

INTERVIEW

## BOOKS I HATE (AND ALSO SOME I LIKE): WITH COLETTE SARTOR

written by Katharine Coldiron   October 30, 2019



I met Colette Sartor far from home: I was attending a writers' group in the San Gabriel Valley, which lies on the opposite side of Los Angeles from my unfashionable neighborhood. Colette said clever things, her lively eyes darting from one person to another, and as it turned out, she probably didn't need the instruction offered that day. She's a writing teacher and an award-winning author, and I was a little embarrassed that I'd asked her for a coffee date like I would for any other aspiring writer I meet at such groups.

But Colette is a kind soul, and a remarkably energetic one. She mentors through the CineStory Foundation, at which she's an Executive Director; she teaches at UCLA Extension; she cohosts the Literary Roadhouse Bookclub podcast; and she has edited a variety of projects across 20 years in service of the written word. Her collection of stories, *Once Removed*, won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction from the University of Georgia Press last fall, and is out now. I asked Colette about what happens when her enthusiasm for books fails, an outcome I couldn't really imagine.

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i have never wanted to kill myself  
have / always been keenly aware  
could die any day / i have / always  
sure something was trying / to kill

be/troub  
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THE ACCOMPLICES

**Tell me about your hatred of books. Do you hate certain kinds of books, certain authors, or just particular books when they come along?**

My predisposition is to love a book until it proves me wrong. Books that most easily prove me wrong and make me hate them are sloppily written ones with plot holes the size of moon craters and characters so puppet-like I can practically see the author pulling their strings.

Other books I hate: books that fail to surprise me, especially those that value linguist gymnastics over great, active storytelling. I'll take a page-turner of a story told with unobtrusive prose over one filled with elegantly crafted sentences that fail to advance a character-driven, engrossing plot.

Yup, I said it: I like a good plot. I want something to happen in a book. I want characters to yearn for something with such intensity that they can't help but act on that desire and spur into motion a causally connected stream of surprising yet inevitable events. Beautifully written books where nothing happens—or whatever does happen feels predictable—bore the crap out of me.

Even though I wind up hating some books, I still have a knee-jerk respect for their authors. I've spent too many years trying to write and publish stories worth telling to feel any other way.

**Give me three examples of books you hate.**

This was a much tougher question to answer than I had anticipated. I tend not to finish books I hate, and it's difficult to remember a book you don't finish. Even books I hate yet finish I try to forget. Middle-aged minds like mine are losing memory capacity at an alarming rate, and I refuse to waste what I've got left on bad books. Still, I managed to come up with three examples of books that inspired my intense dislike:

*Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn

*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* by Marlon James

*The Woman in the Window* by A.J. Finn

**Why these books?**

Because *Gone Girl*'s main character felt so contrived I wanted to smack her, and I know Gillian Flynn can write better than that because her book *Dark Places* kicks major ass; because I fell in love with the first 100 pages of *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* but then wound up so confused by the book's many plotlines, tangents, and characters that I resented the huge amount of time it took me just to understand what was going on; because *The Woman in the Window* relied on gimmicks and a stereotypical drunken, drugged, unreliable female narrator, and it made me feel unclean for having finished it.

I wound up being surprised by my own list—though not by *The Woman in the Window*, since I found nothing admirable about it. What surprised me was that all three of my list picks are action-packed. I had assumed my hate list would include beautifully written yet aimless novels populated by characters who do a lot of thinking but not much else. Those were the kind of books I read obsessively (alongside just about every book Stephen King wrote through the nineties and a bunch of those he's written since then) before I started writing in my thirties because those were the types of books I aspired to write—those were the books I thought were worthy of being considered “great” books.

But, as I've grown and stretched as a writer, I've come to realize that great books, regardless of genre, are driven by complex characters who can wreak havoc in their world with their smallest gestures. Great books are those that contain at their core a mystery, big or small, that readers feel compelled to discover. Books that don't contain those elements—those are the ones I hate.

