

**"TO BREATHE WHAT SHE BREATHED ALL THE TIME"**  
**AN INTERVIEW WITH**  
**STEPHANIE POWELL WATTS**

**BY**

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Stephanie Powell Watts was the keynote speaker for the 14th annual *Writing By Degrees Graduate Creative Writing Conference*, reading from her excellent collection of short stories *We Are Taking Only What We Need*. I was struck by how warm and kind she was, and how thoughtfully she answered questions after her keynote speech. We are very grateful that she took the time to share her insight with us further.

MJC: Your collection *We Are Taking Only What We Need* is clearly grounded in place—"Highway 18" and three others even reference place in their titles—and I'm wondering if you set out to depict rural life in North Carolina or if that's simply what you found emerging as you wrote. How do you feel that your own location influenced your development as a writer?

SPW: I grew up in a rural setting for the most part. Being in a small place, relatively isolated from the the goings-on of town is a great laboratory for creativity, I think. When people have nothing to do they become desperate—for companionship, for connection, for amusement, for love, for an intricate little machine to occupy their watchmaker minds. I happen to be from a rural place, but kids in the seventies and eighties in Brooklyn created a whole different kind of music without instruments with turntables and the sounds they could produce from manipulating the speed of a record because they were alone and poor and bored. Having to amuse yourself can create great problems and great adventures. Those problems make good fiction. I

did not set out to write about rural North Carolina, but I found as I wrote one story after the other that this locale was preoccupying my thinking. You can't escape your place. Learning to shake hands with and be civil with your place is a first step to understanding its influence on you and your work. I may not love every aspect of where I'm from, but it is my home, love it all the time, or not.

MJC: Each story has a distinctive narrative pull. I'm curious how the audience figures in the equation of your story-building, and what sort of work or consideration you do to pull the audience into these lives.

SPW: Every writer wants an audience. I would argue that even if you are writing a diary or journal you are writing for the future you—a different audience—than the current you. But literary writers can't be too concerned about who will read the story and certainly not who will buy the story. Tastes change, old ideas become radical new ones, one kind of story hits big and suddenly there are a dozen stories just like it flooding the market. One of the hardest things to realize is you can't control any of that. You have to write the best story you know how to write, one that says something true about what it means to live. People respond to truth. I don't mean the answers to life's huge questions. I mean accuracy. The ways we look at a face we love, the things we hear when we are alone in the woods, the thoughts that occupy us in a hospital waiting room. If we tell the truth about what it is to try to make it and thrive in this world, we have done something large and significant. We have connected people to a humanity that they are looking to recover, a humanity that can be stripped by the mundane, tedious, and inconsequential. That's doing something worthwhile. I hope what I'm about to say isn't contradictory, but I am a firm believer that a writer should write to communicate with others. We want desperately to create a bridge to another person with the things we as writers create. If our work isn't clear enough, doesn't have anything startling and exciting to say about what it means to be alive, then it won't touch and inspire the reader; it won't be true.

MJC: So many of the stories in your collection are told from the point of view of girls or young women, and show the nature of growing up female in our culture. What attracts you to this perspective?

SPW: I am very interested in the lives of girls (adolescents and a little older) who are trying to define the terms of their lives. Before we create the terms of our lives, the boundaries, there are periods, moments that our lives are not cast and set. Whether we realize it or not at the time, these days are important ones that shape the days after. The women in my stories are smart but not educated, they are not rich and their choices in many ways are fewer by those limited means and opportunities. They know none of this. Do you remember when you were a kid and race didn't matter, you didn't know who was rich or poor or who lived in the good neighborhood? You see small children playing at a park together and the issues that are so divisive and crucial in our social lives are hardly acknowledged. Slowly the pernicious ideas that divide us and tell us that one group is better or luckier or more beautiful or smarter than another seep into our consciousness. Adolescence is a time when so many of life's road blocks matter but do not feel as important as they can be later in our lives. There is no Romeo and Juliet or a million other stories like it without the openness and sense of possibility that defines adolescence. I love thinking about situating my characters in that less restrictive—not more innocent—but less mentally-confined time.

