

Maureen O'Leary
Interview by Sue Staats

To hear Maureen O'Leary tell it, she lives the most boring life possible. Work (she's a teacher), home (married to her college sweetheart), Mom (two grown daughters), daily gym workouts, writing. No vices. But read her stories and you'll know that inside, her life is the opposite of boring. Her stories absolutely explode in weird, creepy, wonderful, multiple and unexpected ways. I've known Maureen a while, and the work she's doing now is very different than her work of just a few years ago, and I was curious about what led to this shift.

Edited for length and clarity.

Sue: Maureen, your writing has really changed. When did this start? And what caused this evolution?

Maureen: To be honest, I'm writing back through a tunnel, back to myself. When I started writing, back when I first had literacy at five or six, like most of us, I was writing terrible things. Horrible scary stories with ghosts and demon women and vampires and witches and like "nobody ever survived" crazy stuff. A teacher I had when I was seven or eight years old thought I was going straight to hell. But, for some reason, and I don't know, really, these are the ideas that just come to me. And so (as an older writer), I shared a book I was writing with my writing group and they said they didn't want to read that book anymore because it was too dark. And so, I stopped writing it and tried to write more cheerful things. I wrote a cowboy romance at one point, and nobody liked that either.

When I told all this to Nayomi Munaweera, my professor and masters' thesis advisor in my MFA program at Ashland University, she just said, "Stop. Just write how it comes out of you. Don't listen." And I was like, that's good advice. So I just followed it. So now I'm writing this awful stuff, like one of the stories being read at the Stories on Stage event where spiders come down from the ceiling. Or is it bees in the walls?

Sue: No, actually it's the ghosts of bees in the walls. But spiders come down from the ceiling, too. Maureen, I love that crazy story, and I know our audience will, too. Tell me how it came to you.

Maureen: Oh, Naomi J. Williams, our friend, did a writing prompt with us my final MFA residency, summer of 2021. She said, "Tell us a story of a domestic dispute from a non-person point of view." "I don't care what it is," she said. "Maybe a man and woman are fighting over the dishwasher." And that's where the story took root. I mean, Naomi J. Williams is 100 percent the one to blame for that story.

Sue: I hope she's in attendance. We'll call her out!

Maureen: And once she said *from a non-person point of view*, my brain just went, Oh, there are bees in the wall of the house, and they're dead! Crazy, right? But to me, that purely comes from a place of artistic and creative authority, and the teachers that I had through my MFA program at Ashland, who I deeply admired, kept telling me that my freaky imagination was okay. And I didn't know that I needed to be told that. But it turned out that I did, deeply, need that (affirmation).

Sue: So, in a way, the evolution in your writing has been a search for your authentic voice which, as it turns out, has been there from the beginning. And recently, you found the right people to study with, people who affirmed your imagination, your vision. Who didn't tell you that your work was too harsh.

Maureen: That's it.

Sue: The biography of you on our website mentions this new work, but I know you've had other work, novels and short stories, published, and I'm wondering why you choose not to include these. I'm thinking about your YA novel, your YA fantasy series, your novel *Ghost Daughter*. All recently published, all well-received, right?

Maureen: Well, no, actually, that's kind of a sore spot. I'd been trying to get an agent for each of them and finally gave up. This was, what, 10 years ago, and I thought, Well, this is the best I can do, I'll be happy just to be published. I'll let go of my big dreams and all of that. So I went with small presses, which were fine. But all three of them closed down within a year. There was no publicity. Now my agent has a plan and I'm confident we'll find a publisher for my new novel. Those other three books, they're sold on Amazon, but I'm not getting the money. *How To Be Manly* sells, too. And I'm a little embarrassed about that, because it's written from the point of view of an African American boy and I would never do that now. Never. It was presumptuous of me.

Sue: Did you ever try to get the rights back? Publish them somewhere else, or yourself?

Maureen: I tried for a while with *How To Be Manly*, but it's hard, and copies are out there everywhere, on Kindle and places like that. And self-publishing is a lot of work. I work full time I don't have that kind of time, or an eye for design, or extra cash lying around.

Sue: Was this experience part of what led you to apply to Ashland and get an MFA even though you were an experienced writer who had been writing a long time?

