

Interview: Sharon McElhone (with Joi Pride)

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PART 1

Where were you born? When?

I was born in 1970 in Santa Monica, California.

Where did you grow up?

Until I was five, my parents raised my brother and me in Lawndale, California. They bought an apartment complex and we lived in one of the units. When I turned five, my father was given a position with the European Space Agency in Holland and so my family moved to Holland for six years. We returned to the Bay Area when I was around eleven and I completed high school in Northern California.

What was your childhood like?

My childhood was romantic since my parents are very adventurous people. My brother and I have been exposed to all kinds of cultures, religions, politics, art, literature, and engaged us from the onset. We were expected to respect people's differences, but we were expected to also think independently. They have always been entrepreneurial in spirit and so we also experienced the feasts and famines that go along with any business venture and we had good times and hard times. As a child, it was wondrous and frightening.

Tell me about your family.

My mother was born in Ecuador. She immigrated to the United States when she was eighteen. My father was born in New York to Irish parents and he was much older than my mother. They met in California in the late sixties at church of all places, I think. My brother and I were very close growing up and we played a lot. When we returned from Europe, my mother and father sadly divorced though. It was a very difficult time. My mother re-married some years later, and we have grown up with our step-sister and step-brother also. My father never remarried, but when my brother and I were in our teens, we discovered that my father had a son in New York before he married my mother in California. There are five siblings in total and we are all friends. We have our own busy lives, but we manage to keep connected. When I was thirty, I married David and we have two children together and are very happy.

What is your heritage? Does it influence your writing? How?

I've always seen the world through the eyes of a half-breed. My mother has dark skin and my father is fair skinned and people treated my mother differently because she was dark

skinned. I turned out to be fair and my brother was dark and it was an interesting time to grow up because America didn't embrace multi-culturalism the way it does today. While my parents didn't let prejudice hold them back, it has marked me and has influenced my writing a great deal. Today, we have #oscarssowhite, the Black Lives Matter movement, and a political candidate suggesting that a wall be built between Mexico and America. We are seeing shifts in American consciousness and people trying to push for more equality and less inequality. Any story that I can tell that will help a reader see themselves more clearly in that context and see their own views more clearly is really what I'm after.

What was your education like?

Education is extremely important to me, but it doesn't have to be entirely formal. In fact, it's important that education be gotten from different sources including travel, hobbies, work and engaging in community. The first school I attended was a Dutch pre-school, where we learned Dutch, then my schooling changed to a French Lycee for most of elementary and my brother and I learned French. When we moved to the States, we entered the American public school system and stayed through high school. I was lucky enough to go to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and even attended an MFA program later when I decided that I enjoyed writing. Traveling and meeting people offer an excellent education with the caveat that some formal education helps put experiences into a more mature perspective in my view. But, I also have a very good friend, who never went beyond sixth grade in his native country of Mexico, and he is a wealthy American businessman and landowner. He is also a terrific father and husband. There is never one way to go about getting an education. I left formal education when ugly politics began to override good decision making. When that happens, the environment becomes more ripe for bullying and back-door dealing and less ripe for transparency and taking risks. Good writing is about transparency and taking risks and finding an environment that supports risks so a writer can grow is what motivated me to pursue other avenues of education after my formal education was complete.

Do you speak Spanish?

Yes, although I have no formal education in Spanish since I studied French. My Spanish gets me by when I travel and work, but I would like to be much more fluent and so I take Spanish classes.

How would you describe your style or writing?

Idea driven and dark at times. Molly Peacock, my friend, called my poems "thinky pieces" once. It's also something that comes out of me without me really having a full grasp of why it does. In that way, it feels like singing. Also, Latin American culture has a very large influence on my work and so does family life. Women characters most often play the central role in my stories because women, to me, have still yet to be fully understood and appreciated for their contributions. Until they are, we don't have a well balanced society. Even though the act of writing feels like singing. Once the story is

actually finished, it feels like breathing clean air again or as if a challenging problem has just been solved. It's a joy really.

Is writing your principal occupation?

No, my writing earns very little, so I work as a realtor to supplement an income. My husband's salary supports us mostly. When I was single, I had been able to earn enough money to support myself, but after we had children, it became quickly apparent that someone needed to take care of them. Since my husband's earning potential was more, it made sense that I would stay home with them and work part-time until they were old enough to go to school. The cost of childcare also became prohibitive for me to be able to work full-time. Essentially, I took on three jobs without access to childcare after motherhood--the care of my children full time, writing, and doing real estate in order to help supplement our income--while my husband took one full-time job and was able to count on me as a full-time caregiver for our children. It's a common set up. We've established it around the world in order to meet the demands of caregiving, and yet it creates a situation where many women cannot suitably support themselves financially. So, I would say while writing does not often pay enough to support writers in many cases, access to affordable and stable childcare has been the biggest limiting factor to my writing and financial independence.

