PHYLLIS HERFIELD

Saint with Book, 2004
Oil on wood panel, 10 x 8 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Writing the Ordinary As Strange

A conversation with Karen Joy Fowler

Karen Joy Fowler lives in Santa Cruz, California, and was an early friend of Catamaran. *In the spring of 2013, we published "Primate Study," an excerpt from her soon-to-be-released novel* We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves, *which was eventually short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Fowler's work has received much acclaim over the years. Her debut novel,* Sarah Canary, *was a New York Times Notable Book and won the Commonwealth Medal for the best first novel by a Californian. Her second novel,* The Sweetheart Season, *was a New York Times Notable Book. Fowler's third novel,* Sister Noon, *was a finalist for the 2001 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.* The Jane Austen Book Club *was a* New York Times *best-seller and Notable Book. Fowler's short story collection* Black Glass *won the World Fantasy Award in 1999, and her collection* What I Didn't See *won the World Fantasy Award in 2011. She is the cofounder of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award and the current president of the Clarion Foundation.*

Though it's often remarked that Fowler moves between genres—literary, contemporary, historical, and science fiction—what's consistent is the wit, richness, and complexity of her work, making her one of the finest writers of our time.

Elizabeth McKenzie: Here's a moment from your story "Go Back" in the collection *Black Glass*: "I can remember a lot of fires and storms in Indiana when I was growing up, but what I remember is that they were never big enough. No matter how much damage they did, I was never satisfied." Do you think this is a clue as to what it takes to be a writer?

Karen J. Fowler: That's such a good question. I do think that as a child, I craved a certain amount of excitement and that some of that came from being such a big reader. The books I was reading were all about children who had great adventures, so I always felt I was on the brink of something that never quite arrived, or never quite turned out to be as big as I wanted. As an adult, it's now very, very clear to me that I don't want any adventures in my life. The best possible life is the one I have, where I read about adventures, but I don't actually experience one. Although I do still like a big storm. It's very exciting when the coast gets all whipped up and the trees are lashing back and forth. As an adult, of course, I'm more aware that someone is probably taking some real damage at their house and I should not be rejoicing in the wildness of the weather. Really, growing up has spoiled all of my innocent pleasures.

E.M.: What was it like to be an eleven-year-old from Indiana and wake up one day in Palo Alto, California?

K.J.F.: It was grim. There were a lot of things going on in my family at that same time—in my eleventh year. My father took the job that brought us to Palo Alto with a certain number of expectations about what the job would be. Those were not met, and they were not met catastrophically. My dad was a scientist and he was brought in to do research. He assembled a team, convinced a number of other people to leave their jobs and to come with him. This was his first experience with corporate America; he'd always worked in academia before. So when his team didn't get the results that corporate America wanted, he was stunned to understand that he was to change his results, that he was in fact to get the results they wanted, not to do the science with integrity.

He couldn't comply with this. One day, he and his team came to work and the locks had been changed, which

is how they knew that they were all fired. He felt tremendously responsible for all these people he had convinced to join him. He went into a serious decline.

That was going on at the same time that I was trying to deal with having gone from, in all modesty, being a very popular, bossy, running-the-school sort of person to someone who was just seen as strange and also very young. An eleven-year-old in Bloomington, Indiana, was not nearly as old as an eleven-year-old in Palo Alto, California. Basically, I just shut up because every time I opened my mouth, I said something that drew unwanted attention. There were bright spots. I had a best friend I adored.

But there was a lot of tension all around me and a lot of unhappiness. Still, I believe, without any way to test it, that I wouldn't be a writer if I hadn't gone through that experience, that that experience made me pay attention to people and people's reactions; just the fact that I wasn't the one talking anymore, that I was the one listening. So hard as it was, I would not change it. If I could go back, I would like to fix my dad's life, but my own life does not need fixing.

E.M.: Many of your stories and novels are haunted by disappearances. I could think of a bunch of instances just offhand, in stories such as "King Rat," "The Pelican Bar," and "The Dark" and then in your novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. What do you think makes the mysterious disappearance such a resonant theme for you and literature in general?

