



Adeena Reitberger

Austin, Texas

REBECCA MARKOVITS

Adeena Reitberger was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and grew up on the outskirts of Washington, DC. She received her MFA from Western Michigan University and has served as a fiction editor at Third Coast and as an editorial assistant and blogger at American Short Fiction. Currently she teaches creative writing at Austin Community College. Until August 2012, she also taught at Badgerdog Literary Publishing—a writers-in-the-schools program that's taken her into public middle- and high-school classrooms in Austin, Texas. Some of her fiction is published or forthcoming in Nimrod International Journal, SmokeLong Quarterly, NANO Fiction, and the Sierra Nevada Review. Reitberger was interviewed by Rebecca Markovits.

Rebecca Markovits: *Where did you grow up and what was it like?*

Adeena Reitberger: I grew up in Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, DC, and as a kid I spent most of my free time running around the woods behind my house. There was a creek that went

on for what felt like miles; I jumped from rock to rock across the stream and tried not to fall in. I also spent a lot of time with my grandparents in Baltimore. My parents would drive us up there Friday afternoons before Shabbat—I was raised Orthodox, and Judaism was a large part of my childhood. There were a lot of other religious families in my grandparents' neighborhood and that meant that there weren't many cars coming and going on Saturdays. So, for one day, the kids owned the streets and we ran from house to house and played kickball and climbed trees. It was a very sheltered, peaceful time.

RM: *When did writing become an important part of your life?*

AR: In fifth grade, I had a friend who wrote novels. No joke. She probably had three or four written by the time we started hanging out. She wrote during class, at lunch, after school. At some point, we started co-writing books. We'd write alternating chapters and have another friend illustrate them. That was the beginning. In eighth grade, I wrote long letters. I'll tell you the truth—my goal in writing these letters was to make my friends cry. I probably had a seventy percent success rate. Then, in eleventh grade, I signed up for a class at the The Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland. That was my first true writing workshop.

Rebecca Markovits just completed an MFA in creative non-fiction at Goucher College. She has written for numerous publications, including the Austin American-Statesman and The Texas Observer, and is the author of The Fearless Critic: Austin Restaurant Guide. Rebecca lives and writes in Austin, Texas. She is currently finishing a book about public spaces in urban America.



Photograph of Adeena Reitberger by Carrie Wells.

Rebecca Markovits

but he taught me a lot about analytical writing and introduced me to a few books that I love, including Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. The language in that novel is just gorgeous. Even then I knew I wanted to write like that.

RM: *Have you ever had a writing mentor?*

AR: In graduate school, I worked closely with Jaimy Gordon. Jaimy held workshops at her house every week, and her students would take turns providing food and drinks for the class. We'd sit around her living room, on the couch, on the carpet, next to her dog, wherever we could find space. It was a very intimate setting and it helped us foster close relationships with each other and with her. Jaimy is a truly wise woman. Her guidance and life continue to inspire me. She won the 2010 National Book Award for *Lord of Misrule*, a novel about a small-stakes horse-racing track in a rural West Virginia town. But before this success, her work was relatively unknown; she published with small, independent presses and wrote in relative obscurity for decades. Everyone wants to be talented and successful, but what does that even mean? How does one measure artistic

RM: *Who was the first person to read your work, and what were you looking for from this reading?*

AR: The first people I showed my writing to were my friends in high school. And what was I looking for? Compliments. It's important to remember that when working with high schoolers—they want to feel that what they're doing is important and that their writing has merit. As a teacher, I always try to balance revision suggestions with positive feedback. And that's what I prefer to call them—not changes or problems or inadequacies, but revision suggestions. It implies that there is always room for growth. The way I approach revision with my students is through questions. I'll ask them to imagine how their poem or story would change if they added more setting or imagery or character details. Usually, when I ask these questions, the students arrive at revisions on their own.

RM: *Did you have any memorable writing teachers as a child?*

AR: Two English teachers stand out in my mind, Mrs. Rapps and Dr. Worden. In eighth grade, Mrs. Rapps assigned a poetry project. We learned various poetic forms and I remember loving the pantoum. I probably wrote a dozen of them just for fun in the weeks following the project. I don't particularly remember writing creatively in Dr. Worden's class,

Photograph of Adeena Reitberger by Carrie Wells.



talent? And is success measured by sales or achievement? There are many great books that never reach a large audience and many bad books that do. Jaimy's success is a good reminder that sometimes slow and steady does win the race.

