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**Why write only what you know:
Through interviews and imagination, Kelzer
author conjures stories far from her own life**
By Karen McCowan

In "Articles of Faith," the first short story in Gina Ochsner's new collection, the Keizer writer describes a Russian farm couple making peace with infertility by saying goodbye to the ghosts of their miscarried children.

In her latest short story - published in *The New Yorker* ("Thicker Than Water," Aug. 22) - her protagonist is a young girl living in Latvia. In another story from the new book, the never morbidly fascinating "Halves of a Whole," she assumes the personae of twin Hungarian-Americans preparing bodies for burial in their immigrant parents' funeral home.

Surely Ochsner is herself an Eastern European immigrant. Her name, pronounced OH-shner, could suggest as much. Or at least she's the daughter of such immigrants - maybe some who ran a mortuary.

But no.

The name, acquired in marriage, is German. She was born to American-born parents. She grew up in the Salem-Keizer area, graduating from McKay High School in 1988. She never embalmed a body in her life.

Ochsner is a serial flaunter of a cardinal rule taught in most writing programs - "write what you know." But that hasn't hurt her career.

Just five years after earning a master's degree of fine arts in creative writing at the University of Oregon, she hit a literary jackpot with her first short story collection.

"The Necessary Grace to Fall" won both the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and the Oregon Book Award for Short Fiction.

Now she continues her boldly imaginative tradition with a new collection, aptly titled "People I Wanted to Be."

In a recent interview, Ochsner discussed her unorthodox approach and her critical success.

Question: *What was it like to have such a hit with your first book?*

Answer: It was a very exciting time. My first degree was in secondary education, so I was teaching. I had two small children and another one on the way. I wasn't writing full time, and it never occurred to me that it would be that well-received. Writing was kind of just this hobby that I loved.

Question: *How did you wind up creating characters so different from yourself?*

Answer: I remember somebody saying in a writing workshop, "You shouldn't write about a culture you don't know," and I was so depressed.

I wanted to write as a way to discover. It felt like the world had closed down if you could only write what you knew. I thought, "Maybe they're right. Maybe I have no right to imagine what this Russian woman is thinking or feeling. What if I get it wrong?"

But I decided to take the plunge. I decided, "I'll just do my research and interview anyone who will talk to me." And no one has ever come up to me and said, "You got it wrong."

Question: *You live in a part of the Willamette Valley where there are some very distinct immigrant communities. How have you used that as a resource?*

Answer: There are many Russians here, in particular, Old Believers. I find them utterly fascinating. When did they get here? What do they think? How is here completely like and unlike where they came from? I've been to the

Russian Orthodox Church out in Mulino quite a bit.

And I have friends from immigrant families. Oftentimes my interviews with them are very informal and relaxed, while we're washing dishes together or watching each other's children.

If I want to use something specific they've told me, I may ask, "This character is a lot like your sister - is that OK?"

Question: *In "Two Halves of a Whole," you write with authority about growing up above a family mortuary. Is that what your parents did for a living?*

Answer: No, this was based on an interview. I drive by a funeral home every day and always wondered, "What would it be like if this was your family business and you were a young person?"

One day I happened to mention the idea to my chiropractor, and she said,

"Well, my mother was an embalmer for 60 years." She went on to tell me about how they ran a mortuary service out of the basement of their three story home in New Jersey, how for years she thought her mother was wearing perfume when it was actually formaldehyde. ...

The research was so interesting, too. I was struck by the great reverence with which she discussed this business, which has its own dark and terrible beauty. Their clientele were Cubans, Gypsies and Irish Catholics. If a dead person was indigent, her father will go buy a suit so they could be buried with dignity.

Question: *Do you belong to a writer's group?*

Answer: Yes. There's a long-haul trucker who writes poetry, a computer expert who writes young adult books, and a mom with four kids she home-schools who also writes poetry. We're a small group but have been together for eight years. I put out the borscht and whatever else I can think of and away we go.

We're faith-based. We critique each other's work, but there's a humility of spirit and a gentleness. We really believe in tactfulness. Our primary goal is to understand what it means to be a writer of faith.

What standard of excellence are we trying to meet? We want our work to stand the test of time. We want to tell the truth, do it with beauty and great artistry. ... I try to express my faith with subtle hints to look up, not down.

Question: *Why did you choose the short story form?*

Answer: I find it so malleable. It's such a mischievous form. When I'm writing a short story, I get to be the monkey swinging from a chandelier, which is fun. The roof has been blown off the top in terms of structure, voice and point of view. Find the right magazine and editor, and you can do anything in short story right now, in terms of structure, voice and point of view.

Yes. I have to write in very small bursts. I carry a stack of Post-It notes wherever I go and jot down words, phrases, images that come to me while I'm doing something like stirring soup. Eventually, I lay them all out on the kitchen table. It's a little like playing bingo. More often than not, I'll spot a character or image there that I can't let go of or that can't let go of me. That's the first sign of life.

Question: *What's next?*

Answer: I'm working on a novel, set in southern Russia. There's a ghost, and he doesn't smell very good. He's got a drinking problem even though he's dead. It's set in a crumbling apartment building right after the economic collapse.