MJC: Similarly, I'm curious about your choice to use the first-person perspective. Is that something that emerged naturally from the stories as you wrote them, or was it a struggle to decide which piece had the type of character to speak in first-person? For example, Sheila's third-person story in "Black Power" compared to Dee's in "If You Hit Randolph County, You've Gone Too Far."

SPW: I wrote most of these stories in the past six or seven years. I did not write them with a collection in mind, but after the fact I decided that they belong together. These stories are kind of a chorus of rural, poor black

women at the end of the twentieth century. I wanted the reader to be close to the protagonist, to breathe what she breathed all the time, and I thought that first-person narration would accomplish that. I wanted people to think that even though these protagonists might differ from them in significant social or cultural ways, they share with them the same selfish hearts, the same anxieties, the same hopefulness, the same desire to live well. I love first-person narrations. When we were all kids we heard stories from a storyteller that knew everything and understood everything. Once upon a time there was a narrator in our stories who knew who was evil or strong, and who had a tortured, but good heart. And that narrator gave us that information directly and without obfuscation. First-person narration gives us the best we can know about the inner workings of another human being's mind and heart. We know everything in the character's consciousness to the tune of the protagonist's own distinctive voice and cadence. It is the closest we can come to the fairytale narration that we all know by heart. Third-person gives us much more flexibility and movement in the storytelling. I will also use third-person narration in my stories, especially if I need more a landscape camera shot in the scenes I build with my characters.

MJC: The title of this collection has always fascinated me. I can see a way that characters in each story are taking according to their need—very literally in the case of Leslie of “Unassigned Territory,” and, obviously, with the title story. When you put together this collection, how did you decide that “We Are Taking Only What We Need” would be the glue that holds it together? In what way do characters like Portia and Cal in this story fly a banner characters in the other stories?

SPW: When people are desperate and fleeing they don't spend a lot of time figuring out what is valuable and what is expendable. They act quickly, but with clear minds and with their best instincts. They take what they need, nothing else. Because they have their needs taken care of, they can survive. The rest: the frills, the extras, the comforts can come later. All of my characters are desperate. They need connection and direction in the worst way. Like the fleeing person from the ruined house, they might make mistakes,

regret the thing left behind in haste, but keeping it moving means that you can't spend too much time in the even recent past.

MJC: In what tradition do you see yourself as an author, and could you point to specific influences you have had in your career, specifically related to *We Are Taking Only What We Need*? Who are you reading right now?

SPW: My influences are many and far-ranging, from Ellery Queen and Asimov to literary giants like Toni Morrison and Edward Jones. I can't tell you how important it is to read about people, circumstances and points of view that you recognize. You get permission to write about your people and circumstances from your point of view. You get a tickle in your brain that your own story might be worth telling. What a gift those writers (and many many others) have given to me. I am a female, African American, post-integrationist, southern, writer. I am proud of all those designations and all of the social and cultural issues that accompany those descriptions are the stuff of my writing. In other words, I am a writer in the new century.

MJC: Congratulations again on receiving the Whiting Writers' Award. It is well-deserved. As you are looking ahead, what is on the forefront for your work? How has this award influenced your writing life or the direction you'd like to take in the future?

SPW: My father worked in furniture factories when I was a kid. Often he worked two full-time jobs and half a day on Saturday. The week of July the 4th the factory was closed and my father got jobs landscaping, painting houses, doing whatever he needed to do to keep our lights on. The gift of that Whiting money means time and time is the most important commodity in the writer's life. With the flexibility the Whiting Foundation has given me I can do the kind of work my father always hoped I would be able to do. That's a big deal to me. I am working on a novel called *No One is Coming to Save Us*. I hope this title is not too depressing. I don't mean it to be. The characters come to the realization (or not) that they have to be piloting their own lives. The impossible is not going to happen; the jobs aren't coming

back, and neither are the dead. The story is a loose retelling of *The Great Gatsby* set in rural North Carolina in the beginning of the twenty-first century with poor black people. It is practically the same story as the original *Gatsby*.

*Harpur Palate* would like to extend many thanks to Stephanie Powell Watts for her time and generosity. We look forward to reading *No One is Coming to Save Us*.