

## Some Folks

When my first book was published, my sister-in-law said she was sorry not to see herself in my stories, as she believed writers wrote about their families and friends. She told me she did notice her hairstyle on one character and had found her body type on another. I apologized that she was not more present in those particular stories, and told her she was only partially right. Our characters are people we know or know of, have encountered, have wondered about, have seen on street corners, have shared an elevator with, have sat across from in a doctor's waiting room. Where else would they come from? The way a young woman in my class chews on the ends of her hair, the way another one squirms in her seat, the oddly aggressive way a jogger I meet on a woodland path says hello, the long-distance stare of a woman on my bus, overheard curses, sneers on a sales clerk's face when the customer is not looking, the glittery pink body suit on the girl who works in the doughnut shop: all these are starting points for characters, all are grains of sand that could become pearls if worried enough.

Short stories are about us. Flannery O'Connor said we read to see "how some folks do," and I agree. It is why I read and why I write. I have a head full of characters now, always do have, and some have lived in me for years. Not all of them have stories yet, but many have ideas and beliefs and emotions and desires and needs and pasts. I'm not yet sure what they'll do when put to a test, the right test, when squeezed or thwarted or challenged, but I look forward to finding out.

A common question all writers are asked at readings is if our characters are ourselves, if we are writing autobiography. At times the incorrect assumption behind the

question is if it is not factual it is not true. I normally say fiction is true, and then deny that any of my characters are me, but even as I say that last part, I know I am lying.

Take Mercy, the exotic dancer in “Mercy The Midget.” She lives in New Haven, Missouri and dances at night in Sauget, Illinois. Both are places I’ve driven through, not stopping long in either. Mercy has short legs, a deformity she was born with, and though I’m short, I’m not handicapped. I could go on. Few of my details are the same as Mercy’s, including the two main ones: I was not raised in a Christian fundamentalist household, and I have never danced topless in a sleazy (or even a posh) strip club. But Mercy yearns for acceptance as I do. She puts up with Tim, the club owner, who wants to advertise her breasts as tits and who calls her a midget, and she puts up with her fire-and-brimstone-word-of-God aunt who sees Mercy’s deformity as punishment for her parents’s sins. And she cares for her demented father because it is her duty and she normally does what is expected. Without going far out on a limb, I can say I see myself in Mercy, or, to paraphrase Flaubert, Mercy is me. She is burdened by the opinionated people who share her time and space, who make the rules she lives under. When her two worlds collide, she’s a double loser, yet is finally able to stop lying, and she knows, as we know, that she will survive.

Because I was a reader before becoming a writer, and because I remain a voracious reader, I create characters I like to read about, people with enough self-awareness to recognize how often and how profoundly they fail, yet with enough blindness to hope they won’t always fail. Most of them have a sense of their place on this spinning planet, their place in a society of similar beings. Many of their decisions are mistakes, or can be seen as such in hindsight, yet if squinted at just right, can become

merely another challenge. My characters desire escape, justice, and absolution. For some, as with the best of us, their struggles to become better creates a self of struggle, a self, as David Foster Wallace says, whose humanity is inseparable from that struggle. They want to believe the lies they tell themselves, and they want others to believe the lies as well. My goal is to create characters who serve as mysterious or familiar traveling companions through a story and a time and place that ends in truth, in other words, characters who show us “how some folks do.”