

Web Exclusive Interview: Shoshana Akabas



In June's Web Exclusive story, "[Between the Shores](#)," two people seem to move in parallel throughout their lives, always a hair's breadth away from interacting directly, only feeling the ripples of each other's actions but never knowing each other. We spoke with author Shoshana Akabas about this idea, about interconnectedness and empathy, and how our treatment of refugees right now doesn't bode well for either.

Erin McReynolds: In “**Between the Shores**” two people move through their lives completely unaware that another person is moving in parallel to them. Did a personal experience spark this story for you?

Shoshana Akabas: I wrote this story while trying to come to terms with the fact that our relationships with other people often don't turn out the way we want or expect them to. Not everything that seems “meant to be” ends up that way. But I find it comforting to think about how we're connected to others in ways we can't even imagine.

The idea of a story about being unaware of other people moving through life—that first hit me senior year of college: I got some terrible news right before a 4-hour organic chemistry lab. Pretending everything was fine while also making sure I was recrystallizing the right layer from my sep-funnel was excruciating. But walking out, I thought, “If I just got the worst news of my life, and none of the 30 people in my lab had any idea, what are *they* dealing with that *I* don't know about?” As a result, I hope I've become more attentive to people outside my direct line of sight. At the very least, it's made me ask myself constantly: Whom am I not seeing? Whom am I not listening to?

EM: The fact that Nicoya and Daniel have tandem lives but never meet—it flies in the face of our traditional notion of “fate.” The film version of this story would have had them finally meet in this breathtaking romantic moment. Why did you choose to have them remain unknown to each other?

SA: I think the fact that I studied science in college means I don't really believe in coincidence or fate—only statistics—and it's likely there are many people with whom we have these crazy “missed connections.” And though missed connections are often viewed as a sad thing, there's something beautiful about how tightly human fabric is woven.

EM: There is. Our new “connected world” seems to have us in this place of extremes, where we either demand of each other total cohesion—you have to feel the exact same way I do about everything—or we engage in total alienation—generalizing, assuming, etc. Do you think science (quantum field theories) is our answer to better understanding and prioritizing our interconnectedness?

SA: As soon as you mention understanding our interconnectedness, what comes to my mind is E.O. Wilson's Group Selection Theory. He's spent his life studying ants and other populations that exhibit altruistic, self-sacrificing behavior. His sociobiology theories provide great insight into how humans relate to each other and why we cooperate. My grandma actually worked for Wilson in the '50s, cataloguing his insect collection at Harvard, so I grew up hearing about and reading his work. I didn't make the connection until now, but clearly it's influenced my writing.

As for cohesion vs. alienation: I've definitely seen your observation to be true. I think a scientific understanding can only go so far in helping us find middle ground, but the job of literature, at least in part, is to help us find a more humane and less divisive approach.

EM: What has your attention right now? What are you reading and writing about the most?

SA: The current state of America definitely has my attention. One specific area is the sharp decline in the number of refugees we're taking. For the last six years, I've been really involved with refugee work, and it's made me very aware of how we treat “outsiders” in this country of ours that we love to call “inclusive.” That definitely drives a lot of my writing. Etgar Keret says, “When we read a book we exercise the muscle of empathy, which is a muscle that we usually, in everyday life, do our best not to put into stress.” I've always tried to read and write literature that exercises that muscle. I think Julie Otsuka, Junot Diaz, and NoViolet Bulawayo (just to name a few) do this extremely well.

My reading tastes are all over the place. I especially like genre-defying authors like Margaret Atwood and Dexter Palmer. Right now, I'm reading Weike Wang's *Chemistry*. I guess it's not a surprise that I'm loving it, but as someone who has struggled to find the intersection between organic chemistry and fiction writing, I'm really impressed that she pulled the combination off.

EM: Is it fair to say that science will probably inform most of your fiction writing? Will you continue to study and stay connected to science as you are writing?

SA: Yeah, “inform” is exactly how I would describe it. I don’t usually write *about* science, but I think the skills I picked up while studying chemistry, like the ability to see things for their parts, really transfers to writing and editing. There are basic laws to follow whether constructing a sentence or a synthesis, but in both cases there are many, many ways to reach your endpoint. That’s where you have to be creative because, while there is rarely one right answer, some methods are more efficient, more elegant, than others.

[clear-line]

Shoshana Akabas teaches in the Undergraduate Writing Program at Columbia University where she is working toward her MFA in fiction writing and literary translation. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in McSweeney's *The Believer*, *HOOT*, *The Grief Diaries*, *FLASH: The International Short-Short Story Magazine* and others.