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## Unabashedly Bookish: The BN Community Blog

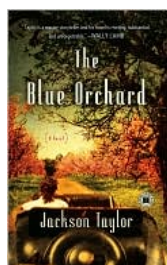
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### Jackson Taylor's Writerly Aim Is True and Almost Blue

by Jill\_Dearman



Jackson Taylor's debut novel, *The Blue Orchard*, (out this month with Simon & Schuster/Touchstone) resonates with depth, as does the author himself. Below, my interview with Taylor about the rich process of his writing, and the long path to publication.

**JD:** Could you tell us a little about the real life story your novel was inspired by and how you decided to transform it into fiction?

**JT:** The story was a well-guarded family secret. At twenty-five it was a certain shock to learn of my grandmother's secret life, yet there was also a sense that finally her contradictions and incongruities began to make

sense. She was a nurse, a farm woman, but also knew luxury, spent money, had fine clothes, knew about law, human nature, politics, and had a great wit and stubborn, world mocking cynicism—how had she acquired so many facets? When I finally learned of her illicit involvements the many sides of her all clicked into place.

I knew growing up that there was a great deal of tension between my father and his mother, but I could never understand it. The first reason I decided to tackle the story was when I realized that I was the only one on the planet who knew all of its pieces and second when I saw that the story was being interpreted in ways that weren't exactly accurate — never by my grandmother, but by others whom I asked — aunts and cousins. My grandmother's account of things turned out to be very accurate, all my interviews and research bore her out. She was a precise and calibrating storyteller and had no use for people who distorted the truth. (Something Dewey did all the time.) What intrigued me was when her vivid narrative grew vague...for then I always knew some deeper secret was lurking or she was ashamed or worried about how I would view her usually over some detail that didn't affect me at all. Lastly, I decided to write it because it was a history of abortion in America that wasn't getting told. In the novel, I wasn't interested in taking a position of for or against, but I was fascinated by the way the historical facts carved out the era that led to Roe vs. Wade

**JD:** You teach and you run the PEN writers program; does your other work energize your writing, or is it hard to find the time to do your actual novel-izing?

**JT:** The work with men and women who are incarcerated is important work and I've learned many things from my involvement with the PEN Prison Writing Program. For example, I learned writing is a skill that can be practiced. Unlike many skills, writing well is useful in almost every avenue of employment, education and daily life and writing is a skill that generates other skills.

The program has taught me good writing comes from any background and we need to support more educational programming for people who are incarcerated, not less. It is a well-proven fact that education reduces recidivism by high double-digit percentages. One influence that eliminated Pell grants for prisoners in the early 1990's was envy and jealousy -

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- from prison guards and staff; these jobs can be very stressful and deforming, and I've come to believe that guards and other prison workers should be included in educational grants. Almost like a G.I. Bill for that industry. Men and women who are incarcerated and who work in the prison industry should not come out worse than when they went in. I've also learned a lot about the distortion of language that surrounds the prison industry and believe it should be challenged. For example, use of the term "Correctional Facility", when there is little or no correction taking place. Improper punitive measure, including violence and rape, should not be fostered or condoned whether perpetrated by people serving sentences or guards and staff.

Warehousing and silencing any segment of a population is a bad, fear-based practice. In order for Democracy to function, it is important to hear from every segment of its population even those disenfranchised by crime. There are lessons about justice we can learn from these experiences. Also, citizens need to know that prison is a growth industry-with conferences, advertising and sales reps for products including billy clubs, cafeteria trays, to Private outsourcing and contracting allow profits to grow only through the containment of as many individuals as possible. If prison beds go empty, funding for prisons gets cut.

I'm lucky in that the pleasure of hard work was instilled in me at any early age, because like most writers I've always had to support myself while writing. The book took about fifteen years to be completed and it would have probably been faster if I could have more free time to work on the book — but again sabbaticals are a luxury few real writers afford. I have a writer friend who believes that most literary fiction that is published in America is penned by people who come from some sort of financial privilege or are sustained through some sort of ongoing family support. I cannot subscribe to that idea, because most of the writers I know work — I'm like them in that I too like to work — I don't like not to work — and my writing time usually comes as a reprieve and a pleasure sandwiched between other obligations.

