

In Conversation with Elayne Clift

MJ: Can you tell us about your journey of finding your writing voice in Vermont? What inspired you to explore this topic in your power piece?

EC: I began to develop my writer's voice before I moved to Vermont. I started writing creatively in the late 1980s and was successful in having poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction published from then on. I honed my skills by attending and then teaching at venues like the International Women's Writing Guild annual writing retreat, and by spending time in Vermont at the Vermont Studio Center. Before moving to Vermont in 1998 I came to the state to have dedicated writing time, which helped me strengthen my writer's voice (a process that continues). The tranquility I experienced here offered me a respite from the pressures of work stress and family life and that opened me up to new ideas and writing goals. This essay is based on one I wrote on my website soon after moving to Vermont.

MJ: You talk about serving as a teacher and feeling a strong connection to the Vermont community once you relocated to the state. Is there a specific moment or experience (or two) that had a significant impact on your writing process as you moved from "oppressive" Washington D.C. to Vermont?

EC: There wasn't a specific moment that had a significant impact on my writing, but I was so much happier here, after several career crises in Washington, D.C., where personal politics can play a big part in one's life there. I felt very welcomed in Vermont for what I could bring to the activities I engaged in, (e.g., serving on the Vermont Women's Fund, the State Commission on Women, and the State Nursing Board as a consumer advocate) and I quickly had several rewarding college and university teaching positions. I made good friends quickly too so all around there was a sense of relief and a much better quality of life which freed me to be creative and to contribute to my community, both locally and in the state.

MJ: What makes Vermont a unique and inspiring place for writers? How does it differ from other locations you've written about, such as in Washington D.C. and your various travels abroad?

EC: My first response to this question is the beauty of the state, its tranquility, and friendliness, in my experience, but I think every writer

needs to address that question in terms of their personal experience here. Maybe my response is a starting place for all of us. When I travel my writing is inspired by the people I meet and the shared experiences with them. It's a kind of happy writing that hones my writing skills, moves me, and gives me great ideas for stories, essays, and poetry. I have traveled not just for pleasure but also for work, and I've also gone abroad as a volunteer doula and women's health advocate, which is deeply rewarding and inspirational.

MJ: How did putting your thoughts about Vermont as part of the, "Why I Write" series, help you reflect on your writing journey and connections with other writers?

EC: I think my responses above largely answer that question. I would add that I am lucky that southern Vermont is host to many wonderful writers who are not competitive and who support each other's work. (I am a member of WriteAction here in Brattleboro.)

MJ: You say in your piece that your voice did not immediately come to you. What advice would you give to aspiring writers who are struggling to find their unique writing voice?

EC: My writer's voice has developed over time, and I think that's true of all writers. Mine is often associated with my regular columns which are quite political these days but my readers and writing students often comment on how I've expressed myself. My travel writing garners comments like, "You make me feel like I was right there with you." Sometimes my voice is poignant, sometimes humorous, always honest. I think what we want to write about tells us what tone is needed in a particular piece, and we get better at that as we continue to develop as writers, as we do with all the elements of memorable writing.

MJ: Since you've lived in Vermont, how do you think your writing voice has evolved and changed through the years? Have you noticed any changes in your style or approach?

EC: I wouldn't say it's changed, but rather it has expanded and deepened. I think it is a matter of time and maturation as a writer more than being in Vermont, although as I've said, moving here certainly contributed to my creativity and sense of self as a writer. And, of course, it has offered new

ideas. For example, I never wrote about nature before coming here, but since being here a lot of my poetry has been about that. And I think I'm better at setting the scene and being more observant about my surroundings no matter where I am.

MJ: Are there any future writing projects or themes you are excited to explore based on your experiences in Vermont?

EC: Well, I did a book called "Love Letters to Vermont: A New England Journal" which includes essays and poetry after living here two years and I wrote several published short stories that were based in Vermont, so I think I've crossed that milestone. My biggest goal right now is to return to editing my one novel – a contemporary retelling of *The Scarlet Letter* - which I know needs work. It's something I've worked on – off and on – for more years than I care to admit! But I know I can make it stronger now.

MJ: What are you currently reading?

EC: I am always reading both fiction and non-fiction. Lately I've read, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, which is now a popular film, and also quite a few historical novels relating to the Holocaust and to women's resistance in WWII. I'm about to start a new book, *The Sisterhood: How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture*. I read a lot of works by feminist writers, and not long ago I read, *Lady Justice* by Dahlia Gathwick. But not all my reading is so serious. I just read what I call a respite novel, *The Excitements*, about two British sisters in their 90s who are wonderfully outrageous; it was a real hoot!

MJ: Are you currently working on any projects? Are there any future writing projects or themes you are looking to explore based on your experiences in Vermont? Where can people view your latest works and publications?

EC: I'm always writing monthly columns, reviewing books for the *NY Journal of Books* (online), and contributing to the New England regional art magazine, *Artscope* (I have an exhibition review coming out in the Jan/Feb issue and another in March/April). And I just started a new short story. I never know what will pop up to inspire me but once an idea surfaces I can't ignore it. But no long-term projects in the works except for the novel revision. People can read my columns on my blog – www.elayne-

clift.com/blog or on Daily Kos. Some of my books are now out of print but some libraries and bookstores in NH and VT might still have copies. Several of my titles are on my website. Two of my books were published by Braughler Books and interested readers can order from them (print on demand). The titles are, *Around the World in 50 Years: Travel Tales of a Not So Innocent Abroad*, and *Children of the Chalet: New and Selected Short Stories* – which won first prize/fiction from Greyden Press some years ago.