Maureen: Yes. That and I wasn't any good. And I kind of knew it. There were flaws in my work that I couldn't see. And I didn't have anyone to help me. I wasn't gaining any traction. I wouldn't have gotten an MFA if it wasn't for Christian Kiefer (Sacramento-area writer and director of the Ashland MFA program). I wanted to be a part of what he was doing and the program he was building.

Sue: What was it about Christian's writing and his vision for the program that made you want to go there?

Maureen: He's my favorite writer, for one thing. What he's putting out there in his stories is deeper, both in his language and in his themes about the redemptive power of romantic love and family, and what it means to be a part of the human family. I get what he's laying down 100 percent. I'm just the audience for it. Also, he's gathered this group of teachers who were diverse, ethnically and artistically, and doing all different kinds of things (in their writing). And I wanted to be a part of that. And I wanted Nayomi Munaweera to be my teacher. I teach high school and as department chair, I had two courses include her book *Island of 1000 Mirrors*. I wanted her to be my teacher and my mentor. I just never thought all those good things would happen. I didn't do it to become successful. I just figured I'd continue to be unsuccessful. But with the MFA, I would just be smarter about it.

Sue: Speaking of good things happening, you've been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Tell me about that.

Maureen: My dad died a week before the pandemic hit in March 2020. So, I wrote a nonfiction piece, "Ten Steps to Getting Rid of the Ghost in Your House," about how I felt haunted by my dad. He was in dementia for the last good 20 years of his life, and part of my family dynamics was such that he took a lot of his rage out on me. And we'd been really, really close when I was a kid and throughout my 20s and 30s. Those last years were really painful. And in the aftermath of his death, I just felt like he was

hovering around and so I wrote about that experience. It's a really short piece. And I sent it to *Reckon Review* and they really liked it, published it and nominated it for a Pushcart. So we'll see what happens.

Sue: Sounds like you were really surprised that they took it. Have you had other similar experiences recently?

Maureen: Yes, actually, another piece about that year. 2021 was rough. (It seemed like everyone) was going through transitions with our parents passing and stuff like that. So, I wrote a piece about clearing out my mom's house. It's a weird, very somber piece and it got into *Tales To Terrify*, a horror podcast. ... I also had a poem accepted by *Sycamore Review*. I didn't know that was going to happen. I send these things out because, after 500 million rejections, you just don't care anymore.

Sue: Ha! Too true. You know, it's too bad you don't get rejections on paper any more. You could do a lot with all that paper, in the artistic sense.

Maureen: I know. And, oh my gosh, back in the '90s when I first started really trying all this, I would send stories to the *Paris Review*. I didn't have a clue.

Sue: Oh, yeah. I sent poems to *The New Yorker* early on. Here's how their rejections started: "Dear Sir or Madam..." And yet here we are, still churning it out. I want to shift a bit: you're a teacher of high school English and have been for a long time. What do you like most about teaching and do the students inspire your writing in any way?

Maureen: I have to say that the best thing I ever did for my writing was getting a lucrative, steady job. Because if my livelihood depended on anything I've written, I'd be very sad. I love the rising generation. I think they're brilliant and fascinating people. But no, my teaching feeds my writing in that I've always been able to make a living and support my family. But my writing self and my teaching self are two totally different people.

Sue: So, you can keep them separate? Do you ever struggle to find time for writing? Or, conversely, do you struggle to find time for your ordinary life?

Maureen: My ordinary life is so ordinary that I don't need to find time for it. I'm kind of a monk. My mom was a nun before she got married and had me and I think I still have a lot of that within my DNA. My dad was a Christian brother and they both lived in monastic life for 15-17 years.

But I don't struggle to create. I work at a school where I have the extra time to do the things I want to do. My younger daughter's in college, my older daughter is 27. I lead a rather monastic life. There's not much I do besides read and write and work. And I go to the gym. And I don't drink and I don't smoke, so I'm sober all the time. I've got a lot of energy.

I know it's not sexy, that my answer is very bland. That's because I don't do anything besides write. And I'm not particularly successful, am I? I mean, the book that my agent has out on sub now is my 12th — completed, multiple-revised, vetted, edited, everything else. So I hope nobody is looking to me as a role model. Maybe if I was busier and more stressed out, I'd be a better writer, I don't know.

