

Finding a “Sense of Place” through Connection to the Human Condition in Mary Troy’s Fiction

by Lauren Adams Willette

Mary Troy is a fiction author from Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. She recently retired from the University of Missouri, St. Louis where she was the director of the MFA program and the General Editor of Natural Bridge, a journal of contemporary literature published through the University of Missouri, St. Louis. Troy has written three books of short stories: Joe Baker is Dead (1998), The Alibi Café (2003), and Cookie Lily (2004), and two novels: Beauties (2010) and Swimming on Highway N (2016). Troy’s fiction is often labeled as regional to the Delta and the Ozarks; her work includes common themes found in Delta literature but does so in unexpected ways. Readers will find motifs of economic hardship, connection to the past, and the importance of family along with the characteristic duality often portrayed through literature and in media focused on the region. Troy creates incredibly complicated characters, characters who are “terrifically flawed,”¹ who embody and disrupt regional stereotypes, often in the same breath.

I had the privilege of speaking with Mary Troy about her career in November 2019; she shared what it means to her to be a regional author, about her complicated characters, and the stories she is working on now. Troy has published three short stories in Arkansas Review, “In the Sky, Lord” (2007), “Courtesy for Beginners” (2009), and “Support Group for the Jilted, Multipurpose Building Annex” (2014), each set in



Mary Troy.

Photograph courtesy of Mary Troy.

Missouri. For this article, I will look closely at these short stories alongside her most recent novel, Swimming on Highway N, which begins in the Ozark Mountains and draws often upon that setting, but is

ultimately a road novel. This novel's various settings work well to point to the Ozark Mountains' unique characteristics while also showing that the region's triumphs and downfalls are common to the United States as a whole. My analysis of Troy's fiction is featured together with excerpts from my interview with Troy as well as pieces of an interview the author did via email with Weston Jones.²

* * *

LW: Do you like retirement?

MT: Yes, I do. I spend not necessarily more time but much time writing, and I can kind of focus my mind more on my own work, and I like that. It's all good.

LW: Are you actively writing anything?

MT: Yes. I am working on some stories I believe will be connected. I mean, they are connected by place and by a few characters. And maybe will eventually be a book. I am only on the fourth one. They all take place in a town very much like Grafton, Illinois, which is, oh, thirty miles north of here, and it's at the point where many rivers converge. The Missouri and the Mississippi join, and then about ten miles, twelve miles north, just before Grafton, the Illinois comes in. It all creates a huge body of water, and some really beautiful bluffs along the edge of a little road that snakes through there.

LW: Oh that sounds lovely and like it would fit nicely in the Delta region, for sure.

MT: Yes, it would for sure, yes. Anything influenced by the rivers.

WJ: Who are some writers that have influenced your own work?

MT: Flannery O'Connor, Anton Chekhov, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Katherine Mansfield, Toni Morrison, James Alan McPherson, Walker Percy, Kate Chopin, etc.

LW: Do you draw inspiration from reading?

MT: I am impressed when I read really good writers, and I think, "Oh, that's it!" I mean, that's why we read. You find somebody who can make you see a part of the world that is either unfamiliar to you or see the exact same thing that

you see but see it from a new perspective or a different perspective. And you find someone who can do that with beautiful language, and not fancy or flowery language, but language that is clear and so concrete, sentences with rhythms, with images. And you say, "Okay that's why I write." And I think it makes you, makes me, want to write more. But my inspiration mostly just comes from being alive. I find that we human beings are fascinating and interesting. And I constantly come across people who intrigue me, who fascinate me and who even sometimes just bewilder me so much I have to maybe use them as a basis for a story or at least start thinking about what their life could be like.

