

Latinidad - Spring 2018: Rachel McKibbens

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BEFORE YOU SEND IT OUT

“Marcela Landres is a gem: wise, focused, practical, strategic, and very experienced. The purpose of my call was to understand how to build my platform as a writer. She spoke about things that I had believed I already knew something about, only to discover that my brain was about to get an injection of steroids—in one hour she opened my eyes to: 1) personalized strategies which will cultivate and reinforce my platform, 2) resources to hone my craft, and 3) a realistic timeline to evolve into the kind of writer I want to be. The latter was particularly significant because it took an enormous amount of pressure off my shoulders. Not only can I breathe more easily now, but her suggestions will enable me to leverage my time, and thus increase my chances for success. All this went far beyond my initial objectives. I typed three pages of notes while she spoke—enough advice to keep me growing for a long time, and when I feel I’ve plateaued, who do you think I’ll call? That’s right. Thank you so much, Marcela!!!”

—Joseph Weiner, MD

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1. Saludos

Rachel McKibbens is the kind of writer whose work can save lives. Her words force the reader to shudder yet nod in recognition. If you’ve had an imperfect childhood, her writing will make you feel less alone. From mental illness to mother-monsters, her poems offer proof that abuse breeds stories, not just scars. To learn more, read the Q&A below with Rachel McKibbens, author of *blud*.

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2. Q&A

Rachel McKibbens is a two-time New York Foundation for the Arts poetry fellow and the author of *Into the Dark & Emptying Field*, *Pink Elephant*, and the chapbook *Mammoth*. In 2012, she founded the annual Pink Door Writing Retreat, open exclusively to women/femme/trans/nonbinary writers of color. She lives in upstate New York. For more information, visit <http://www.rachelmckibbens.com>

Q: You're an advocate for mental health awareness, gender-equality, and victims of violence and domestic abuse. How does your activism shape your writing? And vice versa?

A: My advocacy is shaped by my art, which will forever be informed by my experiences as a trauma survivor. I spent much of my childhood dissociating from a brutal spectrum of violence, and was forced to remain silent about it all. I was not allowed to name anything, so the absence of language became the tool used to bury me.

Theater was my first creative outlet; I could become other people, navigate a different life besides my own, play after play—a sort of peripheral resurrection of self—but there came a time when I got too good at it. That level of immersion wasn't helping me solidify my own voice. I was still mouthing someone else's words. So I quit. I'd written short stories and plays most of my life by then, but didn't stumble into poetry until my early twenties. It truly saved my life. I was able to expand, able to name and excavate and become through language.

Q: In addition to being a published poet, you are a Woman of the World Poetry Slam champion. How does your experience in the spoken word community shape your writing? And vice versa?

A: I'd been writing and performing long before I'd heard of slam. It helped expose my work to larger audiences, yes, but my writing never changed. In fact, it's why I didn't do well in slams for the first ten years. I've always valued the musicality of a poem, it is what helps shape its temperament for an audience. Poetry is meant to be read aloud, language as currency. An exchange. We are meant to be guided by a poem's sonics. As Auden said, "No poem, which when mastered, is not better heard than read is good poetry."

Q: How did you come to be published by Copper Canyon Press?

A: Funny story: I sent the first draft of *blud* to my dear friend, Brenda Shaughnessy, who has wonderful books out on Copper Canyon, and she forwarded it to the editor. I didn't know any of this, and while cross-country

camping last summer, I started getting calls from her and an unknown number out of Washington. When I finally spoke to her, she told me she'd shown my manuscript to the CCP team. I blushed and thanked her, but never imagined anything would come of it. I continued driving through the mountains, camping with my kids, but that damn Washington number kept calling, and I was like "What kind of pesky ass bill collector?!" Finally, the executive editor Michael Wiegers texted me, telling me my voicemail box was full and that he wanted to talk to me. Once I reached a spot with decent cell reception, I called. He offered me a book deal and I accepted.

Q: Of your many accomplishments (recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts Poetry Fellowship, participant in HBO's Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry, founder of Pink Door, a writing retreat for women and non-binary writers of color, etc.), what I most admire is that you did all this while raising five children. For the writers—especially those with young children—reading this, how do you manage to write and parent?

A: It has been a struggle every step of the way. In the beginning, I incorporated my art into the daily lives of my family, taking them with me to poetry readings and festivals. I once gave a reading while breastfeeding. A great deal of my poetry is centered around the fear that comes with parenthood—the humbling joys, the anguish that climbs your skull after a failure. This country puts a lot of energy into romanticizing motherhood, leaving women to feel less-than if they aren't constantly bubbling over with glee. I call bullshit. I wrote my first book during a divorce, while having no idea how I was going to pay my rent. My childcare was whichever friend was willing to watch my kids while I taught poetry workshops in Manhattan. My second book was written during the worst depression of my life. The Pink Door Writing Retreat happened because I hungered not just for community, but for a community built by the very artists who are routinely ignored. Black and brown women and femmes and butches and non-binary and trans artists demanding their rightful place in the world. These are the narratives I want my children hearing. These are the artists I want guiding them towards enlightenment. If you can find a way to merge your art with your family, you have to do it. It's the safest kind of trust fall. Otherwise, build a schedule for yourself and stick to it. Get selfish. Demand one-hour (at the very least!) of time for yourself to do something that pulls you back into your body, whether it's reading a book, writing a book, or masturbating while eating a sandwich.

