

For Seaman, books are little points of light

By Mara Tapp

Special to the Tribune

Published November 21, 2005

Donna Seaman begins her new book, "Writers on the Air," a collection of some 11 years of radio interviews, with a magical sentence: "In the hope of transformation and pleasure, I'm forever falling into the arms of books."

That image captures her sense of the lure of literature. An editor at Booklist, published by the Chicago-based American Library Association and marking its 100th anniversary, Seaman reads all day. She is a regular contributor to the Chicago Tribune's Books section, and her radio show, "Open Books," airs on Loyola University's WLWU-FM 88.7.

"I grew up depending on books as beacons in a dark world," she says. "I always say that I read from an early age looking for clues because people don't tell children the truth . . . and I found that novels were windows to the world, to how people's minds work and what adults were up to, so I think serious readers -- and writers are serious readers -- share that beginning, that kind of trust in literature."

Recently, we talked with Seaman about the art of interviewing, autobiography and her new book.

Q. This is largely a collection of interviews with fiction writers. Why?

A. Fewer and fewer journalists talk to fiction writers, and I think fiction writers have many truths to tell us. . . . Many novels are full of knowledge about the world. . . . I think stories are intrinsic to human nature. I love biographies. I did read some history on my own, but I've always found that novels and poetry and essays are a continuing education -- and pleasure, of course. It's always been about pleasure.

Q. What is it you look for in an author interview?

A. I really look to speak to people that I feel I'll learn a lot from because that's why I read them. I'll admit that I'm interested in writers who are interested in our relationship with nature. . . . That profoundly concerns me at this stage in our civilization. I would definitely put Diane Ackerman, Margaret Atwood, T.C. Boyle, Jamaica Kincaid in that category.

Q. In this age of celebrity how do you avoid asking about a writer's personal life?

I'm very much more interested in the art. These are people who are speaking about their books, and there's a lot of personality in their books, but it's their work that we're talking about. There's so much in there that is urgent and of great interest, and we do get around to questions of "When did you start writing? How do you write?" but it always does get back to the work. This is a volunteer effort, which means that . . . there's no pressure on me to be commercial or to pander in any way. I can be as literary as I am.

Q. But much work does draw from life experience, so how important is autobiography in your interviews?

A. It's extremely important whether it's overt or covert. There's no way out of that. . . . It's always there but is it the driving force? . . . When you speak with Margaret Atwood, you do find things about her childhood that speak about her literature . . . but in her novels she's using her imagination. She's extrapolating. She's speaking beyond herself.

Q. Like any good writer, she's taking it from the personal to universal.

A. The best memoirs do that, as well, but always in fresh and surprising ways.

Q. You always ask about authors' reading habits and favorite books. Why is that so important?

A. Part of my little mission here is to encourage reading, to remind listeners and readers that very few people become writers without having loved reading. This is my love letter to the universe of libraries, writers, schools. . . .

Q. You're a very close reader, and you ask questions that are very specific. It's almost as if you inhabit the text with the writer.

A. That's who I am. . . . So much of our world is superficial and glib and quick, and I really believe in depth. . . . You get very amazing responses. . . . It's always fascinating. It's always revealing.

Q. You organized the book into sections. Why?

A. As I was trying to decide who I would give up, which was torment to me, I also started to notice what was going on in these books. . . . There are certain themes in fiction that I follow . . . and so I thought it would be interesting to group writers and see how they approach various themes in different ways. . . .

Q. "Between Worlds" was a section that particularly attracted me, not only because it included some of my favorite writers -- Alexandar Hemon and Jamaica Kincaid -- but

because it addresses the immigrant experience in literature, which has a fine history that's being refreshed regularly, even as we speak.

A. The immigrant experience has obviously been the bedrock of American literature and will continue to be. The whole story of this country is of people who came here either by choice or under duress. . . . We're fascinated by our roots, the old country, questions that come up between generations, trying to celebrate it and conceal it. It's just enormously rich.

Q. Your section on "Creative Nonfiction" intrigues me, especially because I know you did a book with Diane Ackerman and she's one of the interviewees here. What do you want to accomplish with this section?

A. She wrote the forward to my anthology, "In Our Nature: Stories of Wildness." When I first started reviewing books, feeling my way here at Booklist, there was this curious little book by a writer I'd never heard of. It was called "A Natural History of the Senses" . . . and it was just a revelation to me. I thought it was creative, brilliant and new, and Diane Ackerman inspired me in many ways. . . . That genre is very rich and instructive, and I love witnessing a mind at work in those books -- whether you're watching birds or a building being built. . . . I really feel very responsible to people out in the real world -- or what I call "civilian readers" -- who don't have this ready access. Many of these writers are not familiar to them, but they would love their books.

Q. You also have a related readings section at the end of "Writers on the Air." Why?

A. Early on, [publisher] Paul Dry asked me to do recommended readings, and I said I'd love to. That's a habit of mine. . . . When I speak to other people who are readers, I feel that we have these maps in our head, like constellations, and they sort of light up so this was my attempt to turn it into something concrete and to capture those conversations I've had with big readers, many of whom were in the book. You know little boys who are baseball fanatics and keep statistics? It was kind of like that, trying to create a world that you love.

Q. I believe that most interviews, especially ones with authors and artists, should be conversational -- almost as if the listener is eavesdropping on a living room chat. I notice that you're not afraid to ask long questions either and wonder if you have the same view of interviewing?

A. Absolutely. In fact, I've found that it really helped the author for me to take over, talk a little. It gave them a chance to think and relax. . . .

Q. Chicago has a real presence in this book with writers such as Hemon, Stuart Dybek, Ward Just, Shakar, Edward Hirsch, Lynda Barry, Alex Kotlowitz and Sandra Cisneros.

A. Oh, and I wanted it to be. I did not grow up in Chicago . . . and so when I came to Chicago I did what I do when I want to know about a place. I read the writers, and I just loved the writing. . . . I became a real Heartland person, felt it was under-appreciated and should be celebrated more . . . and I make it a real point to speak with Chicago writers, Illinois writers. I think we have a real tradition here.