PART 2

What do you usually write? Poems? Novels? Short Stories?

I've written four collections of poems, one novel and two collections of short stories. Currently, I'm working on a collection of essays about affordable childcare and putting out a monthly, bilingual column called "Middle America-Our Engine" in *La Oferta*. The column is dedicated to the middle class.

Do you write in English, Spanish, and French? Do you find it easier to express certain ideas in either language?

I write in English and include Spanish in my work from time to time because of my Latin background. More than languages, my work is affected by cultures, especially the Spanish culture. Cultures vary in their belief systems and when a different culture clashes with our American culture, there is lots of movement. New principles and ideas are formed and sometimes violence erupts. That tension drives many of the stories and poems I write.

You said you and your brother were taught to respect people's differences and to think independently. How might these ideals influence your writing today?

My parents freed me when they taught me the importance of being independent and respecting differences. Respecting a difference is not the same thing as agreeing. When a person feels free to disagree and also respects another person's right to think

independently, judgment disappears. I don't feel afraid to write about any subject really because when I write about things I don't agree with it's not an act of war, but an act of trying to understand another point of view. Sometimes, I try to change that point of view too. For a woman, it's gratifying to feel free because society traditionally puts all kinds of restrictions on what is appropriate for a woman to say and do and what isn't. My writing would suffer if I listened.

What are your favorite topics to write about?

I have no favorite topics. I write down whatever inspires me at the time.

Can you give me an example of something you wrote that may have helped readers see themselves more clearly?

No. That is a personal thing between a piece of writing and a reader. My only hope is that my work is engaging on some level to readers. Sometimes I get a compliment or criticism from someone on a piece of writing and am glad that it meant something to that particular reader and that they cared enough to read my work, think it over and give feedback.

Why do you think women have yet to be fully appreciated for their contributions to society?

Well, for one, it's 2016 and America still has not had a female president. It's mind boggling. There is not a standard universal childcare system in place in America so all families can work with dignity and have access to financial stability. I think the most powerful nation in the world can do better for women and should see them as intelligent and also as powerful allies to have.

Who is your audience?

Any audience I have is through the publishing outlets that support my work. *La Oferta*, *Label Me Latina/o*, *New Short Fiction Series*, *Squaw Valley Writers*, *BASTA!* have all been extremely generous in backing my fiction, journalism, poetry, and/or essays. Luckily, editors and writers such as Dr. Michele Shaul, Mary Andrade, Molly Peacock, Sally Shore, Dr. Emma Sepulveda and Iris West have all put time and energy into my work by either publishing it or championing it. My friends and family are readers as well. I'm very lucky.

PART 3

Do you have any favorite authors?

I've had authors influence my work like Lara Gularte, Peter Nathaniel Malae, Arlie Hochschild, Isabelle Allende, Al Young, Sharon Olds, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Seamus Heaney, Molly Peacock, Kristen Iversen, Maya Angelou, Naomi Shihab Nye, Jeffrey

Eugenides, F Scott Fitzgerald, James Baldwin, Alice Munro, and Alice Walker among others.

What advice do you have for new writers? Dos? Don'ts?

Do work hard. Do find a quiet and nice place to write. Do read a lot. Do keep a job if writing alone doesn't support you financially. Be flexible about when you write. When I had children, my writing schedule changed based on their needs. Do find editors and writers who support your work and be grateful to them. Do encourage other writers as well. Do enjoy friends and family because they can be a great support system if the relationships are true and healthy. Do believe in yourself and in your work if it fulfills you.

Don't let "the noise" distract you. Don't believe every criticism is true, but use constructive criticism that is helpful in order to improve. Don't get discouraged with rejection if you really enjoy writing. It's part of the process.

Do you think writing is something everyone should do, whether casually or professionally?

I think writing casually or professionally is a pure joy, but not everyone feels that way.

If you were to go back in time what advice would you give to your younger self?

"You can do this even when it seems like the road is too steep and too long."

Describe yourself in 15 words or less.

That is a very good question. I can't think of an answer.

How do you define success?

Following one's passion and feeling fulfilled, completing the tasks you set out to do and having the ability to love another human being.