



## EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

# Lynne Tillman

## Interviewed by Matthew Sharpe

Lynne Tillman is a fiction writer, essayist, and educator. When we spoke last year, I had just finished reading her entire oeuvre and was very eager to discuss all of her books. As it turned out, the focal point of our conversation ended up being her first novel, *Haunted Houses* (1987). In retrospect, however, this seems fitting because that novel inaugurated the themes and techniques that have come to distinguish her as a writer. —Matthew Sharpe

**Matthew Sharpe:** You once wrote that you decided to become a writer when you were eight years old. “I stuck to the idea; I held the notion deep inside me, for me alone and for a long time. I think it sustained me or gave me a me to sustain.”

**Lynne Tillman:** The fact that a child could make a decision like that at the age of eight shows that children are not children in the sense we usually think of, and, also, that some sense of our own survival comes up very fast, which makes us more mature than we’re supposed to be. I had quite a vociferous family. In order to be heard—for me to speak, I think—I needed a place of my own. No one could interrupt my writing. When I started writing those little compositions you do when you’re seven or eight, I remember I was thrilled. We were asked to write an essay on Charlemagne, you know, Charles the Great, and I wrote two. I wrote “Charlemagne, Man of War” and “Charlemagne, Man of Peace.”

**MS:** Ah, the internal contradictions of the self: already one of the major Tillman themes emerging.... More than once you’ve quoted

Franz Kafka to the effect that “my education has damaged me in ways I do not even know.” What does that statement mean to you?

**LT:** We live inside our limits and we don’t even know what they are. And we only come up against them in more extreme or severe situations. There are the Oulipo writers, like Georges Perec, who wrote a novel without the letter E. I thought that was his way of finding a formal way to ask, “What does it mean to have suffered the loss of one’s parents in a concentration camp?”

I lived in Europe for quite a while, which was extremely important to me in terms of finding out how my education had damaged me. You don’t recognize how much has been encoded in you, that you are a mass of attitudes. They’re simply part of your identity. So in the way that *Haunted Houses* was about what it meant to be made into a girl or a woman, my second novel *Motion Sickness* was more about national identity.

A female narrator who’s unnamed goes from place to place, country to country, and she meets other displaced people, like an older German and a younger German in Spain, one who lived through the war, one who was born after. I’ve an Irishman in Morocco, and a New Zealander in Greece. All displaced and drifting, but carrying their nationalities, in a way.

**MS:** There’s actually a treatment of this theme in *Haunted Houses*. Emily goes to Amsterdam, where “she recognized her Americanness with ideas like ‘things can change,’ ‘everything is possible,’ ‘just leave him, her,’ ‘you’ll get the money somehow.’”

**LT:** It’s funny that you remind me of Emily’s being in Amsterdam, because Virginia Woolf says that books continue each other.

She was talking about the history of literature but, in a way, writers sometimes end a book where their next book is going to begin. Not in a literal sense. But in another kind of sense, where you’re thinking through certain problems. You reach a conclusion and then you realize that there’s some excess, there’s something that you haven’t dealt with. It gives you reason to go on. We all need reasons to go on.

**MS:** You’ve mentioned that recently pleasure has become a major reason for your writing. What were some of the other reasons?

**LT:** I think that I was basically always rebellious. My father called me a rebel. I remember when I was writing *Haunted Houses*, I felt angry that the way in which girls had been written about traditionally was so pallid, that their lives seemed so much less complex and didn’t have the kind of stress or ambivalence or craziness that boys’ lives are written with. Being a girl, becoming a girl, is extremely difficult. It was on my agenda to write a novel that was literary, formally unusual, and also took no prisoners in terms of its attitude toward these girls—a really tough-minded book about girls. I didn’t say to myself, “You’re also getting pleasure from writing this,” but I think I did.

**MS:** What were some of the formal decisions you made in writing the book?

**LT:** I decided early on that the girls would not meet. They would not know each other, which would defy reader expectations.

I thought to myself: the novel is a container and though they don’t meet, they live contiguous lives inside the container. And so I had many formal aesthetic ideas about that. And I thought I would divide it into—I don’t know why—five sections. I’ve never written an outline in my life. With *Haunted Houses*, though, initially I had to keep a chart,

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because I wanted the girls to have similar crises. They were all going to be middle class, but different stripes of middle class—lower middle, middle, and upper middle. And I was going to emphasize the mother-daughter relationship with Grace, the father-daughter relationship with Jane, and the best friend with Emily. I also wanted to bring in other texts: for Emily, Simone de Beauvoir; for Grace, Oscar Wilde; and for Jane, King Lear.

**MS:** The novel seems different to me in other ways as well. For instance, I think you're concerned with causality, and yet you don't direct the reader as authors often do.

