for her sixteen years. This girl is still holding on to her own lost mother, the one who left a year before, with an old bracelet of glass beads that used to belong to that parent. And in the novel's conclusion, you reimagine the presence of glass beads in your life with a reference to William Godwin's bead metaphor in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. Here, beads are our many experiences, both good and bad, strung together to create our lives. Seconds before you will meet Andrew, you return to your sixteen-year-old self, that child dancing in the meadow on the verge of giving birth. As readers, we know that memory is one of the imperfect ones. Talk about why you chose that experience to frame the piece.

KM: It is interesting to me that just last week I did a reading at Emory and Henry College, then this week, another one in Florida. On both occasions, I ended up close to the memoir in a way I had not been for some time. At Emory and Henry, a friend and fellow writer wrote a paper about the memoir and read it, with me sitting right there. In Florida, I brought the memoir out and read parts from it I had not read in a very long while. And, if you believe it, on both occasions I began to understand that glass beads in a way I had not before. The beads were a jet black necklace that belonged to my mother. My mother, you must understand, was quite ill, controlled my body and the way I dressed in such strange ways, for so long. I wore her clothes to school even, for a long time. And I hated her for all that, her control of me, her lack of what I needed. So to be wearing her necklace, by choice, is quite a metaphor for me, as I think it now. I wore the necklace like I loved it, like it was a celebration

of her, her life, the pretty young woman she lost somewhere along the way. And it broke and scattered in the weeds. Like I broke free of her, and lost her too, all at once.

There's some fairy tale where a necklace breaks and the young woman who wants to escape from the wicked whoever is set the task of gathering beads lost in the grass, and the ants finally help her do that. Only magic helps the necklace be made whole.

For a long while, the necklace I wore and broke was my mother's, broken and lost in the grass. The necklace of the events that made her and me, years and years, times lost, love lost, people lost (mother and son and me as a mother) was broken and scattered.

The task I set myself was to gather up all the lostness and make it fit together. Force it to fit together. Make it fit together with the sheer will of education, jobs, accumulating successes, publications, lines on vitas. Cerebral things. Knowledge made, earned, as carefully acquired as a treatise (William Godwin metaphor, anyone?).

The only thing that really found the beads and mended the necklace was magic. The totally unexpected finding of my son by what seemed a miracle. Whether or not the reunion went "well," was all I dreamed it could be, the dream happened. The lost beads of time were gathered in the way I least imagined.

SE: I love that you included photographs in *Surrendered Child*. You included photos of your mother, of yourself, and then of Andrew, showing the progression of your family's generations. Each subject is shown as a child and as an adult. You also mirror your own marriage with your parents' in these shots. Why did you choose the pictures you did? What do you feel each adds to your story?

KM: During the writing of the memoir, I taped pictures all over the walls near my desk. Great grandmothers. Grandmothers. Aunts. Them as children and young women. Me as a child. My cousins. All the black and white photos I could find. I wanted the ancestors there with me as I wrote, their eyes studying me as I studied them and found the words for my past. It was comforting to me, and sometimes unsettling too. The shadows you see fall across faces from the past.

I can't say, so much, that I was aware of paralleling—my marriage, my parents; their childhoods and my own. The editors arranged the photos, and actually chose photos

from a big group I sent them to look at. I was more aware of ghosts helping me summon time.

SE: You write about very gritty experiences in your essays and your books. In *Surrendered Child*, you recall the drug addictions and anorexia you struggled with following your son's birth and adoption. And in one of your essays, "Saved," you compare the parental arguing you witnessed as a child to the pain of the Christians in *Book of Martyrs* who "were set upon long spikes to die awful deaths." And finally in your essay "Hands" you discuss your awareness of the darkness your stories often tell, saying:

My hands conjure wounds. Friends tell me this. They say, make the story lighter. So I pull all the glittery threads beneath a quilt made of black squares. I write stories in which mother loves daughter and daughter loves herself. Is this the truth, after all? I want to remember afternoons where sunlight drifted across the polished floors. Want to remember hands stroking my hair, telling me the world was good. But eventually, I come back to it. The way voices still collide in the shadows of my past. If I use this word, I tell myself, that word. If I describe it just so. That look on my mother's face. Darkness pulses in these things I call words. Does the wound inform the truth, does the truth alter in the telling? If I reach for her hands across time and space, pry open her clenched fists, will I find love at last?

In that excerpt, it seems you may have struggled with the idea of writing "lighter," entertained the idea to please your audience, but inevitably got pulled back to the painful darkness of your truth. Can you talk to me about any of the struggles you've faced writing about your dark memories? Have you often been asked to change your tone for the audience? Have you ever personally struggled with the dark tone of one of your pieces? And despite all of those challenges, why do you feel you often gravitate toward a darker tone?

