

PEN/Faulkner Award Winner: Kate Christensen

Recently, Kate Christensen won the 2008 PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction for her novel *The Great Man*. Kate graduated from Green Meadow Waldorf School in 1980, determined to be a novelist. She proceeded to write and publish four humorous, caustic, utterly compelling novels: *In the Drink*, *Jeremy Thrane*, *The Epicure's Lament*, and *The Great Man*. Although she attended a Waldorf school for just her junior and senior years, her teachers and classes left a lasting impression on her. Read some of her reflections on her upbringing and education by going to Why Waldorf Works.

WE: You moved to another state and a completely new kind of school for the last two years of high school. Since this was your first taste of Waldorf, how different was it and what surprised you, delighted you, confused you?

KC: I was born in Berkeley, California -- my parents were both quite politically active there in the 1960s. My mother is a clinical psychologist (recently retired) who got her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona, which is why we lived there. I went to public schools through 10th grade.

When I was in 9th and 10th grade, I lived with my mother and two younger sisters in Jerome, a ghost town in the mountains of Northern Arizona. The high school I attended down in the Verde Valley was, I started to feel with increasing urgency, not challenging enough for me academically. During the summer after my sophomore year of high school, I decided to transfer to Green Meadow, which I knew about from visiting my grandmother, Ruth Pusch [*editor and translator of many of Rudolf Steiner's work, as well as others – Ed.*]. I applied, and got in with a heap of financial aid, which enabled me to pay the tuition. I lived with the Eaton family -- Ann Eaton was teaching English at the High School -- and did housework and babysitting in exchange for room and board.

After being in a huge public high school with hundreds of kids in my class alone, I now found myself in a class of 13-15 kids -- in a school of less than 60 altogether. I was very lonely at first; a lot of these kids had known each other since kindergarten, and they shared long-term history together, and I was the new kid, the outsider. But gradually I started to feel a bit more of a part of things, although late adolescence was never easy for me; it was a very lonely, awkward, painful time.

But in terms of the school, I was enthralled with the academic course work and the artistic and musical challenges I found at Green Meadow.

We sang Mozart's Requiem, wrote and illustrated our own main lesson books, read Wordsworth and Thoreau, had a lacrosse team, played Brandenburg concerti! Although at home my sisters and I had always sung three-part harmony, studied classical music on our instruments, and read literary novels and poetry, at school I was used to show tunes, standardized textbooks, volleyball, and cheerleaders... it was a thrill to be not only encouraged but challenged in my most passionate interests at school -- I could hardly believe my luck. I never took it for granted for a second -- I

felt a profound and constant sense of gratitude during my time at Green Meadow, the relief of being among my own kind, whatever that was, for the first time in my life at school.

WE: What was your dream when you left – were you determined to "be a writer" right from the beginning?

KC: I have known I was a writer from the very beginning of my life – I wrote my first story at 6 – "My Magic Carpet Ride" – about a girl and her sister who go around the world on a magic carpet and get home in time for tea – and I have never wanted to be anything else.

WE: What year did you graduate, exactly?

KC: I graduated from Green Meadow in 1980 – which makes me 45 years old now – amazing.

WE: May [May Paddock – Kate's high school English teacher] was a friend of your grandmother's, and your grandfather was the librarian at the Rudolf Steiner Library before May's husband, Fred, was. Were you influenced by them while you were growing up?

KC: I didn't know Hans well, but I was deeply influenced by Ruth. Like her, I'm an avid reader of English novels and mystery novels, a drinker of tea, player of Solitaire, NPR listener. When my grandmother died a number of years ago, she bequeathed me the unfinished adventure story she had been working on for many years; she asked me to finish it and see that it got published. I have since sent it to my agent, who agreed to represent her! Now I just have to finish writing it... so stay tuned for "The Adventures of Tyl."

WE: Your aunt lived in Camphill and I understand you two were very close. I'd like to hear anything you'd like to tell us about that relationship.