RM: *Writers seem to have a wide range of feelings about pursuing an MFA. Are you pleased you did?*

AR: I enrolled at Western Michigan University for my MFA a year after I graduated from college. In some ways, I wish I had waited another year or two because I was young and naive. I didn't understand how cutthroat and competitive the writing world was. If I had more time, I might have been a little less green. But despite that, getting my MFA was an invaluable experience. I met a talented group of writers who still read and support my work, and I had three years with funding to dedicate to a substantial writing project. I was also given the opportunity to teach classes at the university and work as a fiction editor for a nationally distributed magazine.

RM: *Is teaching writing something you do as a necessary side project to your own writing, or is it part and parcel of being a writer for you? Does it ever detract from the time you can spend on your own work?*

AR: That's an interesting question. To be honest, when I started teaching I saw it as a way to pay the bills, but now I can't imagine being a writer and not teaching. My students are some of the most creative, interesting, free-thinking people I know. They're not self-conscious about their writing like adults; they're not trying to channel something outside of themselves. Their voices and ideas

are their own. This semester, I had one student write a play that was a conversation between a nickel and a map of the world. It was just the most bizarre, hysterical, and devastating interaction. There was a real heart in it. Another student, a sixth-grader, wrote a poem about the BP oil spill. In it, she described a pelican "stuck in midnight waters / the apricot sun / rising in the distance." That image is just so vivid and haunting. Young students make the most unusual, poignant associations. They remind me that writing is fun. They remind me that sometimes I need to lose control, that I need to let my own voice be a little wilder.



Photograph of Adeena Reiterberger courtesy of Badgerdog Literary Publishing.

RM: *What next?*

AR: I feel very fortunate because I love my job. I hope to always teach in some capacity. I'm also working on two writing projects. The first is a story collection and the second is a fragmented novel. Hopefully one day you'll see them on a bookshelf. ☺

Classroom Snapshot

ADEENA REITBERGER

Mariah Pogue wrote this piece of flash fiction during a workshop I led for Badgerdog at Del Valle High School this spring. The high school is located seven miles east of downtown Austin in what was once a farming community that primarily produced cotton and grain. Del Valle's population has grown exponentially in the past few decades, and while some farms have turned into housing developments, many farms still remain. When you walk out the front doors of the high school there are often a half-dozen horses grazing across the street. Mariah's family has lived in Del Valle for years and the solitude of the countryside echoes in her writing.

Mariah's story was inspired by "Daydream," a two-paragraph flash fiction piece by Roberta Allen published in the anthology *Micro Fiction* (Jerome Stern, editor. W. W. Norton & Co; 1996). In "Daydream," the narrator sits in the backseat of a car while her half-sister's husband makes hairpin turns around mountain bends and laughs maniacally. In the last few sentences, the narrator—alienated and unresponsive—finds herself in a daydream that provides comfort and escape.

I had asked my students to make a similar move, to present a situation in which a character felt stuck and to use the character's imagination as a tool to break out of the physical setting. Because of the condensed nature of flash fiction, we paid close attention to diction and detail, making sure that each word, gesture, and image lent itself to the larger meaning of the text. After the initial draft, I asked the students to cross at least ten boring or flat words out of their stories and replace them with words that were alive and interesting. In Mariah's story, verbs groan, pop, fade, waft, whine, and kick. The broken-down truck in front of the house is a

"yard sofa" and the sky is an "amber-red soup." A good piece of flash fiction is truncated and compressed, but there is evidence that it goes beyond what's on the page. The characters may be in a moment, but, like the narrator in Mariah's story, there is a sense that they have a past and a future.

In the Country

MARIAH POGUE

The Ford's tailgate groans as Shiloh and I hop up onto our permanent yard sofa with its Texas license plate rusting and falling off. Idly, I pull the white fringe from the holes in the thighs of my faded navy jeans, and I stare out at the barren fields in front of me. I sigh as the sunset fades away into an amber-red soup over the desolate land around me.

I pull Shiloh into my arms and rest my head on her broad, golden shoulders. She barks and tries her hardest to lick my face. We're two soldiers on an escape mission. A tin can clanks off a rock behind us. Dad's angry, and he's kicking all his belongings around again as though kicking things will fix his problems.

The raw smell of dirt wafts up in the fierce north wind that often caresses our trailer. Shiloh whines, frightened. I look absentmindedly over the cracking horizon where wet brown mounds with green tufts once existed. I think of excited voices, laughter, honking, shouting, begging, crying, singing, and the brushing by of all the city folk miles away as they travel down the bustling sidewalk of opportunity. 🐾