K.J.F.: Literature in general, I think, is always about death in one way or another. The mysterious disappearance is sort of death lite. It's the same narrative, just with the possibility of a different ending. I don't know if there's anything in my own past that draws me to it more than any other writer; I'll have to think more about that. But the particular story line that I notice that I return to, whether I planned it or not, is a sort of Black Beauty prototype. It's the story of someone who is living a comfortable, happy, contented life and is suddenly taken out of that life and thrown into something quite difficult and disturbing. The cast-out-of-Eden story line is the one that I notice I seem to be very obsessed with. Maybe a mysterious disappearance is often part of that other story line?

E.M.: Your work is marked by defamiliarization. You make the readers see ordinary things as strange. Is that a place where you find the spark that ignites a story for you?

K.J.F.: Yes, very much. There are a number of things that are so constant in our lives or that are so familiar to us that we haven't taken that step back to look at them carefully. To ask ourselves why. Why that? When did that start? Certainly, there are a number of things in our cultural and political lives that seem as if they could be otherwise and yet are not. I spent a lot of my upper education studying other cultures. I think that's also a defamiliarizing thing if you . . . There's a quote, and I don't know where it comes from, that no science fiction writer has been able to create an alien life form as alien as Chinese culture was to the Europeans when they first encountered it. Doubtless the opposite is also true.

The quote is not intended to say anything about Europeans or the Chinese. It's about the paucity of the imagination of writers. But one of the reasons I liked studying other cultures and one of the areas that I was often focused on was the first-contact narrative and the misunderstandings that people had at the beginning. One of the classic ones is that when the Europeans arrived in China, they were appalled at the way the Chinese emptied their noses into the streets. The Chinese just could not stomach the idea that you would put your snot in a handkerchief and then keep it in your pocket. They were both equally grossed out at the whole way you dealt with your nose.

E.M.: That harkens back to you as an eleven-year-old coming to Palo Alto too, then?

K.J.F.: Yes, I guess it does. I expect everything will harken back to me as an eleven-year-old coming to Palo Alto.

E.M.: To make a really broad brushstroke, I would say your stories seem to be unsentimental explorations of jagged moments, while your novels are rounded and smooth. What's the difference for you when you're writing one or the other?

K.J.F.: That's a really interesting image for me to think about. I do think, yeah, that my short stories tend to lead up to a moment or lead away from a moment, and that certainly, just in terms of my own conception of what they're about and what their structure will be, that they are—this is not true of every story, but enough of them, I think—they're about a shock, a moment of shock, either for the reader or for one of the characters. I often quite prefer if it's the reader who's shocked instead of the characters.

But I just cannot really talk about novels because I haven't figured out how to write a novel yet. I've spent a lot of time teaching short stories and thinking about short stories, much less about novels.

When I write a short story, I'm pretty much in control, I feel, at most moments. I know what I want to do and I know how I want to do it, and I know when I think I have done it. All of that confidence vanishes when I write novels. I just can't keep the scope of them in my head or the structure or the movement in my head in the same way. I recognize immediately what you're saying about my short stories. I will have to think a long time about my novels and why you feel they're smooth and rounded. I expect it has something to do with plot.

E.M.: What books thrilled you as a child?

K.J.F.: Oh man. How much time do we have? I just loved books and I don't think that I had any sort of aesthetic sense as a reader. There were a few that did draw me more. They're a motley assortment and there are a lot of them, but for a very long time my very favorite book was called *The Green Poodles*. *The Green Poodles* involved an orphan, as most quality literature does. She was from England and when her parents died, she had to come to Texas to live with her cousins. She had only two valuable possessions. One was her dog, Juliet, who was a show poodle, highly trained. The other was half a painting. The story in the family was that they had this painting of a rich ancestor and, a few generations ago, when part of the family moved to America, they'd quarreled about who got the painting. So they ended up cutting it in half. Our orphan came to Texas expecting that they would finally be able to put it back together, but none of the Texan cousins had ever heard of this painting.

So the book involved this mystery about the painting, it involved dogs, it involved orphans and cousins. It just had everything I wanted. Soon, there was a prowler menacing the property. Also, more dogs. Juliet was pregnant at the time, so soon after she arrived, there was a litter of poodles. The book has a lot of information about how to train dogs and how to clip poodles. I loved it so much that I just kept getting it out from the library and getting it out from the library and getting it out from the library. Finally, my parents gave it to me for my birthday. About three months later, I brought it home from the library and my mom said, "Did you forget that you own this book now?" I said, no, I remembered, but it had just been sitting on the shelf since I stopped checking it out, and I worried that it was lonely.

