



TEACHING ARTIST SNAPSHOT

Melanie Maria Goodreaux

DAVID McLOGHLIN

Melanie Maria Goodreaux is a playwright, poet, and native of New Orleans who has made her home in New York City since 1999. Her poetry and plays—including *Saydee* and *Deelores, Walter. Bullets. And Binoculars*, and *Ka-trina Who?!—have been performed at Yale University, the Lillian Theater in Los Angeles, the Nuyorican Poets Café and the Chelsea Playhouse in New York City, and at the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta. She is a teaching artist with Teachers & Writers Collaborative, Creative Theatrics, and the Manhattan New Music Project, teaching creative writing and drama in all the boroughs of New York City. This interview took place on October 14, 2010, at Teachers & Writers Collaborative.*

David McLoghlin: *How long have you been teaching writing in schools?*

Melanie Maria Goodreaux: For about ten years now.

DM: *When did you first start writing?*

MG: In high school I wrote all the plays, and then started writing poetry, probably after a break-up with

some guy (*laughs*). Then, when my father died, I started writing poems about that experience. At some point I started doing poetry readings. I thought, “Okay, this is something that’s supposed to be shared.”

DM: *Did you ever attend an MFA program?*

MG: I didn’t do an MFA, I just came to New York and did... life! You see, I was already a writer. I taught art therapy at an “independent living” home, but I was still doing my writing. Then I moved into this artist community/squat in the East Village, where we converted a studio apartment into a thirty-seat black-box theater. We put on our own shows—writing plays, casting actors—and people would come. Wynton Marsalis came, isn’t that crazy? And then a producer started producing my plays at different theaters around New York. So to me, that was better than an MFA.

DM: *Oh, I agree! How did you come by your first teaching job in New York?*

MG: Well, after college I worked as a school librarian in New Orleans, and then as a middle-school reading teacher and a drama teacher, so I’d had the experience of teaching. Then when I came to New York, I was looking for a way that I could still write, so I looked into Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, David McLoghlin is an MFA student at NYU. In 2006 and 2007 he received grants from the Arts Council of Ireland and Kerry County Council. His work has appeared in Poetry Ireland Review, The Stinging Fly, The Shop, and other Irish literary journals. In 2008 he was awarded second prize in the Patrick Kavanagh Awards, Ireland’s most prestigious award for an unpublished first collection of poetry. Salmon Poetry will publish his first collection, Waiting for Saint Brendan, in June 2012. McLoghlin is a 2010–2011 intern at T&W.

DM: *What kind of work do you do with T&W?*

MG: I work as a writer-in-residence. In some residencies, I work with the students to write a play, and in others I do a writing workshop where we finish by publishing the students' writing in an anthology. I work in all different parts of New York City, traveling on different trains and getting to see new neighborhoods. That's one of the cool things about being a freelance teaching writer.

DM: *I saw two of the books you produced with kids. I really loved them.*

MG: Oh, those were genius kids! Such imagination.

DM: *Are you naturally drawn to working with children?*

MG: I think I have a natural affinity for them. I think that all adults basically have a kid inside them. So, it doesn't matter if the children I'm working with are "special kids," or "gifted kids," I just listen to what's coming out of them, and hope to inspire them.

DM: *What originally drew you to do this kind of work? Was becoming a teacher something you wanted to do, or was it necessity?*

MG: Teaching is a joy, but also a necessity. I mean, it's what I do and I do it well. I'm good with kids. If writing is about looking at the world, and thinking about things differently, it makes sense that writers would want to be around people who think about writing, think about ideas, and inspire kids to do that. Being a writer and being an educator are good cousins.

It's been my experience in New York that an artist may have to do many things to juggle the "New York life." So, I write, I teach, I adapt scripts, I write scripts for theater companies, and I can even do astrology readings!

DM: *Do you have any advice for writers who might want to teach?*

MG: Just remember what made you a writer, and bring that same sort of inspiration, those same sources, to the up-and-coming young writers you'll be working with.

DM: *What are you working on now?*

MG: I'm working on a children's adaptation of *Hamlet*. I meet with a group of kids in Brooklyn on Tuesdays and we are hashing out the story of *Hamlet*, and creating a new play inspired by Shakespeare. I will take their ideas and adapt them into a work for them to perform. Last year we did a futuristic, outer-space version of *Romeo and Juliet* called *Starcrossed*.

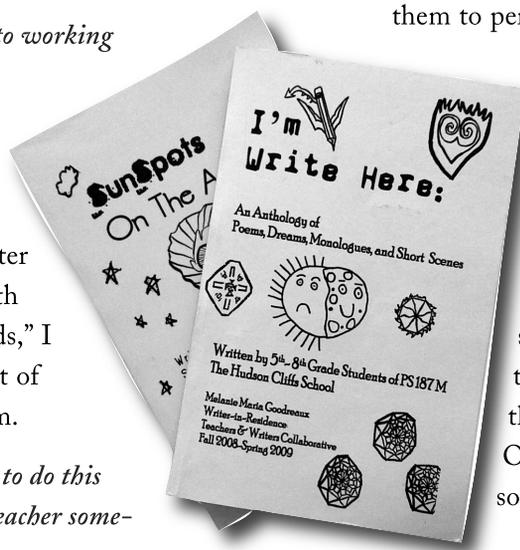
DM: *Describe one of the best teaching experiences you've had.*

MG: Every year with T&W I've done a residency at a school for students with special needs. We take a musical genre, we expose them to it, and then we write a play. One year we did Motown, and it was so great to see the kids come on stage as Diana Ross and Stevie Wonder and the Jackson Five, and pay homage to the

music. That was definitely one of my favorite experiences. Creating an opera with my students was a favorite too.

