

## Leonora Desar Talks (to Meg) About Taking Meg's Workshops, And Lots of Other Stuff

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### Meg asks Leonora Desar about .....

*"In a generative workshop, safety comes first. And fun. And kudos. When I started your classes I really needed to hear that I was good..."*



Meg Pokrass, teacher  
(me)

*Leonora Desar took one of my workshops in late 2017. Since then, she has taken many more workshops, and it's been a privilege to see such talent develop. An absolute marvel.*

*Over the last year and a half, Leonora has made me aware of the happy fact that many of her anthologized and widely published flashes were conceived in my flash fiction workshops. This was happy news for a creative writing teacher! Especially with a student as prolific and original as Leonora, who writes in a quirky, refreshing way about strange and sometimes taboo subject matters and situations. She writes about them in such a creative, ingenious way that we forget how meaty her subjects are. She makes it seem easy. Makes me laugh, makes me think, makes me cry. Ending a Leonora story, one simply craves another. There is an addictive quality to her work.*

*As a writer myself, I'm enjoying reading about Leo's observations about the creative process. She's been offering her thoughts and ideas to us at New Flash Fiction Review with her advice column, Dear Leo. **Dear Leo # 6 – hot off the press today!***

*I thought it would be fascinating to talk to Leonora about the workshop experience, which I see as an ever-evolving experiment!*

## Meg: When you first began taking my workshops, what was happening in your creative world?

Leonora: First off, thanks for the kind words!

Pre-workshop it was Dark Times, meaning I wasn't writing much. I did do a lot of reading. I had this place. It was my happy place. There were palm trees (fake ones). There were also people. They weren't reading; they were talking on the phone.

After awhile, I got down to business.

Profiling (avoid):

Cell phone talkers—Public Enemy #1

Stage 2: the Cough (Leonora, TM).

This wasn't my finest hour. There may have been some phlegm involved. It was to scare people away. But it did allow me to fall in love. Not with men—with words.

Here were my bigtime crushes: Miranda July: We became BFFs. This was definitely one-sided. It went something like this—

Hey, Miranda, how's it going?

Miranda July: “Even pee was in on this . She showed me the price list and the slot that money would come through...”

Pee! Be still my heart. I, too, had stories about pee. Somehow I sensed that these were different and perhaps unworthy—but maybe not? Maybe Miranda July would show me.

*Cosmo Best American Short Stories:*

When I was 14 I got dumped. He was the most popular boy in school. He looked like Christian Slater—if Christian Slater were a bit dorky and liked the Gap.

We went out for 14 hours, seven minutes, three seconds. I even asked him; he kind of forced me to. He said—women who ask men out are feminists—and who was I to prove him wrong?

I didn't take the dumping well. I figured these were my options:

a) never leave the house

b) read *Cosmo*

I had fantasies. *Cosmo* would turn me into one of its own—the kind of girl who wouldn't get dumped. I studied it, which was a challenge, given the lack of text. Most of the time I just inhaled the cheap perfume samples. I didn't turn into a *Cosmo* girl but I did sneeze—a lot.

*Best American* was like that. It was *Cosmo* plus. For one thing, there's text, and for another, it doesn't smell. I studied it and sometimes I inhaled it, as if mere proximity would get me closer to something holy.

I read everything. Ok, not everything—*Best American*, *New Sudden Fiction*, V.C. Andrews (no judgments, please).

I found myself **at a laugh party**[1]. It was awesome (and scary).

**I became a dog getting born**[2]. Then I died. Then I became a woman—I drove and drove until I reached the sun, which happened off-page (presumably)<sup>3</sup>.

At some point this got tiring. I signed up for your class. It was great. I could finally retire the Cough (for now).



*Me hiding behind a palm tree  
getting mad*

\*When writing this, I wasn't sure what Miranda would say, so I opened to a random page. Sometimes I do this—It's my Oracle of Miranda (O.O.M).

**Meg: I make up weird exercises. Can you talk about how these helped (or didn't help) you to find your voice, and to create such wildly creative stories?**

Leonora: Thanks Meg! They did!

I wrote this thing about my parents. My father was made of fire. He sat around smoking a lot and listening to bad music and lighting cigarettes with his tongue. My mom was made of water. I was a water/fire mix. There were other ways to tell this story, but they would have been kind of lame. By using surrealism, I tried telling a familiar tale—cheating dad, screwed-up kid—in a way I hope was different, that made **the piece** my own.

Prompts are constraints—good ones. Now, instead of having infinite things to write about, you have this one. It's a way of tricking your brain: not to worry so much, to have fun, to go beyond the stuff it typically likes to write—

PS: In case you're curious (you, reader), Meg's prompt for this was:

“Write a story in which the truth about a relationship appears and/or evaporates in stages, like a bruise.” (Inspired by **this Stuart Dybek piece.**)

I read the Dybek piece and flipped. I also thought: I'll never do that, who is this woman kidding, here?