Q: Which writers—of fiction and nonfiction as well as poetry—have most influenced you?

A: Ha! It's a long and eclectic list. I've been reading books to stay alive since I was three. Beverly Cleary. Ray Bradbury. Gabriel García Márquez. V. C. Andrews. Charles Addams. Judy Blume. Sandra Cisneros. Stephen King. Lucille Clifton. Anne Sexton. José Saramago and lots of punk rock music.

Q: So much of your work deals with inheritance. Undoubtedly, you are influencing future generations of writers in general, and Latina writers in particular. What inheritance do you wish to pass on to your literary kin?

A: Whew! That's a big question. It's important to live the way you write—fiercely and with integrity. It's okay to challenge and scare yourself and let play have a home within your writing. It's okay to write what nobody wants to hear. It's okay to not write and to, instead, listen. And read. And witness. Most importantly, don't ever let a man or whiteness dictate the language of you.

Q: Do you have upcoming projects that my readers should have on their radar?

A: I'm finally diving back into my memoir. Six years ago I sat down and wrote 78 pages in 48 hours, spooked myself, and haven't touched it since. I think, once it's finished, I'll take a big break. Take my kids to Guanajuato, MX where our ancestors are from and put our hands in that soil.

3. Resources

HUMOR POETRY CONTEST

Deadline: April 1

The Wergle Flomp Humor Poetry Contest offers \$1000 and publication on the Winning Writers web site for a humorous poem. No restrictions on age or country. For more information, visit <https://winningwriters.com/our-contests/wergle-flomp-humor-poetry-contest-free>

\$10,000 POETRY COLLECTION PRIZE

Submission Period: April 1 - May 31

The Max Ritvo Poetry Prize in partnership with the Alan B. Slifka Foundation awards \$10,000 and publication by Milkweed Press to the author of a debut collection of poems. For more information, visit <http://milkweed.org>

HEADLAND CENTER FOR THE ARTS

Application Period: April 2 - June 8

The Headland Center for the Arts offers four to ten-week residencies to poets, fiction writers, and creative nonfiction writers. Writers based anywhere in the world are eligible to apply as long as they can speak basic English. Residents

are provided with lodging, roundtrip airfare, work space, five meals per week, and a \$500 monthly stipend. Families may join the artist in residence for up to four weeks (by request only and subject to availability). For more information, visit <http://www.headlands.org>

SUPERNATURAL FICTION AWARD

Deadline: April 30

A prize of \$1000 and publication on the Ghost Story web site is given for a short story with a supernatural, paranormal, or magic realism theme. For more information, visit <http://www.theghoststory.com/tgs-fiction-award>

\$7500 NOVEL PRIZE

Deadline: May 1

The William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition is open to all writers anywhere working in the English language. Entries are accepted in eight categories: Novel, Novella, book-length Narrative Non-Fiction, Novel-in-Progress, Short Story, Essay, Poetry, and Short Story by a High School Student. Prizes range from \$7,500 for a novel to \$1,000 for a Short Story by a High School Student. For more information, visit <https://wordsandmusic.org>

SEEKING ESSAYS ABOUT HOME

Deadline: May 21

Creative Nonfiction Journal seeks essays about finding—or, perhaps, coming to terms with losing—your place in the world. For more information, visit <https://creativenonfiction.org/submissions/home-0>

SHORT STORY COLLECTION PRIZE

Deadline: June 15

The Spokane Prize for Short Fiction offers \$2000 and publication by Willow Springs Books for a short story collection. Open to all U.S. authors regardless of publication history. For more information, visit <http://willowspringsbooks.org>

\$11,000 POEM PRIZE

Deadline: June 30

The University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize offers approximately \$11,000 for a poem. The runner up will receive approximately \$3500. Entries may be submitted from any place in the world and you don't have to be a previously published poet to enter. For more information, visit <http://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/competitions-and-awards/vcpoetryprize>

REDACTIONS: POETRY & POETICS

Redactions is a journal of poetry and poetry-related materials, such as poetry book reviews or essays about poetry or poets. They encourage submissions from everyone of every gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation. For more information, visit <http://www.redactions.com/>

RECENTLY PUBLISHED: SUENO STREET BY PATRICIA SANTOS MARCANTONIO

Sueno Street is a graphic novel in homage to “Tales From The Crypt” and “Night Gallery” but with Latino flavor. On the walls of Sueno Street, a young Latino artist paints murals that come to horrific life. New betrayals in a canyon of ancient petroglyphs. Space explorers discovering evil on an alien planet—and in themselves. A wife beater who gets what he deserves. A woman willing to challenge a horrible evil for love. For more information, visit <https://patriciasantosmarcantonio.com>

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“you write poems to understand what you cannot understand.”

—Rachel McKibbens

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