**Do you think this hatred has changed your reading habits?**

**IMAGINE A DEATH**  
BY JANICE LEE, SEPT 2021.

*Imagine a Death* embodies a vast, preternatural and intensely intimate terrain... sentence upon sentence, her rhapsodic fearlessness and logic not only reflects and withstands, it back... The result is the greatest work to one of America's most elemental voices: death-defiers, a kind of lamp that breaks dark.

— **Blake Butler**, author of *AI*

## RECENT COMMENTS

Tara Williams Writer Oh Entropy, I am so sorry you go. I am honored to have had a piece up in Cackle. Thanks and all the best as your journey continues.

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Not really. I'll pretty much try any book, regardless of genre, that sounds like it's driven by strong main characters who are so desperate to get something—or, even better, to hide something—that I empathize with them and can't wait to follow them on their journeys. I figure if I wind up hating something that sounded good, I can always stop reading it and reread an old favorite. As I mentioned, I'm a big Stephen King fan, though I lean more toward books like *The Dead Zone* and *11/22/63* that are less horror and more thriller. I'll also reread pretty much anything by Alice Munro, Jesmyn Ward, Margaret Atwood, and Jhumpa Lahiri, though lately I've been rereading some of my favorites by Tana French and Megan Abbott, who write superb crime novels driven by compelling, dark, deeply motivated characters.

### Do you think your tastes have altered anything about your writing?

Hating books that don't surprise me has made me strive to tell stories with main characters who force themselves to interact with the world and put themselves more at risk both physically and emotionally. Until recently, I've been primarily a short story writer, which means my canvas tends to be more limited than many of my favorite writers; however, one of my current projects is a novel based on a murder my grandmother helped cover up in the seventies. That's why I've found myself reading and rereading French and Abbott, who help me better understand how to structure that type of story. Still, I suspect my novel will remain entrenched in the types of worlds reflected in my stories, worlds driven by women navigating family obligations and secrets while still trying to carve out space for their own desires.

### What was the last book you read that recommend?

*The Witch Elm* by Tana French. It's an engrossing story with superbly drawn characters, and it builds to its final reveal in a way that pays off handsomely.

### Do you keep books or give them away?

I used to keep all my books because I felt guilty giving them away, kind of like when I was a kid and couldn't bear to give away my stuffed animals, even the tattered ones, for fear of hurting their feelings. For years, I even stored my textbooks from law school (which I truly, madly, deeply hated) in my parents' basement until finally, after I quit law to become a writer, my parents made the decision for me and threw them out.

Eventually, when I ran out of room on my bookshelves and in my closets, I had to start giving away books and selling them at garage sales. These days, I don't buy as many books in print. My ever-worsening eyesight has forced me to read mostly e-books. But I can't seem to get myself to give away the print versions of my favorite books. There's no substitute for the tactile satisfaction I get from paging through those well-worn editions.

### Have you ever physically thrown a book across a room?

No, but I do give away books I really hate ASAP—or, these days, delete them from my e-reader.

### What are you reading right now, and do you like it or hate it?

*Call Your Daughter Home* by Deb Spera, which came out this summer when I was crazy busy and couldn't pick it up for fear of not being able to put it down. And I was right. I got through half of it in one sitting. *Call Your Daughter Home* is not just gorgeously written, it's gorgeously told by its three first-person female narrators, whose individual stories weave together in ways I wouldn't have predicted. Plus, the first line is irresistible: "It's easier to kill a man than a gator, but it takes the same kind of wait." It's just about impossible to put down a book with an opener like that.

Disarticulations

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The Waters

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Session Report series

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Birdwolf

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Comics I've Been Geeking Out On

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Small Press Releases

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Tales From the End of the Bus Line

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Cooking Origin Stories

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Ludic Writing

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KATHARINE COLDIRON

Katharine Coldiron's work has appeared in the Rumpus, Hobart, the Normal School, and elsewhere. She lives in California and blogs at the Fictator.



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