

Web Exclusive Interview: Kyle McCarthy

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Photo by Martirene Alcantara[/caption]

*"I think being a woman is insane," says the narrator in September's hilarious and timely Web Exclusive story, ["The Seagull."](#) With keen wit, Kyle McCarthy illustrates the unwinnable, frustrating, and ultimately pretty ridiculous conundrum that being a good, modern feminist can be. Given where we are right now, as a country, and the coincidental connection we both had to Chekhov's *Seagull*, we had a lot to discuss.*

Erin McReynolds: This story grabbed me right away because it started out the way it did—it felt so real, like I was reading an actual account.

Kyle McCarthy: I think lately I've been interested in the place where essay and fiction writing touch. Not so much subject-wise, but tone. Like, what happens when a short story starts off like an essay? So in "The Seagull" I sort of let myself vamp and vent a little bit about feminism, and that feels like the exposition, rather than more traditional exposition.

EM: That essay quality makes the ludicrous parts all the more powerfully ludicrous; Andre is a fantastic tool for ludicrousness, BTW. I come from the L.A. area and you have it pegged.

KM: Oh, thanks.

EM: You must know people from L.A.

KM: Yep. Yeah, I know L.A. is supposed to be hip and arty now, but this one time I was at a "literary" party in L.A., and I thought: I feel like I'm in *Annie Hall*. It felt like that mythos of snobby, neurotic NYC looking down at trashy L.A. was still in full operation. But also the ideals of femininity there—of how a woman can be "hot"—seem a lot more . . . alien to me. So the clash with L.A. culture, I think, can also be a clash about how to be a woman, or how a woman should be.

EM: I'm listening to HRC's memoir right now as I walk the streets, and I'm getting just heated, so angry.

KM: Ooh, when she talks about Trump looming over her during the debate?

EM: I was so glad she addressed the double standard head-on; she at some point says [paraphrasing here], "people wanted me to be 'more real,' and yet if I cried, I was weak; if I said what I truly believed, I was 'too hard'."

KM: Right. She couldn't win.

EM: That's what I loved in your story—you nailed it: we can't win. Even being "good feminists," we can't win. And what even is a "good" feminist?

KM: You mean because of the "punch me" moment? Or just the whole gala to end sexual assault?

EM: Gosh, in so many places: She contemplated dressing for cleavage before the gala, but realized it wouldn't be in line with her views on female sexuality; the gala is put on by well-intentioned women, but still women who act in a show that sensationalizes sexual assault. And, yes, the "punch me" story, as well as her knowing that she shouldn't really care that Andre has a conventionally (money-makingly) beautiful face, but finds herself flirting, regardless.

KM: In the few days before this conversation I've been thinking about the "good feminist" idea, and then the Roxane Gay "bad feminist" idea that we can forgive ourselves for liking trashy, sexist TV shows, or whatever. That forgiveness is so important. But I think for me, I'm less interested in weighing in on whether something is "okay" or "not okay." I'm more curious about all the ironies around us, constantly. Maybe that's why I prefer fiction to essays.

EM: It reminds me of something Susan Sontag said: The only interesting answers are the ones that destroy the question. You raise more interesting questions in this story than you give answers.

KM: I like to think that everyone in the story is just sort of lost and bumbling through the contradictions of living in a sex-soaked, sexist culture that also has given women more real power than almost any other moment in history. And maybe the narrator, at the start, feels

herself above it, but her social anxiety betrays a kind of buy-in to the economy of beauty and money around her.

EM: Oh, congratulations on *Best American Short Stories 2017!* That's huge.

KM: I'm stoked. And very surprised.

EM: Well, we're pretty darned chuffed that it appeared in our pages [in issue 62—[available in our store](#)]! In that story, "Ancient Rome," you take on class, mainly, in this very funny, sharply observed way that's not unlike "The Seagull."

KM: Oh, thank you.

EM: You have a clear and defined style that takes writers a lot of maturity and time to find. How did you find your way?

