

Web Exclusive Interview: Anessa Ibrahim



October's Web Exclusive story "[Ray Charles Never Lost Anything Important](#)" brings an ancient archetype, the soothsayer, to a group of teenagers in East Los Angeles in a funny and sweet, totally believable scene that could take place at almost any time. We chatted with Anessa Ibrahim recently about mysticism and belief and writing.

Erin McReynolds: First of all, congratulations on your first publication! Personally, it's my favorite thing when we find a story we really like and then find out it's a previously unpublished/new writer. When did you start writing in earnest and who are some of your influences?

Anessa Ibrahim: Thank you! I'm so happy to have my first publication through ASF—I've admired the journal for a long time.

I began writing in earnest during my senior year of college, when I got into a fiction workshop led by author Marianne Wiggins, who was a terrific teacher and a very supportive mentor to me. As far as influences, right now I'd say Paul Beatty and Stuart Dybek are two standouts from a very long list. I don't have any pets or children to name 'Paul' or 'Stuart,' but my Wifi password is the namesake for one of them.

EM: Oh wow, you're lucky. What's one of your favorite things Marianne ever said or taught you?

AI: She talked about how she became a writer: not by taking university courses or going through an MFA, but by working jobs, and writing, and writing, and writing, and writing. She gave me my first sense of what devotion to art looks like, which was so very important to me, and still is.

EM: I love that you took something as folksy and archaic as a soothsayer-shaman and plopped him down with pretty typical East L.A. teenagers. How did this story come to

you?

AI: I'm living in Minneapolis now for grad school, and one of the city's ten trillion lakes has a beach that's known as 'Hidden Beach' for its nude-friendly scene back in the 70s or something. It's a tiny little beach, maybe a hundred feet or so, but there's a sharp divide between the types of crowds that hang out: you've got families straight out of *Leave It to Beaver* at one end of the shore, all the way to bong-hitting hula hoopers at the other. A few summers ago, I was there one afternoon (sitting somewhere in the middle) when I saw this older man, with a pure white top-bun and a pure white beard, lecturing on the cosmos to a teenager. The man was referencing all of these charts he had in hand, really passionate about whatever he was saying, and the teenager was clearly as enraptured. I started thinking about what kind of role this man was playing for this kid—science teacher? spiritual guide? therapist? friend? Whatever it was, I wanted my characters to have a relationship with someone in a similar role.

EM: That's amazing, I had almost the exact same experience in Austin's greenbelt, except he was making everyone grass bracelets and lecturing about survivalism. How did you decide to transfer that experience to L.A.?

AI: Ha! Maybe the secret to survival *is* plant-based jewelry.

This story is part of a novel-in-progress set in Boyle Heights, where my mom's side of the family settled when they came from Mexico in the 70s, and pretty much every experience I find the desire to write about is currently being transferred there.

EM: It's pretty funny that all of Hugo's prophecies are so obviously unassailable—stuff like "You'll be late for three things today, early for a fourth." And yet people really are taken in by him and want to believe in him; people who grew up, for the most part, in catholic households, where miracles play a major role. Did you grow up with mysticism? What do you think of our current relationship to it?

AI: 'Mysticism' is a funny word that's come to mean so many things now—sort of like 'organic' or 'the news.' In our current society, my impression is that we mostly use the term to talk about alternative, personal relationships with things we can't perceive or prove, whether you think of those things in terms of a secular god or fate or the dead or the soul, and so on. How we interact with the pop-culture versions of those alternative relationships (astrology, Tarot readings, psychics, and palm readers, in particular) is especially interesting to me, because, in those contexts, intuition is openly valued so differently from how I think it normally is. Also important is how far those popular varieties of mysticism are capable of reaching. In a lot of communities, people are more likely to visit a local psychic for their problems than to consult a therapist, for a number of reasons. I'm curious about the effects that can have on people, for good and for bad, and I think Hugo as a character is a way for me to try and get at those questions.

The psychology of the horoscope is also one I love building amateur theories around. For example, what if horoscope predictions really are as self-fulfilling as skeptics claim, and yet the

power of suggestion isn't what debunks the mysticism, but rather allows for it (i.e. the magic of the horoscope is that it plants a seed of thought, one that needed to be planted and subjectively interpreted, all for some unknowable but profound outcome)? Like, even if I *truly* do not believe all Cancers are going to receive some great news at work tomorrow, I still might keep my ears a bit more open than I normally would; and maybe the best news I learn all day is that Peggy in marketing (who I barely know) is pregnant, but now, I suddenly might see that as great news, and I might empathize with her excitement a little more, and then me and Peggy become lasting friends out of that. I don't know, I'm being sort of ridiculous here, but I think our relationship to mysticism is so genuinely complicated and instinctual that it doesn't hurt to be happy for Peggy.

EM: It's not ridiculous at all! We *don't* use our intuition enough, and we are capable of making all sorts of insightful connections if sparked the right way. How exactly we get that spark isn't the important part. . . whether it's Tarot or the I Ching or prayer for a sign. A writing practice is the same way; it seems to attract either ritualistic or superstitious attitudes. Do you have a ritual or sacred object or anything?

AI: I wake up at an unholy hour, and while I wait for the coffee water to boil, I look out window and count all the lights turned on in other people's houses.

EM: What are you working on now? How long until you finish your MFA?

AI: I finish next May, and right now I'm working on a novel, also called *Ray Charles Never Lost Anything Important*, which will serve as my thesis.

[clear-line]

Anessa Ibrahim is a fiction writer from Los Angeles. "Ray Charles Never Lost Anything Important" is an excerpt from her novel-in-progress and was a finalist for the 2017 American Short(er) Fiction Prize. She is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Minnesota. This is her first publication.