KM: I do this blog at a site called Marginalia. Letters exchanged with my friend Nancy Peacock, a novelist. We write each other letters about our lives as writers. The one I am pasting in here is about light and dark and me:

Dearest Nancy:

I also love laughter. Like you, humor, hilarity are the sweet underbelly of the world that keep me going. How I long to laugh. To eat those orange circus peanuts and watch silly movies and laugh so hard my stomach hurts. And yet I do not laugh easily.

In the closet in my study is a portrait of my great-great grandmother. My father, who is prone to tall tales like the father in that film I love, *Big Fish*, has told me various stories about that ancestor. In one story, her name was Nethaladia. My great-great grandfather met her when she was the bearded lady for a carnival. In the portrait, I see nary a sign of a whisker, but I do see the saddest eyes. A lover of old photographs, I have many more. On my wall as I type you this letter, there's a photograph of a somber great aunt and her sister standing in a pasture by a fence. There's one of my unsmiling grandmother as a child, her head adorned with a huge, white bow. Another of little me at Christmas with my father and my granny. I'm looking gravely at my cousin. None of us in any photo I've put up in the room where I write are smiling very much. We're a serious lot.

Truth be known, I have never been much good at humor. At parties, I'll dive into a joke and forget the punch line at the last minute. I'll tell a joke I loved earlier and change important details just enough so that everyone looks at me, puzzled and not the least bit amused. I never did think he was funny when, years back, I dated this guy who loved nothing more than silly jokes. He would stand in my kitchen, pick up the cutting board and say, hi, I'm bored! Or he'd tell me this one. What did the Dalai Lama say to the hot dog vendor? Make me one with everything! Har, har.

Like I said, I come from good gravitas stock. I love nothing more than all the serious stories about my ancestors. An uncle, locked out by an aunt after he drag-assed in after one more night of serious card-playing and drinking, how it was winter and he died sleeping in the front seat of his truck with the heater running. The cousin who died from a shotgun's blast. The grandfather who saw a hole into eternity in the middle of the kitchen floor. The aunt with visions of the Holy Ghost. Show me a story about what hurts and I'm salivating all the way to my writer's notebook.

Here of late, though, what I'm struggling with is not so much humor, exactly, but hope. Like a friend said in a Facebook post about reading dark work, *maybe I'm getting too old to enjoy things that are relentlessly bleak. I don't need to be left in despair at the end of a book--the world has enough of that for me to seek it out.* What I'm struggling with is how to write, not exactly the funny stuff, but light in the midst of darkness. And this, as we all know, is no easy task. Not easy when I come from generations of sadness, of depression, of loss, of tragedies. Not easy at all when I watch the news from Gaza where, according to reports from the United Nations, one child dies each hour. Stories from the Ukraine where land mines keep mourners out of the field where a plane was shot down and 295 civilians died.

How do we as writers summon light in the midst of darkness? I honestly don't know, most days. As Anne Carson says in an essay, "It is easier to tell a story of how

people wound one another than of what binds them together.” Far easier for me to summon pain, to translate darkness to the page. Yet I feel myself reaching again and again toward tiny jars of gold from my spirit to illuminate. It hurts to be happy. Joy hurts when I summon it, but I try daily to teach myself the power of beauty, of radiance. I have to believe in the power of words to transform not only the lives of the characters I create, the lives of readers, and my own. Am I foolhardy to believe that stories are gifts?

Pardon if I’m writing about something that I’ve written about to you before, but I think about this moment a lot. That time in Thailand so many years ago now. I was traveling with the boyfriend and we’d crossed whole worlds to end up in Bangkok outside a Buddhist temple. I remember how we solemnly took our shoes off and tiptoed across a huge marble floor, our hearts pounding and our heads bowed as we passed begging bowls laid with blossoms and mounds of hennaed butter on plates and walls adorned with photographs of nuns attending to bodies laid out ceremonially on stretchers. All manner of things that we, two young Westerners in a strange world, did not understand. At the center of the temple there it was, the main statue of The Buddha. He was a fat, laughing Buddha, that one. Around him stood orange-robed monks, pitching pennies at his navel.

Love you, Nancy.

Karen

SE: You’ve written pieces of literary fiction, creative nonfiction, and memoir. There is certainly an obvious change in approach between the genres, an adjustment that must be made in a writer’s tone and style when swapping between the categories. Yet, you’ve obviously mastered that shift of focus and process, as all of your published books have won awards. Describe any challenges you’ve faced during the changes of genre in your career. Is there a particular genre you feel most comfortable in?

