The Act of Writing Itself



photo Jeannette de Beauvoir

an interview with A. C. Burch — *by Mari Carlson*

A longtime resident of Provincetown, A.C. Burch is the author of two books: the novel ***The HomePort Journals* (Homeport Press, $15.97)** and the story collection ***A Book of Revelations* (Homeport Press, $12.97)**, both of which feature characters on the margins of society. Admiring the books, I asked for an interview and he obliged. Writers often remind me of the Wizard of Oz, magicians whose tricks make them larger than life—but instead of being disappointed by "the man behind the curtain," I found myself inspired by his convictions. In the following short interview, we discuss music, community, and more.

Mari Carlson: Where do you write?

A. C. Burch: I have a writing shed with a view of the Provincetown monument. In winter it's heated by a vintage 1900 cook stove. I've filled it with things I love: favorite books, paintings, signed photographs. There's even a secret door where I stash the inevitable rejection letters. I impale them on the inside wall. Then I shut the door and they are forgotten. It feels great!

MC: Do you have any special rituals or "tricks of the trade" when you write?

ACB: I write to music (I trained as a classical musician), and I stop the playlist when I quit for the day and return to exactly the same spot in the music when I start up the next day. It brings me right back to wherever I was in the thought process, almost as if you turned a faucet back on and the water flowed out again. *The HomePort Journals* was written to the music of Philip Glass. Each story in *A Book of Revelations* has its own musical inspiration—Wagner's Lohengrin, the music of Billie Holliday, Miles Davis, and more.

MC: You mentioned your musical training. What are the similarities and differences between music and writing?

ACB: I struggled for a long time with the transition from one art form to the other. I think I have finally found answers that work for me. The key similarity is discipline. When you play an instrument, you have to practice every day. The same goes for writing. I'm fortunate to have had a daily practice ritual for more than fifty years. That helps a lot. I would say the struggle came from my own sense of the difference between "interpreting," i.e., executing the wishes of the composer according to your own lights, and actually "creating," be it characters, plots, or venues. I constantly questioned whether my musical training would add any value to my writing. Over time, I learned that writing, too, has rhythm and tone (if not frequency) that can be crafted much like a performance. I've come a long way in realizing the training was a gift, not an encumbrance. When that happened, I felt I'd become a "real" writer.

MC: I'd also like to know if writing has isolated you, if it feels very solitary, or if it helps build community and puts you in touch with people?

ACB: What an excellent question. I think it has transformed my life in significant ways, though subtly and over a period of time. I trained as a classical musician and was on stage a lot. That persona was focused on performance and immediate audience response. I find I'm actually more comfortable being at a greater distance from that audience. So in those terms, I am more isolated. That said, I've found a wonderful community here in Provincetown. The folks at the Provincetown Bookshop have been incredibly supportive. The Provincetown Book Festival (now in its second year) has been an amazing place to meet local and nationally-known authors. I've also come to enjoy fellow author Jeannette de Beauvoir, who also writes of Provincetown (*Our Lady of the Dunes, Death of a Bear*). For me, the writing life is a perfect combination of isolation *and* community.

MC: Your writing has a strong sense of place. How do you approach

that in your writing? Where does it come from?

ACB: I've always been a sailor, which, of course, means I'm continually drawn to the sea. One of the wonderful things about living in Provincetown is that you are essentially living on a sandspit out in the ocean. The ocean intertwines with your life in amazing ways: powerful storms, gorgeous sunsets, magnificent light, and sand everywhere. It's hard to ignore all this beauty and power. It's right there for the taking when you need to set a novel or describe a scene. I'd like to think that I've absorbed some of the power and beauty of this environment and that describing it comes as second nature. Then there's the town of Provincetown itself—such a diverse and fascinating community. Everyone has a story, and most have come here from somewhere else. It's a magnificent mix of Jamaican and Portuguese, Gay and Straight, young and old. With thousands of people in summer and just a few hundred in winter, there's a lot to write about and, in the off season, the isolation to do so. In summer I sail offshore and look back at the beauty and pageantry that is Provincetown. In winter, I burrow in and write about it. Somehow, that sense of place comes through.

I'm honored to be moderating the opening panel of the Provincetown Book Festival this year. Jamie Brenner (*The Forever Summer*) and Emily Miller (*News from the End of the World*) will talk about "Writing Local: Sense of Place in Two New Cape Cod Novels." I'm looking forward to learning how they made such wonderful use of place in their books. There's always more to learn.

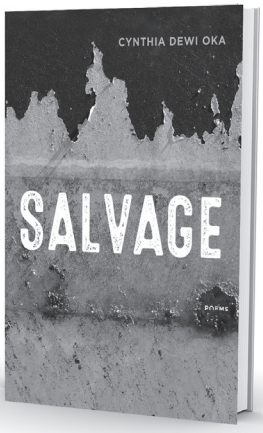
MC: You write a lot about gender/sexuality/identity. Why is that?

ACB: When I returned to my high school after a year in college, there was an episode I'll never forget. A young man I'll call Frank had been found in a compromising position. Due to an indiscreet teacher, the whole community knew about it. Frank was in the process of changing gender when she returned to confront the entire community at a school play where my sister and her brother had lead roles. She stood there in the cafeteria holding a bouquet of roses as parents and students alike cowered in the opposite corner, like sheep faced by a lion. I was so impressed with the courage she displayed and could only imagine what her life might have been like. I think that memory has lived with me ever since.

I'm also drawn to the notion of the shape-shifter. I think there's a part of me that is fascinated with the notion of turning yourself into someone else and creating your own reality. I suppose I do some of that in my writing, by infusing a bit of myself into characters that are bigger or more outrageous than I'd ever be. Helena in *The HomePort Journals* is a great example of that.

MC: Any parting thoughts about writing or anything else for our readers?

ACB: Yes. To those reading this who always have wanted to write, remember this: the greatest benefit to be found in writing is the act of writing itself. This "Spooky Art," as Norman Mailer called it, will teach you so much about yourself and the world if you just let it. Don't worry about fame and fortune or negative reviews. Just jump in, enjoy the ride and surprise yourself. It is a life-changing decision you'll be glad you made. rt

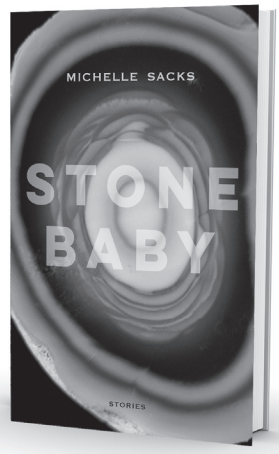


Salvage
Poems
Cynthia Dewi Oka

"We are in the thick of the sludge of salvage, in an age of greedy locusts . . . when visionaries are bound to emerge. Cynthia Dewi is one of these visionaries, a word prophet. She writes with one foot in time, the other in timelessness. These poems in her newest collection *Salvage* are small fires to light the way. They are lit by urgent need. With these poems, we will make it through." **—Joy Harjo**

Stone Baby
Stories
Michelle Sacks

"What tough-minded, original stories these are—knowing, disturbing, and full of dazzling talent. As the settings move from Cape Town to Berlin to Bali to Dublin, we follow a superb array of characters in a cycle of harming and helping. *Stone Baby* is a chronicle of high-risk adventures and emergency escapes—wonderfully told and quite unforgettable." —**Joan Silber**



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