

An Interview with Marilyn June Coffey

Q. When you write, do you set goals of a certain number of words a week or do you write when inspiration strikes?

A. I don't set word goals; I don't seem to need that kind of pressure to write. I love writing and always have. But inspiration, I hanker for it. I court it. Inspiration makes me gleeful when it strikes. If I wake in the night with words running through my mind, I turn on the light, grab some nearby paper and write it down. Some of my best lines, sometimes my best scenes, arrive that way. Usually these inspired writings require further editing, but once it did not. That inspiration began, "I am cursed by a large penis..." and the words to that poem just marched out. However, my poem had no title, so I stole a title from Robert Coover's *Pricksongs & Descants*. I called the poem, "Pricksong." I know what you think pricksong means, but actually it's an obsolete term describing a piece of vocal music. The *Los Angeles Times* called my "Pricksong" "a wry poem about an obscene houseplant." And the Pushcart Press honored it with a national Pushcart Prize. That's why I court inspiration.

Q. Does writing energize or exhaust you?

A. Both, but typically it energizes me. And energizes me and energizes me until I drop, exhausted.

Q. What does your typical writing day look like.

A. I get up when I wake. Weigh myself, swallow a pill, get dressed, exercise (about fourteen stretches plus two weights). Breakfast. Take three pills. Read newspaper, drink red tea. Feed and water my birds and critters. Walk for a half-hour (treadmill, neighborhood, or stores). Go outdoors to look at people; run errands. Fruit snack. Kid around with Paco, my housemate, if he's home. By now I'm awake enough to begin writing; it's usually 2 or 3 p.m., sometimes 4. I check my email, decide what to work on and begin to write. I take a lunch break, a fruit break, a supper break. I set an alarm to remind me to get up from my chair and stretch. About 10 or 11 p.m. I stop, check Facebook. Then take three pills, feed and water Snickerdoodle (my cat), clean her litter box, bring in the mail, check locks on doors, do three more exercises, get ready for bed, take last pill and play with Snickerdoodle. It's typically 1 a.m. when I turn off the light to sleep.

Q. What was an early experience where you learned that language had power?

A. In my early twenties I learned, not that language had power but that it had limits, an understanding that empowered me as a writer. I discovered semantics. I plowed through S. I. Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action*, startled by his assertion, "The word is not the thing," then ruminating about it. From Hayakawa, I traveled back to his mentor, Alfred Korzybski, and was studying his *Science and Sanity* on the night before my wedding. (Isn't that how every bride spends her last night?) I describe this in my book, *That Punk Jimmy Hoffa*.

Q. If you could tell younger writers anything, what would it be?

A. Don't give up.

Q. What did you do with your first advance?

A. With my money from *Marcella*, I went with my boyfriend, Jon, to Europe. We saw the Netherlands, England, Ireland and France. We had a grand time. We gazed at Stonehenge, Anne Frank's house, and dozens of cathedrals. We saw the Bronte sisters' home and the drug store where their brother, Branwell, bought his fateful laudanum. In Amsterdam, we smoked dope and gawked at whores marketing their wares. Both were legal there. And we fell in love with Paris.

Q. How long were you a part-time writer before you became a full-time one?

A. Fifty-two years. I became a full-time writer in 2000 when I retired from teaching. I had taught for thirty-four years at Boston University, Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and Fort Hays [KS] State University, receiving tenure twice. Prior to teaching, I worked as a journalist in Denver, Nebraska, and New York City.

Q. What is the toughest criticism given to you as an author?

A. I received it from my boyfriend, Charlie, when I was a freshman at Kearney [NE] State Teacher's College (today UNK). I had just won a 1956 writing contest for my story, "Portrait of Matt." Charlie was among the judges. At a party to celebrate the contest, Charlie took me aside and said, "Marilyn, don't think you won that contest because your story is so good. It isn't. It's just that the others were so horrible." And just like that, Charlie became my ex-boy friend.

Q. What was your hardest scene to write?

My father's death scene in *That Punk Jimmy Hoffa*. Describing his heart attack on the road wasn't so hard; I hadn't been seen it. Even writing about the night that I spent reading poetry to his corpse didn't move me. But when I wrote about riding behind the Fort Collins police motorcycles in the parade of cars to Dad's funeral, I began to cry. But what tore me apart was entering the church to see—I'm crying as I remember this—my father's white casket smothered in red roses. That's when I understood that he had realized his most fervent wish: he'd outlived Jimmy Hoffa.

Q. Who is the most famous person you ever met?

A. Robert "Bobby" Kennedy, Jimmy Hoffa's nemesis. Bobby was chief counsel on the U.S. Senate's Rackets Committee when I met him. I had come to Washington D.C. with my father who was about to testify against Hoffa before the committee. I liked Bobby's lopsided grin. He looked good in the expensive suit he wore, but his hair was so tousled I wondered if he ever put a comb to it. Bobby is a major figure in part of *That Punk Jimmy Hoffa*.

Q. Tell us a little about yourself? Perhaps something not many people know?

A. I sleep naked.

Q. What did you find was the best way to publish your books, traditional or self-publishing?

A. My first three books were traditionally published. Charterhouse, a big New York firm, and Quartet, a major house in London both published *Marcella*. Iowa State University Press brought out my second book, *Great Plains Patchwork*. A California press, Bandanna Books, then published a book-length poem called *A Cretan Cycle*.

In New York, in 1976, I decided to self-publish my poems. I called my press Omega Cottonwood Press (OCP), printed broadsides which I then sold at my readings. I enjoyed the work, and it felt good to follow Virginia Woolf's footsteps. In 1991, then in Nebraska, I published my first OCP book, an illustrated documentary of the brouhaha when I agreed to give a public reading of my novel, *Marcella*.

In 2010, with a finished book manuscript, *Mail-Order Kid*, in hand, I had the choice of traditional or self-publishing. I chose self, teaming up with Lisa Pelto of Concierge Marketing, Inc. (CMI) I found her level of professionalism matched what I'd experienced in traditional publishing. And I simply loved working with Lisa and her designer, her marketer, and her editor/proofreader. Since *Mail-Order Kid*, OCP has published six additional books with CMI, four by me and two by OCP writer Jack Loscutoff. Obviously, I prefer self-publishing.

Q. What do you owe the real people upon whom you base your characters?

A. A great deal. Trillions. More than I could ever repay.

Q. What research pilgrimages have you gone on?

A. When I was in my forties, I decided to write historical fiction. I chose to write about the Astorians, fur traders who followed Lewis and Clark up the Missouri River to the West Coast. So I followed their path. Bought a trailer and a Bronco II to pull it, took my dog with me and we roamed all summer long, taking notes, buying books, that sort of thing. Then I followed my main character, John Bradbury, a botanist, to London to see the plants he'd brought from the Great Plains to England. What a rush, standing in London, looking at his pressed plants that had grown in American soil!

Q. Tell us a little about your plans for the future. Where do you see yourself as a writer in five years?

A. Let's see. I'll be eighty-five. Let's keep it positive. I'll still live in my home and feed my assorted birds, five squirrels, two rabbits, a large possum and a wild turkey. And of course, I'll write. If not books, then short prose and poems. If you're on my email list, you'll be able to read my blog, a **JoLt of CoFFeY, An Intermittent Newsletter**. <http://marilynjcoffey.blogspot.com/>

Q. Your favorite quote?

A. "Don't catch the ball before it arrives" by Marilyn June Coffey.