

FICTION MOST FOWL: A BRIEF CONVERSATION WITH [KATRINA BARTON BEST](#)

INTERVIEWER: [ANDREW MACDONALD](#)

Originally from the UK, Katrina spent several years in Vancouver before moving to Montreal, where she now lives with her husband and their two children. She has won the Canada/Caribbean section of the Commonwealth Prize for Best First Book with her short story collection [Bird Eat Bird](#).

The following conversation was conducted via e-mail in the spring of 2011.

Andrew MacDonald: How long did the stories in *Bird Eat Bird* take to write?

Katrina Barton Best: It's hard to say exactly how long in total, since I wasn't setting out consciously to write a collection when I started writing the short stories. But I only began seriously attempting to write fiction a few years ago, when my two children were really little. The amount of time each story in the book took to write varied enormously: the longest story in the collection, "At Sea," was written over a two to three month period, although I'd had the idea in my head for some time. Meanwhile, another, "Tripe and Onions," had languished for a decade as a one-pager that I'd started and quickly abandoned in my twenties. I then reworked it many, many times over the course of a year or two.

AM: You were born in England but now call Montreal—a bilingual city—home. What's it like, being awash in so many different cultures? Do you ever feel like you're being pulled in several different directions? And how do those various directions influence your writing?

KBB: One of the things that drew me—and my husband—to Montreal was its European atmosphere and mix of cultures and languages. We'd previously lived in Vancouver for a few years and we were both feeling very homesick for the U.K. and Europe, yet wanted to stay in North America. Montreal felt like home immediately, in ways that Vancouver never did. I've heard other

people agree that Montrealers have more in common with Brits than with the French (aside from the language, obviously). For instance, I remember the first time we called a workman to our house here to fix something. He turned up late but instead of apologizing was totally belligerent. After years of cheerful good service on the west coast it was a bit of a shock, but it was also very familiar! My husband is fully bilingual and studied and worked in France previously, so it was a natural fit from that perspective, too. I'm not totally fluent in French but I can get by okay, and have been lucky to find quite a bit of work here in English. I'm not sure about feeling pulled in different directions, but certainly this is first time I've lived as part of an obvious minority group. It is an interesting experience, and has no doubt affected my writing. One of the subjects I often explore is the émigré perspective, but in Montreal I probably feel like less of an alien than I did in Vancouver. Maybe it's because so many people are from somewhere else, even if they're second generation immigrants. Another plus is the incredibly supportive community of writers and artists living here, and the way this feels at once like a big city and a small town.

AM: I find your stories wonderfully cinematic. Maybe it's the conciseness of your language, or the way you excel at using dialogue to narrative effect. How does your work in film inform the way you tell stories?

KBB: Well, thank you. I'm honestly not sure how much my work in film influences my fiction writing. One of my fears about attempting fiction in the first place was due to the years I'd spent writing in various "house styles"—first as a magazine journalist and then for TV series and film — which weren't too conducive to developing my own voice (especially with regards to descriptive prose). But I've always enjoyed writing dialogue and found it relatively easy, perhaps because my first loves were the theatre and comedy—I was an aspiring actress in my teens and did theatre studies for a couple of years and thought I would become a playwright and/or joke writer. Instead I got a job on a mainstream women's weekly magazine in London, where I edited the horoscopes and celebrity pages and wrote first person confessionals and features articles on such weighty topics as performing animals. I then sidestepped into TV and film when I moved to Vancouver over fifteen years ago now. Perhaps the one constant in all these various forms of writing is the benefit of having an ear for dialogue.

AM: Speaking of the *hows* of storytelling, can you describe your process for writing fiction?

KBB: I don't really have a daily routine, though maybe I should! I struggle terribly with time management and procrastination, and since I work from home there are always many distractions, so just making the time to write fiction is often the hardest part. Once I'm well into a story, though, it's the opposite problem: it's usually hard to tear myself away from the computer. I definitely try to write down all my ideas, so I carry a notebook with me at all times. I still seem to have my "best" ideas when it is impossible to write them down, though, like while driving or, worse, while asleep.

AM: I loved the concept of "[Lunch Hour](#)": a disparate group of people captivated by a pelican gradually swallowing a smaller bird. Can you remember where the idea came from? And why did you choose to make the central character of the story a group, instead of a single character?

KBB: That story was inspired by an odd little real news story from the UK in October 2006. A pelican really did eat a pigeon in a crowded London park one day, for no apparent reason. It was a setting I knew well, because I often ate a picnic lunch there with my colleagues from the aforementioned women's magazine, so the story was simply a dramatic imagining of the event, along with the various onlookers' tragi-comic reactions. I suppose the intention was for the crowd of gawkers to combine and form their own collective beast. What inspired me most, though, was [the brilliant picture that accompanied the article](#) (and both are still easy to find on Google). There's a passage in the story which references both the original news article and the photograph.

AM: What was it like working with [Jon Paul Fiorentino](#) and the editorial team at [Insomniac](#)?

KBB: Great in both cases. I was also very blessed to have Gillian Rodgers as my copy editor at Insomniac. She's just wonderful. I've known Jon Paul for a few years now and he'd already published a couple of my pieces in *Matrix* magazine when he approached me about putting together a short story collection for Insomniac, so I knew he'd be an amazing editor (and of course he didn't disappoint!). We are also collaborating on a film project, co-writing the adaptation of Jon's novel [Stripmalling](#). We have been lucky enough to team up with a great producer and have received development funding for two phases so far.

AM: *Bird Eat Bird* is almost the little engine that could. Tell me a bit about winning the Commonwealth First Book Award in Canada, and the surprising success of smaller press books on this year's prize lists.

KBB: It's been quite surreal at times, starting with when I found out I'd won the Commonwealth regional first book prize. Just making the shortlist had been a total shock, and of course a huge honour, since several of the other nominees had been shortlisted for, or had won, major awards, like [Alexander Macleod's *Light Lifting*](#) and [Sarah Selecky's *This Cake is for the Party*](#), both shortlisted for the Giller. Meanwhile, I'd not been up for anything award-wise at all. So obviously when I found out I won it was a major boost, and I suddenly got a lot of attention from people in the industry who probably wouldn't hear of me or my little book otherwise. I think it's wonderful that so many short story collections (including several from smaller independent publishers like mine) have been published of late, and even better that more and more seem to be getting onto major prize shortlists and therefore gaining more attention. There's now a website replete with manifesto, set up by some very cool writers in Toronto, declaring 2011 to be the [Year of the Short Story \(or YOSS\)](#). I was also pleased to discover that *Bird Eat Bird* is one of two short story collections to win the 2011 Commonwealth regional first book award (the other, [A Man Melting by Craig Cliff](#) from New Zealand, is wonderful). I'm looking forward to meeting Craig and the other Commonwealth finalists very soon now. As part of the prize, we all get sent to Sydney for the Writers Festival starting May 15th and the final announcement of the two Commonwealth overall winners happens on May 21st.

AM: What are you working on these days?

KBB: I am currently attempting to expand a novella I wrote last year into a novel but I am leery of stretching it beyond its natural limits. So we'll see. It's about a Cockfosters housewife who's seeking personal enlightenment.