E.M.: You were the guest editor of *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2016*. What's the state of science fiction and fantasy now, what did you see there?

K.J.F.: Well, this was all pre-election. I think anything I saw or noticed was completely erased in November. But in the distant past of last year, there was a lot of interest in a lot of the things that science fiction has been interested in forever. One of which is the border between human beings and machines. We are still obsessed with the Turing test and the question of when a machine has so many human capabilities that its origins will cease to matter. I also saw a lot of it from the other side: How many bodily modifications and enhancements can a human have before they cease to be a human being, before they become something posthuman? So a lot of interest in both sides of that. Also, in virtual worlds and the importance or unimportance of the distinction between reality and something so completely immersive that your experience of it is your reality.

A lot of interest in war. This was sort of surprising to me because I expected a lot of interest in new forms of warfare, in terrorism in particular, but the traditional vision of war still was getting more attention than this other model.

The settings for these wars changed dramatically. A lot of them were off-world. The technological capabilities change, but it's still one army against another army. Myself, I'm tired of war stories. I'm bothered that the war narrative continues to be so thrilling and that it takes up so much of our cultural space in terms of movies and

television and books. Even though much of this material is explicitly antiwar.

So I can't quarrel with the intent of a lot of it, but I'm starting to think if we want to have an actual impact in the world that is an antiwar impact, then maybe the war narrative can't be massaged into that. Maybe we just have to put that whole narrative aside and try to find other things and other ways in which we can be thrilled and inspired by heroism, danger, and sacrifice. Like I said, there are a lot of books and movies about war that I really love and that I really admire, but I'm still tired of them. The whole Star Wars enterprise is troubling me now that I have small grandchildren. I see how quickly that's the narrative that appeals to them. The good guys, the bad guys, the fight to the death.

E.M.: It's been on my mind every day, the false "fake news" accusations against journalists who are reporting what's happening.

K.J.F.: I just feel it's creating difficulties for fiction writers and nonfiction writers alike, not to mention all our other fellow citizens. I think one of the political problems we're facing right now is that nobody knows how to counter that fake-news accusation. If all your opponent has to say is "I never said that" or "you're the one who's lying" even with clear evidence to the contrary, nobody yet has found the right, the effective comeback, because the rest of us can't get used to the fact that facts don't matter.

I think this is something that writers need to be thinking about and working on. I think it's up to us to figure out how that can be countered, because it's culturally devastating. But we're the people who deal with words and we're the people who deal with narratives and we're the people who think about truth in that sort of mutable way. I don't see our media responding effectively to this postfact world, hard as I think they are trying. (Of course, they share some responsibility for creating this problem with their "both sides are to blame" narratives.) But I see that something has broken in our shared world and that it won't be easily mended. Not on the Internet, for sure. Not by all the king's horses and all the king's men.

Elizabeth McKenzie's novel *The Portable Veblen* was longlisted for the 2016 National Book Award for fiction and received the 2016 California Book Award silver medal in fiction. She is the managing editor of *Catamaran*.

KAREN JOY FOWLER

Sugar Your Cookies

Wisdom from Family Reunions

In my family, my Grandma Fossum is the maternal prototype. My Aunt Mikki once got in trouble with her psychiatrist husband for saying at a dinner party that she had no complaints about the way she was mothered. Her husband thought she'd made him look bad—the wife of a psychiatrist and yet so unaware of all the ways she'd been screwed up!

Grandma had four children, three of whom were girls. Those three had eleven children, five of us girls. When I say that my family is a matriarchy, I don't mean that the women make all the important decisions, although it's possible that we do; it all depends on how you define *important*. What I mean is that, much as we love our men—and they are the very best sort of men—they're not exactly central. If you want to know what's going on in the family, you must ask the women; the men won't have a clue. (They appear to prefer it this way.)

My grandmother, my mother and her sisters—they are all similar in temperament and personality, remarkably cheerful, even-tempered, and unflappable. Neither my cousins nor I can even remember an occasion on which our mothers lost their tempers. Sadly, our own children cannot say the same. The apple falls a little farther from the tree with each passing generation.

