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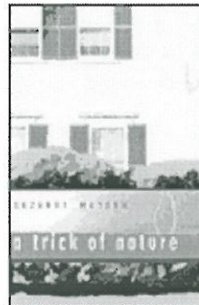
Turning Fact into Fiction is Suzanne Matson's Trick of Nature

An interview with the novelist and poet

Elizabeth Michaelson

Sometimes real life enables fiction. Such was the case for Suzanne Matson, whose second novel, *A Trick of Nature*, was just published by W.W. Norton.

The novel's events are loosely based on a tragedy Matson heard about from her family. "My mother sent me a newspaper clippings about a lightning accident that happened in our neighborhood in an elementary school football field, and several of them were actually hurt, seriously. I started thinking about my old neighborhood."



A Trick of Nature by Suzanne Matson

In Matson's tale, an unexpected natural disaster affects Greg Goodman, a high school football coach and settled family man. Goodman's world changes irrevocably when lightning strikes a football player on the field. The accident sets off a chain of seismic shifts in family life-adultery, separation, and teenage rebellion.

While Greg Goodman's world veers towards domestic derailment, forty year-old Matson herself seems firmly ensconced in family life. With baby Teddy (not quite three months) cradled on her lap and her two older boys upstairs with her husband, Matson talked about her novel over breakfast in a Manhattan hotel.

My first son was a newborn, [so] it wasn't a great time to write. But I really had the story ready to go and when he was napping, I wrote. Sometimes nothing else got done-some days I didn't even get dressed!

--Suzanne Matson

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Turning Fact into Fiction

While her mother's clipping gave her the idea, Matson had some developing to do before she found her story. "I developed a scenario: someone who had married his childhood sweetheart, was living in his old neighborhood, and I thought, 'What if he was a high school teacher in the same high school he went to? What kind of a settled, suburban, maybe complacent life could be so suddenly destructed by something violent, something that was almost a metaphor for cosmic intervention-what would happen then?' Matson explains, "What I was after was the sense of a family coming apart in pieces, in shocking and sometimes violent ways, in order to have them look at themselves."

Matson's success with this story is hardly beginner's luck. The forty-year-old author has a B.A. from Portland State University and received her Ph.D. in Contemporary Literature from the University of Washington in '87. She has also published two poetry collections: *Sea Level* ('90) and *Durable Goods* ('93), through the University of Maine at Farmington's Alice James Books affiliate. Matson recalls, "When I started teaching [in '88] I was writing only poetry. It's not that I never wanted to write fiction, it's just that when I got to graduate school I somehow veered off into poetry and stayed there."

Making the Jump from Poetry into Fiction

A timely sabbatical in '95 encouraged Matson to write fiction again: "I thought, 'When am I going to have the time to write fiction?' I wanted to write a novel, and in fact I was getting the idea for what would become [her first novel] *The Hunger Moon*."

Even on sabbatical, Matson had difficulty finding time to write: "My first son was a newborn, [so] it wasn't a great time to write. But I really had the story ready to go and when he was napping, I wrote. Sometimes nothing else got done-some days I didn't even get dressed!" Matson laughs. "I found that I could write about three or four hours a day, and the first draft was complete when I had to go back to teaching. It needed some revision, but I was able to do that in evenings-I think that was because I was waiting at the gate to write fiction." She adds, "By the time I was revising *The Hunger Moon* I was already starting *A Trick of Nature*. So [as] the second one took over my life, I didn't really have any space to write poetry, and now I'm writing a third novel."

Getting an Agent

Although many fiction writers struggle to get published, Matson has had little difficulty in placing her fiction. After finishing *The Hunger Moon*, she says, "I queried a few agents, and there was one, Henry Dunow, who called me back immediately instead of writing me back." Impressed by Dunow's enthusiasm, Matson signed with him. However, she had already had already sent the manuscript to the one New York editor she knew, Norton's Jill Bialosky. Bialosky had worked on a '93 collection of essays called *Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition*, to which Matson had contributed.

Matson explained the situation to Dunow, and, Matson recalled, "Henry said, 'Oh, I know Jill very well, in fact I would have shown it to her.'" Matson smiled. "And in fact she made an offer on the book, we never showed it to anyone else! It was really serendipitous. She's a wonderful editor, and I felt lucky that Norton wanted my second book as well."

Looking Forward to the Future

Matson's busy schedule often limits the amount of time she can devote to

writing: "I started writing *A Trick of Nature* in the summer of '96, but when I'm teaching I'm really too busy. [Altogether] it was probably about two years of writing and rewriting." However, the time away from writing can be beneficial to the creative process: "The characters live with you, so when it was time to start writing again after a few months you're looking forward to it."

Though her academic background is in poetry, Matson admits, "It's not clear to me if or when I'll go back to poetry. When I teach poetry workshops then I feel sparked to write a poem or two. But that's not really much towards building a new collection. I'm not at all sure that the third collection's ever going to get finished, because writing novels is a lot of fun! The whole world that you get immersed in, the characters live with you on a daily basis-it's such a textured, rich panorama..."

Meanwhile, breakfast is over and Matson is off for another round of interviews. Tomorrow she'll be in Baltimore, but a weekend detour to a New Jersey railroad museum looms large. "My sons are looking forward to it," she laughs.

Elizabeth Michaelson is a freelance writer living in New York City.

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