KM: I think at Iowa I really wanted to write beautiful sentences. And I would read my work aloud obsessively, trying to make it sound sort of perfect . . . as if I were trying to win the "most beautiful sentence" award or something. And then I read *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* by Geoff Dyer, and it took my head off. I started reading it as I was walking home from the bookstore, like nearly running into people, and just giggling hysterically. And there was something so alive in Dyer's voice—it sounded so much like what the inside of my head is like (which is maybe a terrible thing to admit, but there it is).

EM: Unaffected? Natural?

KM: Not natural; sort of hyped-up and hysterical and self-mocking and mocking others, but with a sort of Buddhist comedic distance. (Dyer would probably hate that I said that, because he also rants in that book against any kind of self-satisfied New Age acceptance.)

I just mean that it's not interesting to mock people cruelly, but if you can point out how they're ridiculous and also human and vulnerable, just like you, then you're onto something. Anyway, that book unleashed this other voice in me, and I wrote "Ancient Rome" maybe a month later, pretty much in one swoop.

EM: Wow. Okay so when we first spoke I told you I'd played Nina in Chekhov's *The Seagull* in college, when I was 20—which is a fucking travesty; who knows enough at 20 to play this role?

KM: I know! I want to hear more about this.

EM: Well how did you come to *The Seagull*?

KM: How did you relate to the role? What did you think of Nina? I want to interview you!

EM: I'll tell you if you tell me!

KM: Ha, okay. I think I saw *The Seagull* in college, before I had even read it. I remember being confused. People seemed in the grip of extreme emotions. I remember Nina kneeling on the stage. But it stuck with me. And then I sort of “got” Chekhov when I watched *Vanya on 42nd St.* and went back and devoured all the plays. You must have been thrilled to have been cast as Nina.

EM: Oh God, I was a 20-year-old actress; I was thrilled anytime any attention was foisted upon me. But yes, as part of the class I had to write an essay on the play, and I still have it. No joke: I found and re-read it *right* before I read your submission, so . . . "Universe, is that you?"

KM: What did you say?

EM: That I, too, am a seagull. I never felt like I had a home, blah blah blah. I love the fact that *The Seagull* is billed, in the title, as a "Comedy in 3 Acts." Even though there's a failed attempt at suicide, then a successful one, and no one's dreams come true. Oh, Russians!

KM: So you identified with Nina?

EM: I'm honestly not sure I understood her all the way—by the end, her dreams are broken and she's older and less sexually desirable and all that, and I was a good 15 years off from really understanding what that feels like. I will note that it was the first time I cried onstage, delivering her last monologue, where she recites parts of Trigorin's play that she performed when she was young and the world was stretched out before her.

KM: I think when you're young and smart, you think you can understand any experience.

EM: I wonder sometimes if it's just that you know when you are reading aloud some fantastic writing; on some level, you know. You feel the rhythm of the words lining up with your breathing. Or it's a kind of strangeness that draws you in.

KM: Yes, totally—as opposed to reading your own writing.

EM: Which is weird, right? It's weird to read your own writing aloud.

KM: Yeah. Just before we talked I re-read “The Seagull,” and there were words I wanted to change, etc. How you respond to something you've written can change dramatically over time. Something can seem pretty good to me, and then a year or two later so thin and terrible . . .

EM: Oh, yes.

KM: And then a year or two after that, I'm like: I was too hard on myself.

EM: I think that's par for the course for any artist. We should never be allowed to re-read

our work.

KM: You can't access what you've made in the way that other people can.

EM: **And if you do, and you let yourself be moved by it, you seem precious and gross.**

KM: Yeah! I always get weirded out when people (inevitably men) talk about being moved to tears by their own words.

EM: **And yet, it's no fun for the audience to hear you sound bored with your writing, so we've screwed over both the writer and the listener.**

KM: Can't win.

EM: **Are you working toward a collection?**

KM: Yes . . . slowly. Also a novel.

EM: **Well, you'd better hurry. They're going to be banging down your door soon.**

[clear-line]

Kyle McCarthy's short story "Ancient Rome," first published in issue 62 of *American Short Fiction*, will appear in this year's *Best American Short Stories*. Her work has also appeared in the *Harvard Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Electric Literature*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she lives in Brooklyn, New York.