KM: I was sitting with a friend at lunch a couple of months back and we were talking about this very thing. She wanted to know why I “diverge” into fiction—the novel. I know that I grew up with stories in my heritage. Ballads. Country music songs that tell stories about marriages and wild women and hard work. And I come from generations of tall tale tellers—my father first and foremost among them. So maybe I have the notion deeply embedded in me that I should tell tales about the world, and not necessarily true ones about my own life.

Yet plot lies down unwillingly for me. Its connections, conflicts, resolutions, are hard for me. I always seem to come back to the stories of my own life.

I know that the deepest place in me, the womb place, the cave place, the chest cavity, the heart, the belly, the gut, comes when I am writing “true,” the creative nonfiction.

The twists and turns, the taste of real, is my favorite story, the one that fits best in my mouth.

SE: Many of your books (The Motel for the Stars, Surrendered Child, Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven) and essays (“Looking Inside,” “The Land Between”) speak about Appalachia and the South and your experiences and emotions influenced by your years spent living in Georgia and Kentucky. What aspects of Appalachia and the South do you hope to infuse into your writing?

KM: Appalachia is where I came from. I lived there first when I was in grade school, when my father taught high school in Harlan County. Some of first memories are of that place, of coal tipples and the L&N and the railroad tracks. My father taught kids from families that had immigrated from Poland and Czechoslovakia and changed their names to suit the register for the coal company. We moved to central Kentucky when I was in fifth grade, but I always went home, really home, when I drove to Johnson County to stay with my granny. And I moved back there when I was eighteen and went to community college—one of the richest times of my life.

I’m not here in this question to give you stories about quilts and lye soap and apple faced dolls, though I could do that. I have those memories. I have memories of smoke houses and well water red with sulfur and an outhouse down a hill where my mother walked me at night.

My connection to the mountains I came from is a spiritual one. And I don’t mean Jesus, though Jesus figures heavily in the place I came from. Big old angels lit all up for Christmas and the nail scarred hands and hymns I will remember all my life.

But spiritual nonetheless.

Mircea Eliade calls sacred space, our intersection with it on earth, axis mundi. An intersection of the heavens and sometimes sad, scarred earth.

The mountains and where I came from is so much gone away from me now. But I hear those voices of my ancestors. I have their photographs on a shelf in this very

room. My Granny Baisden. My great grandmother, Beck. My Granny Salyer. My own mother, sad and her memory gone now.

The richest vein in my memory, my body, my belly, on my tongue, in my hands.

The mountains.

That home.

SE: Finally, you have co-edited a new book of essays with Adrian Blevins slated for debut in Fall 2015 called *Walk till the Dogs Get Mean: Appalachian Writer's Break the Silence*. Would you like to tell us a bit about the new project?

KM: A couple of years ago, poet Adrian Blevins and I gave a presentation at the Appalachian Studies Conference in Boone, NC. Our talk was called *Writing into the Forbidden: on Cultivating the Courage to Speak*. Basically, we talked about how we became who we are in relationship to our artistry and our mountain heritage. We were most interested in how we overcame what Adrian calls “the compliance of silence” and learned to speak out on the pages in our essays and novels and poems. At that same conference, we were asked to gather essays on the same subject from other writers from our region and we accepted that challenge. What we have gathered is a collection now called *Walk Till the Dogs Get Mean: Meditations on the Forbidden from Contemporary Appalachia*.

What we asked our writers to talk about in their essays was the courage it requires to write and publish in a “new” Appalachia caught between ways of the past and its traditions, and ways fiercely challenged by environmental, familial, and cultural changes, from without and within our region. We asked for work about challenging taboos, be they political or personal or ideological. We wanted essays by writers of all genres and genders, by artists very strictly within the boundaries of Southern Appalachian geography as well as work by those who might be considered outlanders, since we wish to enlarge the conversation concerning what makes a writer regional.

What we have ended up with is a rich range of voices addressing challenging ideas about Appalachia. Faith and transformation. Memory and longing. A fierce desire to leave home equaled only by a fierce desire to stay put and challenge and grow in that home place. Our essays are about sexuality; about gender and transgender; about sexual identity and identities made and remade via memory and language. We are so proud of the range of voices here. Poets. Nonfiction writers. Novelists. Short story

writers. Silas House. Connie May Fowler. bell hooks. Jacinda Townsend. Chris Offutt. Crystal Wilkinson. So many others. I am honored to have read and helped shape their work.

The collection is forthcoming in fall of 2015.