

Danila Botha Interviews Sarah Henstra — Hamilton Review of Books

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Expanding Possibilities for Thinking and Feeling:

Danila Botha In Conversation with Sarah Henstra

Sarah Henstra is the author of the young adult novel, *Mad Miss Mimic*, and most recently, the provocative and engaging novel, *The Red Word*. She is also a professor of English at Ryerson. We had the chance to talk about feminism, subversion, and the secret of slow accumulation.

Danila Botha: *The Red Word is set at an unnamed Ivy League American university in the nineties. Karen Hull, who is Canadian, lives in a house with feminist roommates called Raghurst, and dates a guy from the fraternity next door. I want to start with the interesting connection you made between classic Greek tragedy and current Greek fraternity culture. Tell me how you decided to write about them, and connect them in the novel the way that you did.*

Sarah Henstra: I wanted to capture something that I experience all the time in academia: this amazing sort of belief, or feeling that the things you're learning about in class have relevance in your life. If students, at an undergrad or graduate level are into what they're learning, if they have professors who light a fire under them, [they] suddenly see how tantalizing and relevant the material is. I didn't have that with a Greek mythology class, but I definitely had that with certain classes and professors. I wanted to capture that feeling, that this ancient, dead material can start to crackle and come alive and feel like it deeply matters in the present moment in today's world. So I invented this class in the book called Women and Myth. And I invented this professor, Dr. Sylvia Esterhazy, who combines this knowledge of classics with Second/Third wave feminist beliefs. It wasn't that I had a life long abiding interest in Greek myth, but I did want to create a course that all these female students could be taking that gives them a common vocabulary for understanding all the experiences that are happening to them in the book. Partly I hit on the Greek myth because I wanted something quite radical that they were chewing on. It has been male versus female since the earliest literature in the western world which was the claim that [the characters were] all learning and starting to believe, and [starting to] see around them everywhere. So for me, going all the way back to Greek myth, was an extreme version of that, even though my own field of expertise is English literature.

DB: *What was the writing process like? I imagine it must have been hard to switch between something relatively contemporary, and a style that is very classic. That must have required a lot of research to properly capture.*

SH: The book went through major plot revisions. When I wrote the first draft, I had some of the Greek elements; for example, the book began with the invocation to the muse, and I had this idea of a kind of Greek chorus in the dialogue, but then I took it all out. (laughs)

I was revising it and polishing it for my first reader, my agent. I'm generally very private about my first drafts.

Basically the things I held back on, taking out the Greek stuff when I sent it to my agent, was because I judged myself. I thought, this is just pretentious literary stuff, I only did it for my own pleasure, and now I've got to kill all my darlings and take it out. So I did, and I left just a little bit in. And the first thing my agent and my editor said was "We want this. This is where the book is really, really interesting." So I put it all back in the book. I'd thought I was being too professorial, or cerebral or something, that I was taking away from the moment of the story, so I was happy when I felt that the things that I thought were sparky and dangerous and interesting, from an aesthetic as well as a political perspective, and a content one, were the things that made the book sing.

I thought, readers might not agree with it, they might not be comfortable, but it'll stir things up, and it'll feel energetic.

DB: *Did you have other first readers, besides your agent?*

SH: I find that the best writing that I'm capable of doing comes when I set myself a kind of dare or challenge to follow at the limit of my writing ability, and I push myself to follow it all the way through to its logical conclusion. Only then do I show it to someone else. The whole time that person is reading it, I'm thinking there's a really good chance that this isn't going to work, that I'm not going to be able to pull this off, that I'm going to have to rewrite this entire thing. In order for me to commit to the dare, a hundred percent and not waiver, if I let somebody read it too soon, I'd be way too inclined to compromise or try to please. In order for me to take risks as a creative writer, I can't also be thinking about what the right answer is. My pleaser personality is the antithesis of what I need to draw on to take creative risks.

DB: *Let's talk about some of the characters in the book. I really liked Charla. The idea of being so in command of your body, that you would try to use it and try to be the master of your own exploitation for a greater purpose, feels in some ways quite in keeping with current fourth wave feminism.*

SH: That's a really astute observation which I haven't heard yet. Charla stands apart from the other characters in terms of her attitude towards Dr. Esterhazy and the class. She stands apart from the other women in the house in that she's not at the forefront of the marches, she tries to stay out of the spotlight that they shine so brightly on the exploitative culture. She is calling her own shots, about her own desire and her body in a different way than the other characters are comfortable with. I tried to really portray that. The narrator's attitude towards her is she is overwhelmed by her. She rhapsodizes about how Charla lit a fire in her brain. Charla talks about freedom in the present tense; Karen is still trying to figure that out.