**LT:** That's true. I thought I would provide a certain amount of background, but I would not analyze my characters. I wouldn't tell the reader what they felt, or if they felt, and I don't believe in simple causality. I would give enough elements so that the reader could have a sense of what might animate this character or what might be an obstacle for this character.

**MS:** You've written elsewhere that the challenge of *Haunted Houses* was "to make unfamiliar the lives of girls in a language that is often hostile to 'girls.' To represent them in writing seemed to require a kind of wrestling match with an unwilling opponent." I was wondering if your attempt at a new representation of women caused you to be less explicit about how one event leads to the next in your characters' lives.

**LT:** It's only many years later that you look back at your own life and impose upon it a narrative arc. You don't experience it that way as you're living through it. Why should the reader have this knowledge of the

characters that the characters don't have about themselves? That was one idea. A lot of people found reading *Haunted Houses* very painful. I think it's upsetting, because the reader doesn't know more than the characters do.

**MS:** Do you consider yourself a feminist?

**LT:** I consider myself a feminist. But I don't consider myself a feminist writer. I'm a writer who's a woman, who's a feminist. I'm in the tradition, let's say, of a Virginia Woolf, I would hope, who certainly was a feminist but whose writing isn't marked by an ideology. It's much more about the complexity of characters living in a particular moment.

**MS:** What do you think of that old creative writing dictum "Write what you know?"

**LT:** That's another limit, isn't it? People know things that they haven't experienced. There is that famous story, and I'm not sure who the writing workshop teacher was, who said "You don't always have to write what you know. You can write about things you don't know. Write me a story that you haven't experienced." She got back a story that began "Morning came early at Auschwitz, but Franz didn't mind. Franz was a morning person." But if I wrote what I knew, then I couldn't have written *Cast In Doubt*, because I didn't know Horace, and I'm not a 70 year old man who's gay. That seems to me a very poor dictum.

**MS:** I think it was Howard Nemerov who said to his students, "Write what you know. That should leave you with a lot of free time."

**LT:** Exactly. We write out of our ignorance. We write out of our pathologies and ignorance and fatal attractions and gory desires. The

notion of knowing seems to me something that really needs to be scrutinized. There's too much complacent writing because people think they know what they know.

**MS:** Are you a postmodernist?

**LT:** "Are you now or have you ever been...?" We live in postmodernity, it's an historical reality. Modernism reflected notions about modernity that no longer apply: a whole range of attitudes and ideas that included ways of thinking about human beings and about progress. These ideas have been subjected to changed circumstances, for one thing. We must think about them differently. Or, I think about them differently.

Certain movements—whether the Civil Rights movement, gay liberation, feminism—that came about after World War II inflected modernism or showed its limits, and affected the ways in which the contemporary moderns were writing, and some became postmodernists (this sounds like a fairy tale).

The recognition of the Other—again I think this all follows World War II and what the Holocaust meant to ideas about humanism—confronted the modernists. Modernists wrote, in a funny way, from the center. But "post" doesn't mean dead. Modernism is still alive. These issues exist in postmodernism.

**MS:** You have written that in the avant garde there was this idea of an artist being ahead of his/her time, and you thought that Andy Warhol was of his time and very consciously so. As he put it, "I'm..."

**LT:** "...like rockets and television."

**MS:** In what way does your writing respond to or participate in your own time?

**LT:** That's probably the hardest question. I

think it has to do with the uncertainty and doubt that are at the basis of my writing. The modernists claimed to be making things new; I don't know that I can claim that. Something that might be a challenge to me may be something very old for somebody else, I don't know. I think you could be writing a 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel in a postmodern way, which has to do with having a consciousness of what that form is. I myself write at a sort of critical distance from the avant-garde position, the one that tries to be in advance of culture and wants to destroy or renounce the past. I don't think that one can, or that one necessarily should. All of the past, present, and future is interweaved.

I don't think there is a form that indicates, or is, contemporariness. I think the fact that I write in different manners could probably be seen as a postmodern strategy, although I never took it up as strategy. It feels like a necessity.

People attack postmodernists and poststructuralists by saying, "You believe there's no Truth." That's not what I understand. What is being asserted is that the meanings of things, or texts, or historical events, are impossible to fix. Some people find this terrifying; the foundation's lost, they say. I don't find it that way. I think things die if the meanings are not re-created and renewed by different generations.

**MS:** Are you at liberty to discuss your current writing project?

**LT:** It's a novel. I'm calling it *American Skin*. It's wacky and will probably be pretty long. It took me a couple of years to be able to go back to writing a novel, and those were miserable days. Do you feel that way, when you're not writing something, when you're not inside a book, do you feel really unhappy?

**MS:** Yes, I do. And it's a real because it's also a basic part of the writing life that you're not