

A Conversation with Tracy Guzeman

1. What inspired you to write *The Gravity of Birds*?

Two things, really. One was to fulfill a personal goal: to write something longer than a short story. The second was a family painting, a portrait of my great, great, great grandmother sitting between her two daughters. I've been fascinated by that painting ever since I was little, always wondering what those women's lives must have been like. Their story, once I was older and heard what it was, was very different than what I would have imagined from looking at their portrait.

2. You've written short fiction before, but this is your debut novel. What is your writing process and how did you adapt it to writing a longer work?

I love the form of the short story, and of "flash" fiction, and the challenge of trying to distill something down to its essence. But regardless of length, once I've gotten a good start on a story, I can stay buried inside it for quite a while before coming up for air. It's easier for me to stay locked in the world I'm creating, as opposed to slipping in and out of it, so I typically write in bursts, long or short, instead of committing to a certain number of hours or pages a day.

It was actually helpful to the process, or at least less daunting, to be able to tell the story from three different points of view, and from different points in time. That made it easier to take the leap from short story to novel. At some point, Alice, Finch and Stephen were probably half-formed characters in various short stories I was trying to write: a story about siblings and the wrenching weight of care giving; the story of a young man who comes to understand he's a failure at an age when most people feel they can do anything. But those stories never found a right ending; they just sort of tumbled off the edge of a cliff. I realized the characters' lives were more complicated and messy than the lives I'd sketched out for them; their problems weren't going to be easily solved. I was too intrigued by them to walk away, so I started wondering—how might their lives intersect? Of course once that happened, they morphed and became different characters; I only recognize the faintest outline of who they were originally.

3. The story includes characters intimate with the art world. Do you have experience with art authenticating and auctioning? If not, how did you go about your research for the more technical sections of the book?

My personal experience with auctioning and art authentication is nil. But I really enjoy the part of the writing process that requires doing research. The danger for me is becoming so enmeshed in everything I discover, it's sometimes hard to pull back and focus on finding the answers only to specific questions. Obviously, museums are a wonderful resource when trying to learn more about art history and authentication, and I was very fortunate in that, during the period of time I was writing the book, there seemed

to be a glut of articles about art forgery and the state-of-the-art tools experts were using to determine the provenance of a piece.

4. Who is your favorite painter and why do you admire them?

My taste in art is very eclectic. The year I graduated from college, my parents gave me two lithographs by Bernard Gantner: *Le Genecheyen automne* and *Village sous la neige*. I can look at them and be transported to a place of absolute stillness and solitude. Gantner paints my favorite winter sky—you can put yourself in the drawing, look up, and feel the bone chilling temperature of the air, see your breath clouding around your face, know that the clouds are weighted with snow that’s going to start falling at any moment. I love John Singer Sargent’s work, but also this quote of his: “I do not judge, I only chronicle.” Sherrie Wolf’s paintings are sly and ripe and luscious; I especially like *Tulips with Bird Concert*. And some of my new favorites include Brad Woodfin, Julie Heffernan, and Todd Lanam, and the photographs of James D. Griffioen, in particular, his *Feral Houses* series. Their work provides me with inspiration for the novels I want to write next.

5. Which character in the story do you relate to most and why?

I think I relate to certain aspects of each character. Like Alice (and like most writers, I imagine), I practice the art of quiet observation. I have Stephen’s love of salty snacks, and unfortunately for anyone flying next to me, Finch’s feelings of unease when airborne.

6. The narrative shifts between the past and the present. Why did you decide to structure the novel like this? How does it compare to writing something chronologically?

I wanted the reader to have a chance to piece together Alice and Natalie’s history from seeing them at different junctures in their lives, adapting to different circumstances. At the same time, I thought it might be interesting to juxtapose the history Finch and Stephen create for the sisters, based on the assumptions they come away with after seeing Bayber’s painting. And the elements of mystery in the novel seemed better served by using this structure.

7. You also alternate between a few different narrators: Alice Kessler, Stephen Jameson and Dennis Finch. For which narrator did you most enjoy writing? Was any one harder than the others?

Alice, Stephen and Finch are all wonderfully flawed, but that’s what I love about them. I admire their fortitude and determination; they continue to put one foot in front of the other and move ahead, even when life seems unbearable to them. But I confess to having a special fondness for Stephen, and for the relationship that develops between him and Finch.

8. The characters move and live all over the United States. Did you visit any of the places in the novel for inspiration?

I carry New York City and Santa Fe in my mind from the times I've been there. Each place is so vibrant in its own way, and both have such iconic identities. I can't imagine Bayber or Finch, or Stephen for that matter—at least in the long-term—living anywhere other than New York City. And Santa Fe seemed to be the right home for Agnete. I needed a place with a strong sense of spirit, since she doesn't have familial ties to any particular part of the country. I haven't visited Tennessee or the Finger Lakes region of New York yet, but would love to.

9. Now that you've finished one novel, are you planning on writing another?

Yes. I'm working on several projects now. The harder question for me is which to commit to next.