* * *

One way that Troy gets at how enthralling a person can be is through her use of humor. Troy often chooses to highlight the small absurdities of life. For instance in, "Courtesy for Beginners" (2009), her main character, Charlene, focuses on the wistfulness of the store she works at, how it sells knick-knacks to help people feel they are alleviating their blues, especially during the holidays, but Troy also highlights the ridiculousness of how some stores will try to sell almost anything, how silly and funny that can be by focusing Charlene's attention on a figurine of Santa using the toilet, "his red pants wrinkled around his black boots as he sat reading a gilt edged book," the seat "rimmed in white fur" (206). The character's main source of conflict and pain comes from her parents' early deaths, but Troy makes her immediately more human and more complex by adding details about the character's thoughts. Troy does this often with her characters, and it allows readers to create an immediate connection. It is also this ability to blend the monotony of daily existence with the complexity of the human condition that makes Troy's stories easily readable and her characters feel so authentic. Troy admits this is part of her world view; she believes "humor and sorrow exist side by side."³ Of course, the two conditions do exist side by side; pointing to this only indicates our shared humanity, something Troy does through her stories often.

Troy's characters are relatable not just through

their humor but through their flaws. Sometimes they are selfish and giving or rude and honest. I certainly have made decisions not just from a place of altruism but also from a place of fear or selfishness, as do many of the characters in Troy's works. It is the use of the bleaker side of the human condition, the way that Troy highlights how we all sometimes suffer, that allows readers to connect with her writing; it is an ironic method to find connection in the human condition for sure but one that allows readers to admit to their own ability to mess up, to refuse help, to see their own stubborn blind spots. The truth is we all mess up sometimes, and coming together in that commonality is just as touching as coming together through any other means, is it not? Troy continued to elaborate on her characters.

MT: My characters almost all, across the board, are terrifically flawed, and some of them are disturbed by things. At their heart, they are aiming to be good, to be nice people. They err on the side of not being mean to anyone. So in a way there is the sense we're all connected, I think. That is also what I mean by never trying to be mean, that we're all connected. You see the other person as other but also as not that much different from you if you lived in slightly different circumstances, and I think almost all of my characters, in almost all my stories see others that way.

[For instance,] when April May shows up, Belinda feels a little bit like, well, maybe I am meant to help this woman. Maybe she can, because Belinda is a little proud of herself and the way that she has helped her own self through life, maybe she can help this person too. Some of it is just pride, but some if it is a real desire. [It is as though Belinda thinks,] "here is a person, what do I do with her? Oh I know, I'll make her better."⁴

LW: Right. When your characters are hospitable or nice, it doesn't come across as being inauthentic. People will often say that folks are more hospitable in the South, but your characters don't use southern hospitality in a way that puts on a show; rather, your characters tend to be nice because that is the way they'd like to act

in that particular moment, even if it turns out badly for them sometimes.

MT: They have many motives going on in them at the same time. It's not easy to say, "Oh she's this or that" because they are also nice sometimes only accidentally because they can't help it, because it might be safer, because it might be easier, because they are cowards, because they are lazy. All that at the same time, but they are never—and this is the one thing that people have talked about with my characters and I have come to realize—they are never closed off. They are never suspicious. Few of them want to be hermits.

LW: You certainly do create these well-rounded, flawed, full characters in a short amount of time. How do you accomplish that?

MT: It's just writing and writing and re-writing, but sometimes in the eighth or hundredth draft you realize, "oh if she says this or if she just has that gesture, then that will convey pages worth," and that is what you are always trying to discover when you put your characters in action and see what they'll do. You are hoping they will do something that says "Ah Ha!" That [type of action] says more than I could say if I could analyze her and put her on paper. But sometimes I do really analyze them. Sometimes I let them tell me. I write many stories in first person that don't end up [staying] in first person because I want to hear what the characters might say about themselves. So much of it is just working through it; you just work and work and then you come upon a line or a gesture or an action. Characters sometimes reveal themselves by what they do no matter what they say, or [through] the difference between what they are saying and what they are doing. And it comes, sometimes, as a surprise to me too. I am always open to these characters being so much more complicated than they seem to be in the beginning.

