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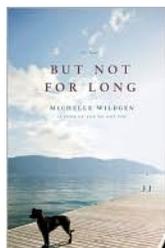
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The Age of Anxiety - Midwest Millennial Style

by [Jill_Dearman](#)

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[But Not for Long](#) is at once spacious and claustrophobic. Below my interview with the meditative Michelle Wildgen:

JD: Your book really captures a type of anxiety a lot of us feel in this country right now, as well as a longer for community. Are you politically active or pretty community-minded yourself?

MW: Not as much as I should be. I try to keep up, and I care about who I donate money to or do some volunteer work for, but these characters are more engaged than I am. In fact, I wonder if I would have wanted to write about a house full of community activists if I were one myself--usually I prefer to write about people whose lives look different from mine, though I

often have a lot in common with them emotionally. I can get immersed in a topic, or I tend to work out my feelings about something by writing about it, that I sometimes forget that that doesn't mean I've have actually gone out and dealt directly with an issue. I once was contemplating vegetarianism and so researched and wrote about bow-hunting and killing a deer, and for years afterward I felt thoroughly at peace with my meat-eating, as if I'd really gone out there and faced my fears. It was only recently that I thought, "Hey, wait, I didn't actually do any of that."

JD: I am a New York provincial and it was nice to be immersed in a foreign culture (the Midwest!) for awhile. Anything you want to share about your process, in terms of capturing the feeling of place in BUT NOT FOR LONG?

MW: I began this book when I was living in New York too, but my parents and many friends were in Madison, so I came back here a lot. Still, I was often writing about Madison to please myself, for the pleasure of re-imagining the city in You're Not You, and then because I knew it well and so I could imagine ways for it to take a darker turn, as it does in this book. But until I came back and actually walked around the neighborhood where But Not For Long is set, I had forgotten a lot without realizing it. For one thing, at first I was picturing all the houses with huge yards and wide spaces between them, and I saw the people of the neighborhood living in isolation from one another. But when I went back I saw that I was wrong--the houses are very close together, and there was no way these characters and their neighbors would not interact. And this was a relief; it changed my approach for the better. But as far as how to capture the feeling of a place, I think it may help to be a bit of an outsider. I didn't grow up in Madison, but came here in college, and so getting that feeling across is sometimes a question of going back to when you were new someplace, getting the same feeling of checking it all out and finding where you like to be and where you feel alienated, peeling away some layers as you get to know a place. I almost never write about landscape--I give a paragraph or two of Madison's lay-out in the opening and I think that's enough--but I do write about the feeling of a neighborhood, about what people do in a certain place to relax, where they work, what you see when you walk around and glance in people's windows. I think that's a big part of what fiction is--peering in the windows.

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JD: What's your writing practice like?

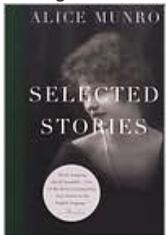
MW: It depends. I work best with some other kind of work to turn to when fiction feels really difficult, so that some kind of balance is there. But in the past few years the balance has been out of whack--too much other work and not enough writing. I have to beat it back into submission again, I think. Usually my writing time is measured--a few days a week, a few hours at a time, hopefully stopping when I still have something to say the next session. Every now and again I do benefit from a week of nothing but writing and no internet, but only if I am already well into a project. I think I find generating new work so difficult that I do it best in small doses: a single scene, a little thread to follow. In terms of plot, I generally only foresee a little beyond what I am writing, rather than having the entire thing planned out ahead of time. This can be nerve-shredding, because you only know months later if you have anything at all, but at the same time I think that the slowness of this, the sitting and thinking and paying close attention to what feels right and unexpected and particular to your characters, is crucial to creating a complex emotional world. Otherwise I think it is too easy to over-simplify people's motivations and encounters with each other. It's tempting to talk about this process in terms of "discovering" why my characters do this or that, even though I know it's my own mind that is generating it all. But somehow the brain seems to knit things together more satisfyingly when I work slowly and let these connections form while I am concentrating on something slightly more concrete.

JD: Are you as perfectionistic about your own prose as most editor/authors I know? How do you achieve momentum in your writing process even when the initial prose slows you down?

MW: I try not to overwork it as I first get going--just throw it down on the page and fix it later like a good ruthless editor. There are definitely times when I am trying to articulate an emotion or a moment and I spend forever screwing around with a couple words to get it right and delineate precisely the weird mix I wanted. But I prefer to try and see the imagined world clearly, to put a ton down and be willing to cut back, and enjoy the mechanic's kind of tinkering you get to do in the later stages, when you move around paragraphs and tighten up sentences. Of course, that part feels so satisfying that it is tempting to jump right to it.

JD: Who are your biggest influences as a writer? Filmmakers? (Your book has a very cinematic feel.)

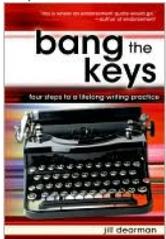
MW: This book was influenced a lot by the movie Children of Men--how recognizable and yet how frighteningly different it was from our world. I started the book but never read it all--I had such a strong response to the film that I didn't want to dilute it, which is odd for me, because as we know, the book is almost always better than the movie. But I am not a film buff, even though I do find some films as satisfying and inspiring as a great book. The last scene of Big Night is like that for me: as beautiful and understated as a perfect short story, everything said in silence, the emotional changes clear but not overdone. In books, I return to MFK Fisher and Laurie Colwin a lot, for the perfect prose, Fisher's gorgeous food description and the ugliness and oddity she was willing to show in people's behavior, Colwin for the sharpness and lightness of her wit, and of course for all the food in there too. Alice Munro



Selected Stories, particularly her older work, is another huge one for me. I love the fact that she is not always writing about what reads immediately as high drama, but yet as you dig into an average life you find the intensity--sometimes a flat-out crazed intensity--is there. Such unshowy prose, too, and often I have a hard time saying what it is a story has done and how it made me feel a certain way by its end--why do I love the story "Turkey Season" so much, or "Friend of My Youth"? I sometimes don't even want to analyze it, because the achievement of that kind of mystery is too wonderful to start chopping it up. I think you have to remain a reader sometimes, and just let it be something you love.

Indeed! To peer into this author's window, check out her website:

<http://www.michellewildgen.com/>. For more on the craft of writing, check out my new book,



Bang the Keys or stop by the site: <http://www.bangthekeys.com>. And now, to all a Happy Thanksgiving and to all a goodnight!

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