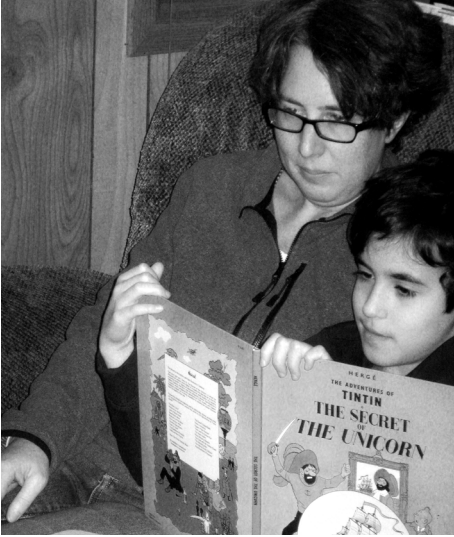


Finding A Voice and Embracing Influence :

An Interview with Professor A. Papatya Bucak

By Renee Long



A. Papatya Bucak is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing and the Director of the MFA Creative Writing Program at Florida Atlantic University. She has published stories, poetry, and essays in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Iowa Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *Pank*, *The Fairy Tale Review*, and many other literary journals. Her story, “The History of Girls,” was first published in the Spring 2012 issue of *Witness* and will be appearing in the 2013 *PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*. Her story, “Iconography,” which appeared in *The Iowa Review*, was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She was also awarded a 2005 Individual Artist’s Fellowship from the State of Florida.

Coastlines: I believe you self-identify primarily a fiction writer, specifically of short stories, even though you’ve published poetry and nonfiction as well. What is it about writing fiction that draws you in? Was this something that developed over time, or have you always felt pulled to the short story?

Bucak: I feel pulled to fiction, and yeah, I always say I am a fiction writer who sometimes writes in other genres, but I don’t feel especially pulled to the short story over novels (stories are just faster to write than novels). Over the years, I have grown closer to stories because I so often teach stories, and reading them carefully has made me appreciate them more. But my favorite books are pretty much all novels. I was one of those children who loved to read and ended up writing as a result. Maybe if there were more memoirs for middle grade readers I would have ended up a nonfiction writer. But it’s pretty undeniable that I am a fiction writer because of E.B. White, Louise Fitzhugh, Frances Hodgson Burnett, to name just a few.

Coastlines: Many of your characters are Turkish, and I’m sure this has much to do with your own Turkish ancestry. How did this sense of place develop for you? When and how did you decide you wanted to write about your roots?

Bucak: My attraction to Turkey is a lot like my attraction to fiction. It is a magical, mystical place where weird and larger than life things happen—like my parents decide to move to the United States and change my life completely. I didn’t write about Turkey for quite awhile because I don’t know it well. Now I suspect I write about Turkey pretty often because I don’t know it well. However, in the grand scheme of my writing, far more of my characters are American than are Turkish. It just happens that the stories I’m currently working on are linked to my current interest in investigating what Turkishness is for me (a mostly-American-Turkish-American). I have a novel in mind for the future that might not have much, probably not anything, to do with Turkey. But I also can’t seem to stop

thinking of stories that do have to do with Turkey. I suppose this is not surprising because I am a true hybrid—with an American mother and a Turkish father—and an American past that is just as magical and mystical seeming as my Turkish one. Recently I found out one of my American ancestors died during the Civil War because he got ahold of some hooch when he was supposed to be taking messages between Army encampments. He got lost riding through the woods while drunk and froze to death in a blizzard. And my great-great grandfather died when he felled a tree on himself at the ripe old age of ninety-two. I imagine because he was trying to act the man for his new bride who was about twenty-three. There are rogues in my family, I am pleased to see.

Coastlines: I'm fascinated by point of view and voice in "The History of Girls," "Iconography," and "Little Sister and Emineh." While maintaining a contemporary relevance, the stories harken back to the oral tradition of folklore and myth, with an active and mercurial narrator present in all three stories. In "Iconography," the story is told in the future tense through a peripheral first person point of view. It is as if the narrator is a prophet or soothsayer weaving the tale for a live audience. Similarly, in both "The History of Girls" and "Little Sister and Emineh," the line, *Once there was, and once there wasn't, in the time when genies were jinn and camels were couriers*, appears as the opening to the folktales the characters tell. This reads to me like a comment on story telling itself—something that makes both the author and reader implicated in the outcomes of the stories. How did this voice and form of storytelling develop for you?