* * *

I wanted to go further in my examination of her characters, of the ways that they could be read as char-

acters who are at least struggling with mental health problems if not characters who might have mental illnesses. Many of Troy's characters use unhealthy coping mechanisms which only make matters worse, but as Troy points out, many people tend to do so. Often her characters are trying to function within a society that doesn't make time to acknowledge their trauma and pain, much less allow them to make time for their recovery from those truths of human existence.

Some examples of this societal indifference can be seen in *Swimming on Highway N* (2016). Each of the *Kneedseeder* (this name another example of Troy's humor) women all deal with symptoms of mental illness. Madeline is always looking for an escape, has been running from her problems since she was a child. When we meet her she is in the midst of finding that very escape by lying in a kiddie pool in her front yard which sits just off Highway N in the rural Missouri Ozark Mountains, talking to the non-existent ghost of her first husband's mother. Madeline's sister Misery, who has changed her name from Angela, wears her neuroses on her sleeve, always rocking or humming or repeating a piece of useless information. Going by a name like "Misery" is the best indication of her public outcry. Madeline and Misery's mother Wanda, for her part, seems to have nearly fully retreated into her own needs, believing she has spiritual powers connected to her Native American ancestry, something she has denied until the moment she no longer does so, well after readers have been introduced to her character.

These examples of symptoms of mental illness continue throughout her other stories as well. In Troy's "In the Sky, Lord" (2007), readers meet Belinda who appears to be dealing with a serious bout of anxiety and depression, conditions that take on lives of their own and cause her to lose much sleep (65, 67). Belinda copes with these feelings by over-eating and over-spending, with both habits only serving to make her symptoms worse. The character Charlene from "Courtesy for Beginners" (2009) has issues handling grief, using sex as a coping method to deal with the boredom that sometimes accompanies depression (209, 211). Readers might also notice that Charlene has a bad memory, a common symptom associated mental health issues in those who have experienced trauma. Troy opened up

about this aspect of her writing, too.

LW: Many of your characters have symptoms of mental illness. Do you purposefully depict those symptoms?

MT: Okay. I think they all have some symptoms of, you know, not full blown mental illness, but certainly, some are neurotic. Certainly, they say they are full of self-doubts and yearnings and desires that they are not entirely sure how to satisfy. I do not think they are any more mentally ill than most people who are walking around. I think perhaps they are more obvious, and that could be because as a reader you are privileged to their thoughts in a way that you are not privileged to the thoughts of the people you interact with all the time. And I don't think they are way off the deep end compared to many people I know and have come to know.

LW: For instance, in "Support Group for the Jilted" (2014), your main character, Josie, often dissociates; she knowingly goes into her own little bubble and sort of leaves the real world behind.

MT: As her means of coping, especially when her brand new husband says this was a mistake. She understands, you can feel something, or you can choose not to feel something, and then she just lets her mind fill in with everything else. It's her coping method; it's not necessarily a healthy method, but it is what she chooses.

LW: I think that the way you portray these coping mechanisms and other symptoms with no real hint at a diagnosis is well done, and I wonder if you feel that characters who are without those types of behaviors and problems would feel inauthentic, would be able to represent a region like the Delta? Could you speak to how those behaviors work in your writing?

MT: I think coping mechanisms make the characters more authentic. I don't think those particular coping mechanisms or problems or self-doubts, neuroses and depression are necessarily just a part of the region. I think they are part of the human condition. But, I do think that the coping mechanisms are sort of intrinsic

to the characters. I think that without coping mechanisms we would all be a mess, and I think that we wouldn't want to live in a world where people hadn't devised some sort of built-in, coping mechanism for themselves. What I find really fascinating about that is often times, [people] choose something that makes it worse for themselves because I think most of us, many of us, can become our own worst enemies even when we are trying really hard not to be.