In terms of feminism, Charla is the most contemporary character in the book. She's looking forward to an era beyond entrenched [thinking]. The characters in the nineties don't know what to do with her, but I think that's still true. When we have conversations about consent on campus, and sexual violence and education on campus, it's still very difficult, and I'm speaking here as an educator who is part of contemporary campus culture. It's very hard to talk about equality and safety and consent because the conversation is still focused on male desire.

If we're totally focused on protecting ourselves from the desires of men, and trying to police male desire, and criminalize it, and call it out, get it off our bodies, it still always puts men in the centre. Charla is less interested in that. She's deeply curious about her own sexuality and women in general, and women's desire. She's not as interested in Dyann's objectives, which makes those characters drift all the way apart.

There was a lot of discussion in the editing process of Charla — shouldn't there be some kind of consequence for her? But she slips out of the plot, she's off in the world, enjoying a freedom that the other characters in various ways aren't.

DB: *I also want to talk more Dyann. She's a fascinating, galvanizing force, especially since Karen admires her so much. She has so much conviction, but also she pushes things far beyond their natural limit.*

SH: Dyann has this singularity of vision, this purpose throughout the book. She wants to create her own mythology, and change what it means to be a woman. She wants to take all the discourse and turn it on its head. I was interested in Dyann as an extremist. For her, human relationships, or the subtleties of how she feels about someone, don't change her ideological orientation. There are people like that, and they create consequences in the world. She's wrongheaded about things in a way that she can't see. She changes course a few times. She decides to take ownership at the end when she tells her whole story to the reporter.

DB: *The book definitely made me uncomfortable in certain places. The Susan Sontag quote you mentioned in your 49th Shelf interview settled it for me a little bit: "I've always liked Susan Sontag's assertion (in her 2004 lecture on South African Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer) that good novelists are 'moral agents' precisely because the stories they tell don't moralize but instead 'enlarge and complicate—and, therefore, improve—our sympathies. They educate our capacity for moral judgment.'"*

SH: I'm glad. I believe that quite deeply about literature, that its responsibility isn't to direct us as to what to think, but to expand the possibilities for thinking and feeling. Part of what can be an uncomfortable reading for me, too, is the reminder that it's the job of art to disturb you, to provoke you, to force you to think about things in a new way, that you maybe can get away with shielding yourself from in real life.

DB: *Is it hard for you when people critique the subversive elements? Like for example, if someone wondered to what end you'd written what happens to the characters —what that violence says about our culture, our society, where we are?*

SH: It's totally understandable. I was raised in the Christian Reformed Church, and my parents are still involved with it. That's exactly their question for me: some works of art and books lead us towards darkness and some lead us towards the light, and does your book lead us towards darkness or light? It's a moral question about the responsibility of the artist to her community, and her family and her upbringing. As an artist, do you bring more light into the world, or do you potentially bring darkness into the world, by highlighting or exposing or capitalizing on something dark, and then what do we do with a book like that? So yeah, I recognize that question. It's a question that I've had to set really firmly to one side for myself in order to write anything at all. Because if you're thinking about audience and pleasing and jumping hoops, your hands are tied before you even start. Then the outcomes have been determined.

DB: *You address class and critique privilege with so much depth within the story. What has the response been from the younger generation of readers and feminists?*

SH: There's been a response from a few younger readers of frustration that the fraternity got away with all the things at the end. They wanted more success on the part of the female characters in taking down the frat. They saw all of that behavior as horrifying, that a male student could call out to a female student and rate them as they walked by on the street. They were horrified in a way that people of my generation are not, simply because we recognize it so much. There's this sense that there's no way they could get away with this stuff anymore. So the fact that nothing happened to this guy, Alec, other than he got kicked out of the frat, they find that really hard to believe. One piece that they're missing is, yeah there are stories in *The New Yorker* of a student carrying her mattress around the stage at graduation because her assailant had not been kicked off campus, but I mean, he's graduating, too. We have a culture now, where things are being publicized and talked about, but it's not the case that justice is automatically being served.

I did a lot of thinking and writing in and around the question of intersectionality. What about women of colour? Two groups are sharing the women's space in the story. There are the students of colour alliance, and the women's centre.