**JD:** Was there a turning point in the revision process, in which you saw changes you need to make in order to bring the novel to fruition?

**JT:** Over the course of several years the book was rejected by more than 25 agents... Many were gracious and kind in their decline, some even invited me to lunch. But inevitably they wanted me to write another kind of book. One agent actually went so far as to say "I want you to write a book like 'Cold Mountain,'" saying that if I did he could sell it based upon that book's success. He said if I could even just do 20 pages he could sell it.

I was lucky, for that same evening I was having dinner with the poet Marie Ponsot and I told her about the request. She said "My dear, You don't want to get into that game, and I'll tell you why. If you write your book for other people and it doesn't go well you will be bitter. If you write your book for yourself and it doesn't go well, you can live with that."

Then all of a sudden it dawned on me: here I was in the presence of one of America's great poets, who had a literary pedigree and dedication of the highest calibration; she'd never had an agent or a 'deal' and here I was talking about my commercial tribulations! How embarrassing. I was ashamed and humbled to the marrow of my bones.

I also remembered Grace Paley once saying that she published into silence. If someone of her ability could publish into silence — well then the pleasure of the work had to be its own reward. And I can't say it didn't sometimes hurt.

So, after the 25 agents said no, I decided to re-invent the book. Over the course of 5 months I retyped the entire manuscript, changed it's structure and cut it by 40 percent. The first agent who saw it after that — Ryan Fischer-Harbage took it in under two weeks.

**JD:** What was your experience like in trying to find a publisher?

**JT:** I'm a clumsy and awkward networker and am always saying the wrong thing or inadvertently offending someone; like many writers the whole commercial process makes me very anxious. I asked Ryan to handle trying to sell the book and not tell me anything about it unless there was something I needed to know. He said he would keep a file on who he'd approached and that I could look at it whenever I wanted to — to this day I've never wanted to see it and can't imagine why I'd ever want to. I am grateful to him for not seeing that file means I can meet or run into someone at a reading or a book party and be free of knowing that they did not like my book. It's a certain freedom to be sure.

In the end Ryan had five people interested in buying the book. I met with them all and liked each one. I kept pinching myself if after so many years of rejection these conversations were really happening — and I was again felt humbled by the kindness and care people showed. Sulay Hernandez at Simon and Schuster had an incomparable intelligence, commitment and passion for the material,

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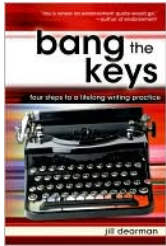
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that right away made me want to work with her.

**JD:** Could you tell us a little about your next writing project?

**JT:** I've got a poetry manuscript I'm fine-tuning which accesses a very different part of me -- a much more private self -- and I am on the third draft of a new novel set in Italy.

**JD:** Grazie! I look forward to it, as I know other fans of Jackson do too.



For more tips on the craft of writing, stop by the salon ...<http://www.bangthekeys.com> or pick up my new book, "Bang the Keys".

And before we sign off, I leave you with this question:

**How long have you or would you dedicate to the writing and completion of YOUR book?**

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by [Cara\\_Cannella](#) on 01-13-2010 11:05 PM

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Thanks, Jill and Jackson, for your insight into the writing process and the PEN Prison Writing Program. It is all inspiring.

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by [BLOGGER Jill\\_Dearman](#) on 01-14-2010 07:38 PM

[Options](#)

Thanks, Cara. Jackson's work with PEN really puts things in perspective.

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by [CharlieG31](#) on 01-14-2010 09:29 PM

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"In order for Democracy to function, it is important to hear from every segment of its population even those disenfranchised by crime." Totally Agree, thanks so much for sharing this interview and I am looking forward to reading this book.

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