LW: Your characters are very relatable and are what I'd call very human. They're not purely evil, a la Cormac McCarthy or anything like that. They don't always make the right choices, but they are not what I'd call hate-able either. Is there a reason you've chosen to continue to portray characters in this way?

MT: The reason would have to do with my view of people and the world. These seem like real people to me. I have, every now and then, tried to create characters who are intrinsically evil. And I know evil exists, or I believe it exists, and I see it sort of played out in the world or on the national stage. Once I get into characters, once I delve down into their psyche, even the ones I mean to be evil, they don't stay evil. Like for instance, you're reading *Swimming on Highway N*, the mother in that book, Wanda, was initially based on a woman I thought was just horrible, and I understood she herself had had a mother like Wanda. But the more I got into Wanda, the more I understood that she had this really sly, weird sense of humor, and she was also in many ways kind of needy. I am not ever attempting to forgive my characters. They are still jerks to each other. Wanda is still mean, but she is not unlikable, and I ended up almost liking her better than any of the other characters by the time I got to the end of some of the drafts. And I think those are the people I know; that's the way they come out. It's my view of the world.

LW: You reflect people who are not either all good or all evil but who fall somewhere on a spectrum of gray.

MT: Right. I've heard people say "No one is

ordinary; no one is ordinary if the writer will just face it." And I think that is true. All of us are really spectacular once someone takes the time to unpack all the stuff and peel all the layers off.

* * *

Troy not only peels back the layers of her characters. She also works to portray the region in a way that rings true to the folks who live there but in a way that also challenges any stereotypes of the region. I wanted to not only talk to her about how she views the region but about how the region is sometimes in conflict with itself. For example, a man from the Ozarks might meet someone from the Delta and immediately call him a "flatlander," even though the man from the Delta only lives a few hours away from the man in the Ozarks. This example points to an often seen theme in literature set in the region, be it in the Ozarks or the Delta: that of duality. Troy calls it "dichotomy." Authors often depict these ideas through the setting itself, and Troy does this too; although, she does so more through her characters and their inner dialogues than with the landscape. This is not to say setting doesn't play a big role in her work; it is just that she has her eye on the people and how the regions can be seen through their thoughts and actions rather than the landscape. The people make up the region as much as the land itself, something Troy points out when talking about this subject.

LW/WJ: How would you describe the Delta region? What do you consider to be "Delta" motifs or themes?

MT: Delta fiction falls in that large range that used to be called "regional" fiction; that is fiction that is not from the publishing center of the country, New York City. It is often thought of as having "local color" and using dialect and local speaking patterns. I generally resent such definitions. I often think of William Faulkner's response when he was invited to New York to receive an award—once his work became popular that is—and he supposedly said he wasn't sure he could go to the big city, being just a regional writer after all. Establishment arrogance exists as

much now as during Faulkner's time.

But there is something that does distinguish Delta Fiction, and it is a sense of place that is palpable. The rivers change, give uncountable benefits certainly yet cause great destruction, are lovely and dangerous at once and are never to be trusted, no matter how well they are loved. This uncertainty, this love/hate informs characters of the region. And the Delta is full of intense poverty, always has been, and at the same time, much like the rivers, exquisite beauty.

When my husband and I drive the back roads of the Delta or the Ozarks, as we love to do, I find myself saying what a wonderful thing it would be to live in such beauty, to wake up each morning to the mist rising from the river. And I wonder why the people who live in such beauty are close-minded. By that I mean they are the ones who are always against things: gay marriage, gender neutral bathrooms, immigrants, etc. And then we pass through a town that consists of nothing but two churches and a Dollar General store, and I know how oppressive such places would feel. The politics of the Delta has often been, on a large scale, conservative, meaning not so interested in the good of all, for all, but good for a few. An example is the "right to work" laws, which mean people earn far less in the Delta than if they lived elsewhere. But that is only large scale. On an individual basis, some of the kindest and most generous people I know are part of the Delta. They are warm and welcoming and hospitable and polite, seeming to accept all and sundry who come by. So accepting, in fact, that the Delta may have more eccentrics and unusual characters living off-center lives per capita than other regions.