KC: I adored Aillinn, who was deaf and "retarded," but was one of the most keyed in people, emotionally, I have ever met. She followed conversations closely, laughing when we laughed, comforting us when we seemed sad; she knew exactly what was going on, and she radiated intelligence and empathy. We were very close -- two fellow firstborns -- I felt a deep kinship with my aunt, and I was heartbroken when she died.

WE: Who were your parents, and why were you/they in Arizona?

KC: My mother graduated from High Mowing, then attended Juilliard and planned to be a professional cellist, but got sidetracked by severe stage fright. She left the East Coast and moved to Berkeley, where she met my father, a radical Marxist lawyer who worked pro bono for various rabble rousers (Black Panthers, draft dodgers, conscientious objectors, etc.). They split up in 1968, and in 1970 my mother got into the graduate psych program at the University of Arizona, and we moved to Tempe.

WE: May recalls that she was trying to get you guys through an Advanced Placement course in twelfth grade but then she became so amazed and impressed by the class's writing that you all ended up having a year of lots of interesting creative writing instead. Do you remember that?

KC: I remember only that the creative writing class was absolutely absorbing for all of us, and everyone in the class wrote such great things – poetry, stories, essays. May was an amazing teacher. Her classes were some of the brightest spots in my adolescent life – she was able to inspire us to do things we didn't know we could do. Our senior play was "King Lear" – and I think we actually pulled it off, if only because May would not settle for anything less than our most dedicated, all-out efforts. It was an unforgettable experience to speak those lines, to experience the greatest play ever written in such a visceral, personal, profound way at such a young age. It's stayed with me ever since.

WE: Of course we all want to know how YOU think writing should be taught in high school. Would you consider teaching in a Waldorf school?

KC: I have always been most moved and struck by great characters brought to vivid life by great language. I have never taught fiction – but if I did, I would focus on this idea of character. I think the foundation of all great novels is a cast of characters who live like real people in the memory when the book is done, who are in some way larger than the book itself: Jane Eyre, Lily Bart, Raskolnikov, Anna Karenina, Elizabeth Bennett, Scrooge, and on and on. I would encourage my students to talk about archetypes vs. individuals, what makes a character interesting rather than ethical or well-behaved, morality vs. aesthetics.

I taught ninth grade English briefly at the Rudolf Steiner School here in New York City in 1991, and during that year, I realized that Waldorf teaching is not my calling. It demands a dedication I could not and cannot muster. My monomaniacal life's passion is writing novels; Waldorf teaching is an art in and of itself. I don't mean to imply that I don't think any artists can be dedicated to their work and also teach in a Waldorf school – just that I can't!

WE: Who did you play in King Lear?

KC: Regan, the evil daughter! I wanted to play the Fool, but May had other ideas for me...

About the PEN/Faulkner Award

Founded by writers in 1980, and named for William Faulkner, who used his Nobel Prize funds to create an award for young writers, and PEN, the international writers' organization, the PEN/Faulkner Foundation brings together American writers and readers in a wide variety of programs to promote a love of literature. Congratulations, Kate, for winning this well-deserved acknowledgement of your gift and your perseverance.

More conversations with Kate can be found on these blogs:

<http://www.papermag.com/?section=article&parid=2107>

<http://maudnewton.com/blog/?p=8052>

<http://writtennerd.blogspot.com/2007/08/brooklyn-lit-life-kate-christensen.html>

What the critics have said about *The Great Man*:

"Mischievous...funny, astute.... As unexpectedly generous as it is entertaining.... Christensen is a witty observer of the art universe."

—*The New York Times*

"Christensen's writing is clear-eyed, muscular, bitingly funny, and supremely caustic about the niceties of social relations, contemporary American culture, and sexual politics. "

— *O, The Oprah Magazine*

"These characters are wonderfully developed and break the stereotype of the aging female protagonist. Christensen...boldly has raised the bar."

— *USA Today*

"Nimble, witty and discerning, Kate Christensen is single-handedly reinvigorating the comedy of manners with her smart and disemboweling novels of misanthropes, cultural and aesthetic divides, private angst, social ambition and appetites run amok."

— *Chicago Tribune*