Sue: I think a lot of writers would look on you as a role model, somebody who's kept on writing, looking for an audience for the wonderful stuff that's been in your head. It's inspiring. Maureen, this is your fourth? fifth? appearance at *Stories on Stage*?

Maureen: Fifth, I think.

Sue: So, you're familiar with sitting in the audience and hearing your story read, hearing the actor's interpretation of your words coming at you. How do you feel hearing your work read?

Maureen: Oh, it freaks me out. Every time it freaks me out. It's an out-of-body experience. I can't believe anybody's read a word I've written, let alone read it out loud. And then everyone else can hear it. Really? It's terrifying.

Sue: Do you ever relax and think, "That's a pretty good story"?

Maureen: Do you, when you've had work read?

Sue: Well, once. And another time I just cringed because I could tell the story wasn't quite finished!

Maureen: There's one thing I learned from you when you were running Stories on Stage. You said you needed my piece to be shorter by a thousand words. So I cut the story and it was much better. It's always better.

Sue: Happy to help! Maureen, what's next? What are you working on? What's on the fire?

Maureen: So I have a book that was my master's thesis being submitted right now and my agent's really hopeful. So I'm choosing to be hopeful as well. And I'm working on a new novel about a middle-aged woman who does terrible things and wants to do better things. It's a tangled mess because I'm just in the drafting stage, which is exciting. I'm also working on a collection of short stories on climate horror. And I'm working on a novella about cosmic horror, kind of like a Jeff Vandemeer kind of thing, multiple points of view. I'm really into that. And I'm also working on a series of linked short stories about two grown adults trying to negotiate adulthood having had narcissistic mothers. That's what I was working on today. I try to give a couple of hundred words to each thing that I'm writing.

Sue: How do you switch focus from one thing to another?

Maureen: Well, for a long time I didn't work on multiple things. I worked on revisions of my master's thesis and another novel that didn't sell. And then I didn't write much at all for about three or four months and that was weird. So I just made a goal for myself: Finish the draft of this novel, 10 short stories and 10 poems, and I don't care how. And along with no other rules, it's just got me writing again. So, if I do at least 100 words a day, I'm be happy. But then if I do 100, then I usually do 1,000, and then, little by little, things get finished.

The fact of the matter is, I am a Catholic high school teacher, right? So much of my life is regimented by bells, by timeframes, by social mores, by what my religion says I should and should not do or think or feel or believe. My body can't eat anything, so I have a really strict diet and exercise schedule, so my writing is the one place where I allow myself just to be wild, no fucking rules. I swear to God, anytime I read someone's advice on writing, I go, "Okay, now I'm really going to do whatever I want." If I feel like writing five different stories, I will. Today, I worked on four different stories, and after this interview I'm probably going to write a poem. And I think that's what got me riding that wave and got me to write the three wicked little stories (being read at Stories on Stage). So, I'm going to do what I want, and you know, people like me better when I do that.

Sue: Sounds to me like your writing self is quite a different person than the one you present to the world.

Maureen: Well, you wouldn't read my stories and wonder who that well-mannered person was. You'd think the person who wrote those three stories being read has no manners, none whatsoever. Terrible manners. And in my real life, I have very good manners.

Sue: It's true, you do. How you present yourself and how you write are so different, a fascinating and wonderful contrast.

Maureen: That's a nice way of putting it, because it kind of freaks everybody out. My mom can't stand it. My mom's like, "Oh, I thought you were a good person." I want to tell her, "Look, Mom, just stop reading my stories. If you stop, you won't be unhappy!"

Sue: We could call it Maureen's Rules for Writers. Number One: Do not let your family read your writing. They might discover what you're really like! I have one last question. You've said several times that you're not successful, in spite of your several published novels and many published short stories, and that Pushcart nomination. I have to ask: what would "success" look like for you?

Maureen: Success to me would be a book deal with a publisher that doesn't disappear after publishing my book. This has been a good year and a half for writing, and for finding an audience, and I am so grateful for and excited by the path I'm on right now with my stories. Wish me luck!

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