Family and the past and economic struggles are motifs in Delta Fiction. But all is not abandoned towns and labor-intensive jobs that are disappearing. There are major metropolitan areas in the Delta, too; there is considerable wealth; and there are many major universities as well as smaller selective colleges, for education is important to Delta folk.

And finally, there is class. The United States often bills itself as a class-less society, but we all know that is merely wishful thinking. And in my part of the Delta, St. Louis, Missouri, class is seldom hidden. One question we ask one another in St. Louis, a question that baffles transplants, is "Where did you go to high school?" It is a somewhat sneaky way of asking what part of the metro area you are from, the close-in south and the west much more prestigious than the far south and especially the north. And it is also a way of asking if your family had the money or sophistication to send you to a private school, all of which are ranked unofficially based on family wealth and status. I find this class consciousness of St. Louis to be infuriating, even as it is good writing material. In my story "In The Sky Lord" (2007), Belinda gives herself a profession as a neighborhood evaluator, something that does not exist, but could exist in St. Louis where class and neighborhood are of prime importance.

But the job and interest of a good writer is to shatter stereotypes whenever possible—for they are always wrong as gross generalities must be—so all these "characteristics" of mine are ripe for shattering, too. Maybe by me.

LW: Would you describe yourself as a regional or Delta author? Or would you rather not be described that way?

MT: I mean, there is nothing wrong with being described that way. If I am, it is not intentional. Moon City Press, which published *Swimming on Highway N* (2016), thinks of me as a Missouri writer. BkMk Press is putting out a book of new and selected stories in about a year,⁵ and they want to highlight my writing as writing with a sense of place and setting, and they think St. Louis and the Ozarks are, to them, my strongest settings, and I have used those [often]. My third book was set in Hawaii because I used to live there, and it has also been reviewed or talked about as having a strong sense of place, and I guess what I think is that you write from the place you are, so if I am a Delta writer it is because I live in this Delta area. If I am a writer of

Missouri, it is because I live in Missouri. If say, you know, I was in Wyoming, I wouldn't be a Delta writer.

Setting grows out of the characters; characters are part of the setting, and the setting is part of them. And it's one of the things that makes a story or a novel seem real: that this is a certain time and place. And I think it is wonderful to be known as a Delta writer, but it sometimes takes me by surprise to think that way because I think I am just a writer of people, and I don't think we are all that different in other places.

WJ: Are there any portrayals of the Delta or the Southern United States in popular media that you consider wrong or inaccurate to your own experiences?

MT: The barefoot, uneducated, uncouth, inbred hillbilly that has been popular in movies and television and jokes for so long is offensive. I was sorry to see it portrayed in the Netflix series, *Ozark*, just recently. That is one of many examples.

LW: Do you consciously try to portray the Delta region in a certain way through your writing, or does it just get portrayed through the people?

MT: I would say it comes with the people, with the characters, but there is probably a part of me that is always aware of counteracting the negative. I really have never been a fan of people being stereotyped by geography. I think in most geographical locations you have such a wide variety of people. I mean, I think all of us are really so much more fascinating than anybody could ever figure out, so I am not trying to play to a stereotype. Oh, you [might] say, "This guy lives in the Ozark hills, we know what he's like." Well of course, I want to give you somebody who is the opposite of what you may think you know.

LW: If you could put the Ozark Mountain region and the Delta region, especially the Delta area in close proximity to a river, in conversation with each other, what do you think the regions would say? Do you think the regions connect or

differ?