Still, it was fun to try. And Stuart Dybek, if you're reading this—that story makes me swoon.

**Meg: What is important in the environment of a writing workshop? Have you felt safe to take creative risks?**

Leonora: In a generative workshop, safety comes first. And fun. And kudos. When I started your classes I really needed to hear that I was good. I hadn't written for so long—aside from journal entries (“I suck!”) and grocery lists. Praise is manna for a writer. So is fun. It basically translates to turning off this person—



*Inner critic*

I thought maybe the palm trees had sucked it out of me—the joy. No, you said. They're only palm trees. But maybe you should write about them.

(You didn't actually say this—not literally.)

I felt that you'd handed me the golden ticket. Yes, you don't suck—and that thing about **your fake brother**: I like it. For me this translated to: Give me more.

**Meg: Is the writing brain like a muscle that we need to keep warm? How do the classes help keep that muscle-use warm?**

Leonora: Yes and no (and sometimes). In my case, I tend to take these incredible sprints. I write and write (and write) and then I'm like, wait, why does my leg hurt? Or in this case, my brain. Then I'm sidelined for a year.

The classes are a great recovery program. They're a way of saying: ok, Leonora, you've written 20 stories about X, maybe you should try a different track? Here. Write a thing about this elephant. Or your grandpa. Or your elephant meeting a grandpa. And make it from the POV of the elephant—on drugs.

Prompts also keep you conditioned. They're great for when you're rounding the track during a sprint. It's like water—the super smart kind (with electrolytes). They nurture you and prevent you from doing this: downward spiral. Which looks like this—

I suck I suck I suck. I think I'll just watch *I Love Lucy*.

(One year later...)



**Meg: Do you remember your favorite prompt? Can you tell us what emerged from it?**

Leonora: I loved learning about surrealism as a tool. This really got in my head—the idea that it can elevate an ordinary story into something really memorable. It was so in my head, that one day I woke up with this image. A couple: they were watching *The Bachelor*, or maybe *The Bachelorette*. Then the husband said: Ok, burial time. He didn't actually say that. Or maybe he did. He was a bit of a cheeseball.

The guy buries his wife— alive. And that's it. This meant I actually had to write to find out what happened next.

It was early. I had a job interview. I could either:

- a) do the right thing and go back to sleep
- b) do the right thing and prep for the interview
- c) write the story

**I wrote the story.**

It goes back to this: using the surreal to recraft what's familiar. For class, we read this piece: "**Get Unreal.**" Here, Bruce Holland Rogers talks about this. In Kafka, the guy doesn't just turn into a giant roach; he feels like one. His physicality springs from an emotionally real place.

A different, "realer" version of my burial thing could go like this:

"Trapped NJ Housewife Takes to Television"

She'd walk around the house. Then she'd sit down. Then her husband would come home—

Hi honey.

Hi honey.

Want to watch TV?

Ok, honey.

What do you want to watch?

I don't know, *Handmaid's Tale*.

Why's that?

I'm feeling a bit oppressed.

Sorry to hear that—want me to bury you? Wait, no, wrong genre.

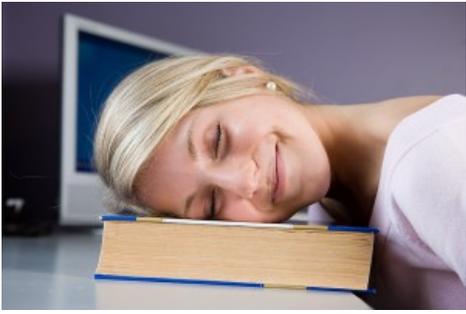
I'm bad at realism. Like, really bad. Surrealism is my shortcut. I love it—it's a way of deepening familiar things. It also gives them oomph. Like a padded bra, for stories.

Meg: You're currently getting your MFA at NYU. How has that been going? How are my writing workshops different from creative writing teaching in the university setting?

Leonora: I was very intimidated about starting NYU. First, there are famous people. As a general rule, famous people scare me. There's this one professor. I worship her. I used to carry her around. Not technically—technically I carried around her book. I took it with me, everywhere. My friends were like—what are you doing with (redacted)—didn't you already read that? Yes, I said. But I'm reading it again.

Maybe I thought if I'd read it enough one of these things would happen:

a) I'd turn into (redacted). Her genius would rub off on me, like when you're a kid and have to study and it sucks and someone gets the bright idea: we should sleep with this!



1.

b) She'd pop out of the book. *Hello, Leonora*. We'd have tea and she'd give me writing counsel ("you're so great") and take me beneath her wing, which would be hard, since she's shorter. Or maybe she'd tell me to give up, but it would be a test. Could I handle criticism? Would I persevere?

