

As a writer, I have discovered my subject matter in the world we share in common, that is, what we all may experience as distinct from what I experience either in my unique life (autobiography) or my unique imagination (fantasy), though there are certainly elements of both in my work. When I present a character, I neither take a real person I know nor invent a being out of an ideal concept; rather I take half a dozen people I've known who similarly have faced circumstances I want to write about — the loss of a parent, rivalry among siblings, political defeat — and draw even more widely than that on physical attributes, inheritance, social circumstances to make up the character I need for the experience I have designed. If that character slips easily into the slot I have made, I am suspicious, wonder if I have been superficial or glib. A character should, like a real human being, resist categorizing, resist simple-minded solutions. The characters I trust I have usually the hardest time with, for they are often conceived in enough complexity to foil my less interesting plots. I have fairly often written about characters I don't much like but never about characters I don't care about. A subjective quirk of mine is to give each of my characters something of my own. It may be a habit or a fear, a cough or a favorite word, an old jacket or a childhood landscape. Whatever it is, however small, it is a kind of talisman against any petty or vindictive treatment. I don't like killing characters even when the structure of a story obviously requires it. I refuse to belittle them.

A circumstance and its resolution are harder for me to come upon than characters to inhabit the experience. Plot often seems to me over-judgmental. It caters to the righteous indignation in us to see characters punished by fate if not by law. I am more interested in insight than in judgment; therefore, I tend to work on circumstances with modest resolutions, which must not be as morally or psychologically simple as they might seem at first glance. I write a fiction of reversed or at least reserved judgment. More and more I have found myself working with novels because I am interested in writing about groups of people and need that much room. The long tradition of fiction with a central character around whom all others must find their secondary place supports hierarchies I don't find interesting; it promotes an egotism that is positively boring. Though it is a common enough fantasy, it is simply not true that any one of us is centre of the world. Why should novels perpetuate a false view? In choosing the world we share as my subject matter, my authenticity is more exposed and my compassion more required than either would be in autobiography or fantasy. Those are safeguards important to me as a writer.

Where I live seems to me a question like how I get words on paper, not really relevant to the question of creative process. We live as we can, hoping for that balance of nourishment and peace which will sustain us in our work. I live where I can be sure I am free to practise writing rather than being a writer.

I Could Have Loved the World

This town's no castle and I'm no maiden,
but he'd call me "Princess"; there's men fool enough
to make magic out of anything, even me.

Only it cut me like a lie,
so I says, "Call me Prin,"
I wouldn't have them laughin' at me.

Understand, even a none-too-bright fat lady
lives in a world of pageants and passions,
though hers may be different from others.

For some it's sleeping around,
booze and fancy men who come to town,
but for me it's a baker's dozen,

jelly-filled dough-blobs, sugar-crusteds,
the only thing that can cure me
surely makes me worse.

But the ache of this house of flesh,
of my hips and tired legs,
is nothing like the prison of the soul.

I'm a shut-in like Rapunzel
without lovely gold hair to let down;
only got things to hide inside.

Mustn't let the fat lady
go on display. Oh, Lord, if I'd been thin
I could have loved the world

as much as anyone. I could have really
had my man, close to me
as anything, as much as anyone else.

Rosalind Eve Conway

Imaginary monologue of a character in Margaret Laurence's
The Diviners.