MT: I don't know. In many ways, they are very similar. There is one thing about rivers; the river is never the same from one week to the next, from one day to the next, from one year to the next, one season. Rivers change course. Rivers take you by surprise, so there is an awful lot of that. There is the dependence on the river and also the fear of the river. This little town Grafton, where I am sort of setting my next collection, is under water often, and yet it is still a tourist [destination] because it is so pretty, and people keep rebuilding, and the areas around me that are surrounded by water, St. Charles County for instance, are farm land. And it continues [to flood], and of course, they need the floods because it makes the land richer, but then every now and then, they lose crops because of those floods. So I think there is a constant change; the rivers change; maybe more than other places in the Ozarks because the geography is not always something you can depend on [in the Delta].

LW: That's a really interesting way to think about it with the river, and something that connects those regions is people's tenacity, people's ability to just keep on keepin' on. Whether it floods or the soil is too rocky.

MT: Yes, and people who are very intimate with the geography will notice the differences.

* * *

Through her stories, this dichotomy found in the region both in literature and out in the real world can be seen again and again. Within the settings, Troy uses phrases like "borderline neighborhood" ("In the Sky, Lord," 2007, 68) or "not one of the cute streets" ("Courtesy for Beginners," 2009, 206) to describe the places her characters call home. She especially highlights the poor economy of the region and how this creates a divide between the classes.

In her story "Support Group for the Jilted, Multipurpose Annex Building" (2014), Josie chooses to do community service and serves at a homeless shelter. Readers are introduced to one character who is stuck there due to medical debt, something that rings true

not only in the Delta but across the United States.

Swimming on Highway N (2016) follows characters working to help an outlaw, who has retreated to the Ozarks as a stopping point in his escape to Canada. If that sounds like a blaring stereotype, the outlaw is running from the US military and other 'patriot' groups after refusing to return to Iraq. He is being helped by a couple of liberal hippies living in the Ozark hills and a few neurotic women from the area, too. They all come together to form a family of misfits. This focus on family also fits well within the portrayal of the region and how the people here tend to put a lot of effort into maintaining family, no matter how dysfunctional.

As this eccentric gang makes their way North, they encounter Tim who is patriotic but in all the wrong ways. His contrast with the deserter, who is being helped across the border, points to the duality and conflict playing out in the country as well as the region. Troy highlights how people across the country react to war: either through pacifist action or through aggression. By using common motifs often found in the South, Troy highlights how people in the South have plenty in common with people in the North.

Certainly the setting is an important influence on Troy's work, but she also puts the region on the map, or possibly back on the map. She offers readers a new way to consider human connection. She shows us that we're all suffering and all experiencing joy, no matter the locale. Troy captures the region through her body of literature, but she also captures the heart of human experience: love, grief, jealousy, joy, friendship, family. These are things which can be found in any region. Connecting people through common, poignant human experience is the most important thing Mary Troy's work does. ▲▼▲

Notes

¹ Troy in an interview with the author by telephone on November 14, 2019.

² Weston Jones is a graduate student in the English Master's program at Arkansas State University. I will indicate who asked the questions by using initials. I have rearranged the questions asked in each of the interviews to provide clarity

to this piece.

³ Troy notes this belief in an interview with Weston Jones completed via email on November 20, 2019.

⁴ Troy is referencing her story "In the Sky, Lord" (2007).

⁵ Author updated this information with Troy in October 2020 via email.

References

- Troy, Mary. 1998. *Joe Baker is Dead*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P.
- . 2003. *Alibi Café*. Kansas City: BkMk P.
- . 2004. *Cookie Lily*. Dallas: Southern Methodist UP.
- . 2007. "In the Sky, Lord." *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 38.2 (2007): 65-76.
- . 2009. "Courtesy for Beginners." *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 40.3 (Dec): 205-214.
- . 2010. *Beauties*. Kansas City: BkMk P.
- . 2014. "Support Group for the Jilted, Multipurpose Building Annex." *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 45.1 (Apr.): 29-37.
- . 2016. *Swimming on Highway N*. Springfield, MO: Moon City P.