Bucak: The first time I wrote a folktale type story was for a college workshop, and it's something I frequently circle back to. I've always been drawn to voice as a reader (this goes back to loving kid-lit, I think), and I can't really seem to write a draft until I have a sentence that nails the voice. Folk/fairy tales are often very voice-oriented, even though when I think about it, the language in them is often so plain. "Once there was, once there wasn't" is the traditional opening to Turkish tales. It's what the storyteller starts with to invoke the world of the story. It's much like "once upon a time," but also like drawing back the curtain at the beginning of a stage performance. I like the idea of calling the reader to attention, which I suppose that does, though American editors are always trying to edit that out of my stories. It sounds so weird to them to include "once there wasn't." The point of view choices that you mentioned, in these three particular stories, were selected because I wanted to do things I hadn't done before. It's not a very organic way to write, I suppose, to say, "I've never done first-person-plural, I want to try it." But I believe there is no one right way to write a particular story. You make a choice; you change the story accordingly to fit the choice. And keeping yourself interested as a writer is important. Sometimes technical challenges do that more than so-called organic choices do. (In an organic choice, I would have decided I want to write about a community, and therefore will use first-person-plural; instead, I decided I would use first-person-plural, and therefore it made sense to write about a community.)

Coastlines: Your writing is charged with emotion and lyricism with no hint of insincerity or sentimentality. You also write about heavy subjects: the death of young girls, the depths of everyday fear, the death of a close college friend. When I try to create emotional resonance or believable drama in my own writing, it can sometimes come out insincere or melodramatic. How does a writer work to avoid this and create genuine resonance?

Bucak: I am generally (I think) an understated person, and that seems to come out in my writing. There is no trick to it. I think I was just born that kind of human and therefore that kind of writer. (I am not suggesting you, Renee, were born insincere or melodramatic, but maybe you are asking your

writing, sometimes, to be something that is not natural to you? Actually, I think you are better qualified to answer this question than I am because you've worked so hard to change that element of your writing and have been really successful at it.) I think beginning writers often know that stories demand emotion and conflict, but they only know those things from movies and television, so they lack textual models for creating emotion and conflict. I rely a lot on reading to solve my problems as a writer. I believe in having reference texts for every piece of writing that I do. I list stories, novels, and other texts that do things I would like to do in that particular bit of writing, and I try to figure out how those reference texts are creating their effects. And then I let all of that filter to my subconscious as I write my own thing. It's tricky finding the line between influence and imitation, but I love letting myself be influenced. I say, embrace influence. All of which is a long way of saying, find texts that are emotional and dramatically resonant for you and see how they created that effect.

Coastlines: You've published extensively over your career. But you're also an extremely devoted teacher—directing the MFA program and teaching graduate and undergraduate workshops at FAU. Can you talk a bit about the influence teaching has had on your writing and process?

Bucak: Well, having people pay attention to whether or not I am writing and publishing—people who had to evaluate me for tenure but also my students—helped keep me motivated. If you think nobody cares if you are writing, it's pretty easy to quit. Teaching texts is what led me to realize how much I like thinking about how texts work (which connects to how I've allowed myself to become more influenced by texts—see answer above). But also I like teaching, and it offers an immediate satisfaction and sense of living a valuable life that writing frequently does not.

Coastlines: Last spring in workshop, you handed me a stack of short stories from authors you thought I might like. I've become obsessed with many of those writers, and they're had a distinct influence on my style and voice. Like I mentioned earlier, there are echoes of eastern mythology and folk tale in your stories, but they each maintain a diverse and unique voice all their own. Are there writers or text you've been obsessed with or heavily influenced by? How does a writer escape the anxiety of influence?

Bucak: I guess I kind of answered this above. I say, embrace influence. But I will also say, while reading a recent issue of a literary magazine, I thought: George Saunders story, Lorrie Moore story, Junot Diaz story (and none of those stories were written by those people). So I'll add, you have to be careful of embracing one influence too overzealously, and you have to be careful about reading the same things as everybody else. Try not to write on trend. I suppose my ultimate advice is embrace influences, plural, and from all avenues, not just contemporary literature.

Coastlines: Can you tell us a bit about what you're currently working on?

Bucak: I tend to be working on a few things at once. I've long been trying to write a story about the years James Baldwin lived in Istanbul. (But the more I read about Baldwin, the more afraid I am of doing him an injustice.) And I'm working on a story about baby tourism (look it up) and one about the Circassian Girls in the Barnum Museum. Also, a friend just told me about this Quaker woman who witnessed to the Sultan in the seventeenth century, and something might well be brewing with that. I also have two craft essays to finish. I have two new stories coming out this year, one in *The Normal School*, about the chess-playing automaton known as the Turk and one in *The Kenyon Review* about an Ottoman ambassador, Khalil Bey, who was known for having a collection of so-called erotic art.