

## Interview with Melissa Dickey

*Melissa Dickey is a poet, professor, and mother of two. She teaches at Tulane University in New Orleans, where she was born and raised. Her first book, The Lily Will, was published by Rescue Press last year.*

**Tulane Review:** *Where do you find yourself situated in terms of the contemporary poetry sphere right now? Comfortably mixed in with other poets? Leaning towards one specific trend versus another?*

**Melissa Dickey:** I'm definitely inspired by contemporary poetry, and though I don't usually think about influence while I'm writing, I see it later. For example, Julie Carr's recent books helped me find a form for the poems I'm writing now.

In terms of where I fit in with it all, I try not to situate myself anywhere really, because that would feel so limiting. I think I'm in between, neither here nor there: I don't feel like I'm doing anything revolutionary or avant-garde, but I also feel different in some aspects than the current trends. My work has always been very personal.

**TR:** *Has publishing a book changed your perspective on writing?*

**MD:** Publishing a book has changed my perspective on writing, but not in the way that one might expect. I don't feel more confident or better or pleased with my work exactly. On the other hand, it's such a relief not to have that manuscript hanging around, not to have to worry over those poems anymore, some of which are very old and most of which I'd never write again—not that I think they're terrible, just that I'm a different person and a different writer. Also, now that it's out there, I feel I can relax a little bit—that dream is done, accomplished.

**TR:** *Do you think that teaching classes has altered your perspective on poetry or your style of writing?*

**MD:** One reason I love teaching is that it forces me to reconsider my perspective on poetry every single semester, and I'm often surprised at how it changes. Sometimes I teach from a super-contemporary anthology, only to

find out that what I really love is the poetry I grew up with, the 20th century classics like Bishop and Roethke and Berryman. So the next semester I'll choose a more traditional, conservative anthology and end up supplementing it heavily with contemporary, experimental work that feels important to me in making poetry accessible, alive, and fun.

The other answer is that every semester I have a handful of students who continue to not "get" poetry and it seems like there's nothing I can do about it, and that always makes me a little sad. I feel like I have to be this champion of what I love, this cheerleader, when that's really not my style. I prefer to leave people alone.

In regards to how teaching has changed my style of writing, I most certainly worry, during the busiest times of the semester, that reading so much student work will influence my writing in a negative way. It's a vain fear. So far it doesn't seem to be well-founded. I keep telling myself that one semester I'll do all my own homework, complete all the exercises I assign. That would be great.

TR: *When do you find yourself inspired/able to sit down and write?*

MD: Oh, I can't wait for inspiration anymore! I learned that a long time ago. In graduate school I used to force myself to turn in a poem every week, though I didn't have to. One summer, a couple of years ago, I held myself to that standard again. I still believe it's a good practice. Unfortunately, at the moment writing happens mostly during breaks from school. I'd like to be more disciplined, but I've got many obligations in my life right now that I can't get out of—such as caring for the needs of small children!

TR: *If you could share some writing/publishing advice that you didn't know ten years ago, what would it be?*

MD: Advice to my 20 year old self: Write more, drink less. Stop hanging out with your lame friends from high school, get over your shyness, and go out and meet some poets.