When I was little, I was absolutely comfortable in my aunts' homes. I knew I would be served food that I liked, a major concern of mine back then. I knew what the rules would be and what would be expected of me. I knew that if I opened the refrigerator I would find a bottle of pimiento-stuffed green olives—the food of the gods—and that I was allowed to help myself to that or anything else. My mother and her sisters were all very close. My uncle we seldom saw.

And then we grew up. In 1996, my cousin Trudy had the idea that we Fossum women should go away together on a retreat. She chose a central location—Pismo Beach—for a three-day weekend. Grandma was long dead, and our own young daughters otherwise occupied, so it was just our mothers and ourselves getting together to reminisce, to gossip, and to share the classic family stories on the remote chance that anyone there hadn't already heard them.

Among these is the mysterious marital arrangement of our mothers' cousin Evelyn, who was married to Julian of the Merchant Marines. One night Julie (the name the family used for Julian) was at a bar and met a man so despairing

that he was considering suicide. Julie persuaded him to come home for dinner. He lived with Julie and Evelyn for the next forty years.

Since Julie was off at sea much of this time, Evelyn's parents were always at some pains to point out the separate bedrooms. As if we couldn't tell a raven from a writing desk! Evelyn wore two wedding rings, one from each man, one on her right hand and one on her left.

Then there was the opulent Hollywood wedding of another remote cousin. This happened in the 1930s when my mother was about sixteen years old. She wore an Alice-blue gown and danced with Lew Ayres. The bride and groom left in a hail of rice and roses. Later that night, a phone call: The honeymoon had revealed the groom to be a woman. Love did not conquer this difficulty; the marriage was over before it began. My mother still remembered this evening as one of the most glamorous events she'd ever attended.

There were stories of earthquakes and accidents. Grandma Hazel's everyday china had been acquired from the Santa Fe Railroad Company when the train on which she'd been traveling west had terrifyingly derailed, and, never one to miss a chance, she collected her set—the California poppy design—from the wreckage. There were stories of illness and hardship. My mother had contracted polio at the age of three; it's what brought the family to California, the hope of better medical care.

There were many, many stories about my grandmother. The time she went to Japan, mistaking it for Hong Kong. The time she and Grandpa took a cruise and she got hives and was confined to her cabin for several days, emerging finally to hear at infuriating length from the other women on the boat how lucky she was to be married to Grandpa who'd apparently been charming the socks off everyone in her absence. A picture of health up until the day of her death, my grandmother put sugar on everything, including celery. When she ate cookies, she buttered the tops and sprinkled them with more sugar.

It was Trudy's idea that we put together a small book for our daughters and entitle it *Sugar Your Cookies.* Each of us contributed five pieces of life advice. Our different personalities come through pretty clearly in this collection. From my practical cousin Gayle: Never leave the house without a sweater. From my inspirational cousin Trudy: Choose a career that nourishes your heart instead of your pocketbook (advice she has rethought over the years as one daughter became a yoga instructor and the other an artist). There I am, an animal lover to the core, telling everyone not to kill spiders.

Three years prior to this trip, my mother had been diagnosed with leukemia. She'd been nearly symptomless for the first two years and then managing well on regular transfusions. She seemed to be keeping up with everyone. My mother lived in La Jolla; she swam often in the ocean. But on this weekend, in the hotel pool, she went under and didn't resurface. I watched it happen.

It's a terrible thing to know about yourself, that you are no good in a crisis. I'm not the person you want when quick action is required—I will be staring down at you, frozen in horror. The person you want is my cousin Sally. It was Sally who dove in and pulled my mother back up into the air.

Her own weakness had shocked my mother and it shocked me. Our trip was not over, but I was unable to recover the festive, familial mood. This was the moment when I finally understood that my mother was dying and I think it was that moment for her as well.

My aunts and my cousins have talked many times of repeating our reunion, and including our daughters this time. We think it's their turn to put out a new edition of *Sugar your Cookies*—advice for a new generation from a new generation. I think it will happen some day, but it hasn't happened yet. Twenty years later, my mother's absence is still too great a matter.

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of six novels and three short story collections. Fowler and her husband, who have two grown children and seven grandchildren, live in Santa Cruz, California.

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Saint in Gold Dress, 2004
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