Of course, when it came time to sign up for classes I ran the other way.

So, my friends said, which famous teachers are you taking?

None of them, I said.

This though is not the point.

The point:

Your classes feature prompts. They're like Mary Poppins, they help lift you up along. The MFA features craft—so what makes this umbrella work, anyway? And how can we adapt it for different climates?

**Meg: Can you tell us about new stories and offer us some links to those pieces?**

Leonora: Strangely, some of my favorite pieces are the ones that keep getting the boot. I have a few on Keanu Reeves. Right now he's keeping my hard drive warm. He lies there, saving people—or he has that Look. It looks like this:



*The Look*

I come home. He fetches my slippers. Or he makes me do it myself, so I know I'm

capable. He feeds me and tells me about all the people he's saved. That's amazing, I say. How did you do that just lying here? Here he gives me another Look 🙄 —this means Mystery.

Not many are fans of my Keanu stuff, or maybe they're just afraid that if he escapes he'll be unstoppable. We'll forget all the celebrities in the world. It'll be Keanu Fever all the time, which would be Madness.

Other stuff (un-Keanu related):

I wrote about a woman. **She's naked.** She shows up at the door. Hi, she says. My name's Beth, is your dad home?

I must've written this a million times. I have a thousand naked women. They're on my hard drive. They're all trying to get with Keanu Reeves. They're mad that he ignores them and feeds me grapes. I tell them they're just going to have to deal.

I also wrote about my grandma. There are millions of her, too. In most of them, **she's flirting with Bob Barker.** She disapproves of having naked women around, even though she's a bit of a badass. Most of the bad-assery happens here (Inner World).

**I have this thing about Jesus.** He lives in my neighborhood. He comes out every year on Christmas Eve. He escaped my hard drive early, which he's grateful for—he's a noise sensitive type of guy.

I have lots of stuff about my family. My dad. He was flawed, but he's not really a bad guy. For some reason, I have a hard time getting this across, which may be why I write him—**over and over again.**

I like *This Is Us*. A lot. Jack Pearson. He's my Substitute Dad. **I wrote about getting adopted by him and moving into the TV.** We really like it here. It's nicer than my hard drive. Plus—there's pizza.

I should probably stop promoting myself now. Keanu's on the loose. He's snuck into Submittable and is wrecking havoc. He's not used to rejection, and this is starting to bring him down. He asked me for a shrink. A therapist. If you have one you can recommend, **please email me.**

Meg: Horn tooting alert here! Author Jayne Martin recently said: “Take a class with Meg. She gets more weird stuff out of me than I ever knew was in there.” This made me smile. Is this true?

Leonora: Yes! You’re the Queen of Wack (meant in the best possible way).

Also, I love how it’s not just about the weird. When thinking of you as my reader, I think a) is this funny? b) is this tender?

I’m thinking of pieces we read. Molly Giles’ “The Poet’s Husband.” Or Dybek’s “Bruise.” It’s not just about the unusual, there’s feeling, here. Or Mary Miller’s “Los Angeles.” This does the best thing a piece can do:

a) makes me want to reread (NOW!!!)

b) makes me want to write.

Over time I developed something. I kind of see it like a value system, or a scale. On the one end, humor. On the other, tenderness. For a piece to be good—for me—it can’t be too heavy on the one. Too much humor, and it’s like the movies: you eat and eat and eat, and then you fart.

Or tenderness, that can be cloying, too. I’m thinking of *Fleabag*’s Harry. Eventually you want Arsehole, or this person:



🔥🔥🔥 *Hot Priest* 🔥🔥🔥

It’s delicate. It’s like cooking—which I’m bad

at. I can feel it as I’m writing (and reading). I judge my pieces by it. Is the mix right? Or did I overdo it and feel gaseous now? Does the weird *mean* something?

Your classes helped build this—bigtime.

###

**Leonora Desar** spent two straight days watching *Fleabag* until someone (not mentioning any names) forced her to leave the house. Her writing has appeared in *River Styx*, *Passages North*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Wigleaf* and *Wigleaf's* top 50, among others. Her story "My Father's Girlfriend" (*matchbook*) is forthcoming in *The Best Small Fictions 2019*. Three of her stories appeared in *Best Microfiction 2019*. She is eternally scared of famous people, professors and otherwise. During a Keanu Reeves sighting, she spilled coffee, didn't meet the man himself, and bore a hole into her lap (with her eyes).



*Leo, Keanu, Jack, and Jesus*

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[1] Steven Millhauser's "Dangerous Laughter" (title story)—another one that makes me swoon.

[2] "The Puppies," by Dean Paschal, in *New Sudden Fiction*. Sad, tender, swoon-worthy.

[3] "Country Miles," by Robert King in *New Sudden Fiction*. Ok, so a woman doesn't quite reach the sun (maybe). She drives, and drives, and drives—

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