I was trying to be faithful to what Karen's politics would have been like in the nineties. That was just around the time when racialized minority groups were starting to accuse mainstream feminists of racism and elitism and classism. This is an Ivy League school in this novel. Class is a huge issue, there's an elitism that becomes the silent backdrop. So many other hierarchies and imbalances of power are conveniently swept aside. These young women are saying, it's all about gender, and at one point their professor says it's about which parents can afford to send their kids there. And she's deflecting, but it's also true, but they're a tiny group of privileged white kids.

DB: *Can we talk about the decision to set the story in the States, versus setting it in Canada? It's interesting because aside from Karen, you also have a French Canadian character.*

SH: I think Canadian fraternity culture has inherited its traditions from American fraternity culture. There are fewer private universities and more publically funded ones in Canada. Greek culture is such a phenomenon in the US, fraternities and sororities provide something like 75% of student housing in the States. They're

hugely entwined with university structure, not to mention all the massive alumni dollars that come in through fraternity chapters.

I did a post doctorate at UC Irvine [in California] and I was past the age when I would be really immersed in frat culture or sorority culture, but I saw it. I was thinking about these things when I wanted to write about campus life. I wanted a universal setting, in the sense of a college campus. I wanted to include enough detail that people feel like they're in a real place.

In terms of specificity, the place I was looking for didn't need to be located in Hamilton, or Toronto. In part, from a publication perspective, it was strategic. I wanted a US publisher for this book. And I thought, if I can write a story that doesn't feel specifically Canadian, and in this case I felt that this story didn't need to be a specifically Canadian story, I could do that because an American publisher would be able to envision an American audience being interested in this book.

DB: Do you feel like you grew into that kind of confidence, in terms of your ambitions as a writer? Or were you always aware of the scope you wanted your work to reach?

SH: Just in case anyone thinks I hit it out of the park from the beginning, I went through tons of rejection. I had a New York agent, and a book on submission for almost three years. I revised for a big American press on spec, meaning no commitment, they just said change the whole thing, and we'll look again, and I did. I spent eighteen months revising it, and they said nah, and the agent stopped calling back. It was a long crushing period of getting nowhere.

Even with *The Red Word* I had twenty-eight rejections for that book. It took more than eight months to find a publisher in the States. I felt like it was this endless grind of rejection that I had to weather and stay positive (about), but my agent didn't feel like it was a big deal at all. It was all a matter of perspective. I find that in my own circle of writers that I hang out with and know, the ones who have success are the ones who are resilient, who don't take no for an answer.

DB: Is there something that you tell yourself or that you've heard when you're struggling to write? My all time favourite quote is from Alison Pick. I keep it on my desk: "Just remember that every book that you've ever read, and loved started with a bad first draft."

SH: That's great. I love that. A big part of what made it possible for me to become a writer was learning what it means to have a writing practice. In the same way that one would have a meditation practice, or a yoga practice — for me it's not so much project based and outcome based, as it is practice based. It just means I show up, almost everyday, and I write. I get bad ideas and good ideas, but I just show up and do my practice and that is how you access the magic of slow accumulation. Writing a novel, as you know, is like a massive long haul of a project, and how do you ever get that done? You do it little by little, year after year.

There was a breakthrough moment for me, when I was super busy with teaching, and my kids were younger, and I was not ever finding that day off, when I could sit down and write for a day. Right?

DB: *Totally.*

SH: I had these week-long writing retreats that I wanted to schedule, but they never worked out. I managed to do some math, and that made me realize, if I wrote two hundred and fifty words a day, I would have a novel at the end of the year. I thought, two hundred and fifty words? I can do that! That's a page, I could write that on the streetcar, and when I realized that, that to me was the secret of slow accumulation. Yeah, it's going to take a long time, but that's a year, and the year before that I didn't write a novel, so how about I try this year? People ask me how I do it with a full time job. I just do it really, really slowly.

***Danila Botha** is a fiction writer based in Toronto. Her first collection of short stories, *Got No Secrets* was published in 2010, and was named one of *Britannica's Books of the Year (Canadian short stories)*. Her first novel, *Too Much on the Inside* was shortlisted for the 2016 *Relit Award* and won a *Book Excellence Award for Contemporary Novel*. Her most recent collection of short stories, *For All the Men (and Some of the Women) I've Known* was a finalist for the 2017 *Trillium Book Awards* and was shortlisted for the *Vine Awards for Canadian Jewish Literature*, and most recently, the *ReLit Awards*. Danila teaches *Creative Writing* at the *University of Toronto*, and at *Humber College's School for Writers*. She is currently working on her second novel and on a new collection of short stories.*