DM: *What do you think is the ideal student age to teach?*

MG: Fifth grade is a magical age. They're not too cynical, their imagination is still fresh, they're still open, but they're able to have interesting conversations. They become philosophers at that age. I also like teaching high school.



Anthologies of student writing from Melanie Maria Goodreaux's classes.

“[Being a writer] is a strange calling. I chose it, or it chose me, but I’m here, I’m going with it, and I’m inspiring other people to do it.”

DM: *So, were there bad experiences when you started out?*

MG: Oh, *please*. When I first came to T&W I worked a lot with students who had behavioral or emotional issues. It’s great work, and you can get really interesting poetry from these classes, but at times poems were being written while chairs were being knocked over, or in the midst of a fight breaking out. Obviously, poetry was very necessary there, and I’d always get these poems that were like treasures because I knew all that had happened to produce even just a few great and honest lines.

DM: *What books do you use most to get ideas for teaching?*

MG: The book I use most is called *Poetry Everywhere*. It’s published by T&W, and has a very simple layout of exercises and examples. You can just open it up, and go, “Ah! That’ll work, I’m inspired by that.” I’m also inspired by making my own lesson plans, but when you’ve been teaching for a long time, it helps to have other resources.

DM: *Which writers have had the most influence on your own work?*

MG: I’m inspired by Nikki Giovanni, and by Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. That was some of the first poetry I read that sounded like me, that sounded like my own experience.

DM: *How do you balance your writing with your teaching work?*

MG: I suppose I feel that writers are always writing because they’re always thinking. I don’t block out time; I write when I’m inspired, when I need to, when I have the time.

DM: *What is the hardest part of what you do—either as a teacher or a writer?*

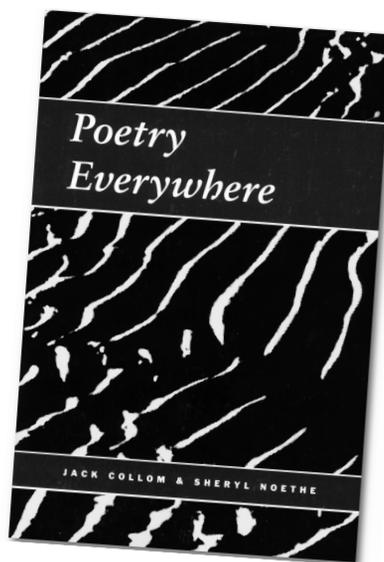
MG: I think living in New York as an artist is hard: trying to make money to survive, and then to create the time to write as well. It’s not the easiest life. It’s like, “I wish I could write more but I’m worried about how I’m going to pay my damn rent!” I mean, if I were a basketball player, I’d be making a lot more money! (*much laughter*)

DM: *What is the best part of your life as a teaching writer?*

MG: I guess that it fits, and that I’m making it work, because what else would I be doing? It’s a strange calling. I chose it, or it chose me, and I’m here, I’m going with it, and I’m inspiring other people to do it.

DM: *What would be your ideal teaching situation—if money were no object?*

MG: Well, I’d love to have some amazing theater space, and get some very talented older students from New Orleans. I would have them write and talk about preserving the city and the culture, or dealing with some of the pain from the aftermath of Katrina in some serious but imaginative way. I’d want to work with people who don’t always have access to those kinds of facilities. These kids would be talented, they would want to be there, and they would have something important to say. ☺



Classroom Snapshot

MELANIE MARIA GOODREAU

Current Of The River Drums

EVA JOHNSON

The park—dawn.
Mainly scrub brush
turned golden with the sun's rays.
Rich, moist, earthly scent of shoots
pushing through soil.
An out-of-date newspaper under the
bench.

The current of the river drums.
Almost like a pulse.

Old man—reading a newspaper
upside-down,
swallowed by an oversized tweed suit.
Wrinkled.
The cloth is musty, like old lavender
pipe smoke.
Something ancient and forgotten
clings to him.
His head feels as if it is stuffed with
cotton balls,
clogging memories.
His mind is as foggy as a smudged
window pane.
Can't remember his own name.
His newspaper is like a shield.

Waves crash and fall.

Who is he? He doesn't know.
He opens his eyes to his muddled
thoughts,
closes his eyes to the world.
Has broken conversations with
himself.
Things change constantly around
him—
a leaf flutters to the ground.
The glossy wings of a bird unfold.

This poem was created by Eva Johnson during a 2010 residency I did at PS 187, the Hudson Cliffs School in New York City. Eva was quiet in class, would never read aloud, would never entertain my analysis and discussion of the poems in class. But poem after poem written and turned in on looseleaf by Eva would astound me and my colleagues at Teachers & Writers. When I would tell them that Eva was eleven years old—a sixth-grader—no one believed me.

This particular poem was inspired by Tish Benson's "Unfinished Scene Meta" from her book *Wild Like That: Good Stuff Smelling Strong* (Fly By Night Press, 2003). I shared just an excerpt of the poem with the students because it has a violent ending, but in the excerpt you can see Benson's minimalism and excellent descriptive word choices. She has a unique way of using her own voice to set the atmosphere and create a "portrait" of the person she is describing in her poem with few words.

I had students pick someone interesting they knew or who had inspired them, and asked them to make a "portrait poem" of that person inside of a particular place, in a very specific moment. We wrote these poems line by line—I gave them minimal words per line, modeling Tish Benson. I would say, "You have only two words for this line to describe how the place smells." Or, "You have to tell me in five words what would be all over the ground or floor in the place where you have put this person in your poem." And I had them end the poems by modeling a technique used by Benson in her poem which was to describe "what was 'born' of this moment."