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Gina Ochsner's journey from uncertain grad student to critically lauded short-story author proves that great writers never stop developing.

BY BARBARA BROOKS

# A Special

# Kind of Magic

By all accounts, Gina Ochsner is on a roll. Her second collection of short stories, *People I Wanted to Be*, is set for release by Houghton Mifflin this month. One of that book's stories, "The Fractious South," found a coveted place in *The New Yorker* last August, and crit-

ics have been salivating ever since. 2005 may be Ochsner's breakout year.

But in fact, the 34-year-old Oregonian has been "breaking out" for quite a while. Since 1996,

Ochsner has been published widely, winning or placing in more than 20 national fiction contests, including the prestigious Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction—which resulted in the 2002 publication of her first story collection, *The Necessary Grace to Fall* (University of Georgia Press). That year, she also took first prize in the Inspirational category of the *Writer's Digest* Annual Writing Competition, for her story "The Hope Barge."

Inspired by the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende, Ochsner's stories blur the distinction between genre and mainstream literary fiction, honoring magic and mystery while contemplating questions of faith and the afterlife. With her distinct voice, her knack for finding fresh images and the benefit of what Robert Olen Butler dubbed "the Big Gift," Ochsner is ready for the big time. Now she talks about what it took to develop that gift, how she approaches her writing, the importance of learning and taking risks—and her desire to own a peacock.

### How did you begin writing short stories?

It started with a sheer admiration of the form. It's malleable. It's mischievous. It holds itself open for endless possibilities, constructions and repairs. Plus, given my short attention span and nervous sensibility, short stories seemed imminently suited to me.

### Were your stories successful right away?

Gosh, no. Everything I wrote from about 1990 to 1997 was a failed experiment. Then it was like Edison with the light bulb—attempt number 3,499 worked.

It was a story called "From the Bering Strait." I thought, OK, I'm

going to keep this really simple, because it's clear that I don't know what I'm doing. I thought, Let's just see what people do when the weather goes whacko on them. How do they react?

[I learned that] the writing has to be extremely tight and focused. Not every flashy fish can be thrown in.

### When you were starting out, whose work did you admire?

In college I was exposed to Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende, and that whole panoply of magic realism writers. I thought, Wow, people can write about the supernatural and make it funny and interesting and weird and unusual—and it's literature! I had no idea! Reading Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* changed my life.

### Why do you think so little magic realism is published in literary journals? What makes this kind of story succeed—or fail?

Readers have to be able to comfortably inhabit the world of angels, or ghosts, or whatever, within the first three paragraphs, or they jump ship. It's the same with Olympic gymnasts. If they wobble in the first 30 seconds, it's all over.

Editors are wary [of inexperienced writers in this genre]. If the voice isn't confident, they just don't want to mess with it.

### You've established yourself with your short stories. Do you plan to try a novel?

My first love will always be the short story. But I think I'll learn a lot about the fuel of the narrative—what drives a story forward and backward, and some structural concerns—if I challenge myself to write a novel. I'm terrified, but I think I'd like to try.

### You seem more eager than most emerging writers to break out of what's comfortable.

Learning to write is a long journey that only begins with the M.F.A. When I finished at the University of Oregon in 1997, I had a collection of beginner attempts. None of them really came together, to the point where the writer feels, and the reader hears, that a story has happened and that it had meaning. Turning the corner for me was learning that each story has

## HONOR ROLL

### Ochsner's fiction awards so far:

- The Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction
- Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Short Stories Award
- H.L. Davis Award for Fiction/Oregon Book Award
- First place, *Glimmer Train* short-story contest
- Raymond Carver Short Story Prize
- Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction
- Jack Dyer Fiction Prize
- *Columbia: A Journal of Art and Literature's* Fiction Prize
- *Writer's Digest* Annual Writing Competition: first prize, Inspirational category
- William Faulkner Award
- Two H.E. Francis Awards (Ruth Hindman Foundation)
- Short list for the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing
- Three Pushcart Prize nominations
- Short list for the O. Henry Prize

### Fellowships and grants:

- Oregon Literary Fellowships for Fiction
- Literary Arts, Inc., Fellowships
- Money for Women/Barbara Deming Memorial Fund Individual Artist Grants
- Oregon Arts Commission Fellowship

its own set of questions it asks of the writer.

**So if getting a degree is just the beginning of the process, how do you keep on learning?**

I read, read, read. I experiment. I teach an occasional workshop. That keeps me sharp. It forces me to look at a wider range of material than I would for just my own work.

**When you're teaching, what common mistakes do you see novice writers make?**

Every time a teacup is picked up and put down, we hear about it. Dialogue tends to be overwritten. And those nasty adverbs—they just kind of worm their way in.

**What do you teach a writer who already knows the basics?**

Scene management. Each scene is like a little lily pad, moving a story from one part of the pond to the other. Each scene has to have its own energy and dynamic, reflected in dialogue and language. Each scene has to carry a different emotional register, so each one

varies in weight. Otherwise, the reader isn't sure when to care.

**Are you in a writing group of your own?**

Yes, thank goodness, and I found them by accident! A trucker-poet who owns a coffee shop saw me reading *Hayden's Ferry Review* and, based on that alone, he asked me if I'd like to join his group.

**Do you read many literary journals?**

Yes, I love them. I subscribe to and read as many as I can get my hands on. Next to being in a critique group, it's the single most important thing short-story writers can do—not only to educate themselves about the form, but also if they want some exposure, or to get picked up by an agent.

**At what point did you start sending out your work?**

In 1998, when I finally had that one story that worked. I didn't know about cover letters or envelopes. It was all trial and error—mostly error—for the first two years. Then I figured out there was a protocol and that there are books out there that tell you how to submit. After that, each year—because maybe I'd have another new story, or maybe the last one hadn't found a home yet—I'd keep sending.

**And by 2000, you were winning contests. Did you ever think you were winning because your stories were so different?**

No. That never occurred to me. My dad asked me about two years ago, "Why do you think your stories are so weird?" And that's when it dawned on me that my stories are unusual—and that doesn't always mean magic. Only about half are magic realism. But, magic or not, there's something odd and

EXCERPT:

## "ARTICLES OF FAITH"

He went less for the pike and perch than for the stillness of the water and the quiet. But for all the water, there were never enough fish. To go to Ladoga, though, or even Onega, to inhale the sweet dampness that hung like a cloud over the dark water, was a kind of healing.

He went there to get away from Irina. She had developed the habit of having too many habits. For example, pressing her mouth into a frown. He'd once loved the way she didn't need a reason to laugh, the way her laughter erupted from her and could fill an entire room. And her stomach, flat and hard like the back of a shovel's head. But since they'd married he had witnessed her slowly turning quiet and cross, packing herself full of blintzes and sweets. Now her stomach had gotten spongy.

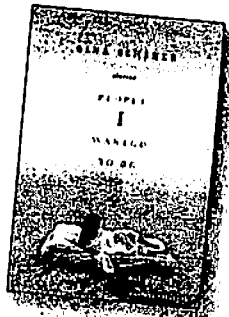
Evin brought the hoe down hard into the soil. Hope only filled you with expectation. At night Irina burlled her face in her pillow and cried. In the morning he'd rise early, go to the lake, and make it his home for a day. He'd tuck the reel between his elbow and his side and watch for the possibility of grace, a bit of heavenly kindness dropped here on the flat surface of the water, shown there in the fierce span of an eagle's wings here in his tired heart, which still managed to want what it wanted.

Evin stopped and leaned against the hoe. He was talking to the tree now, but so what. All this waiting for a group of cells to divide without any help from him. All this believing that someday he would have something he could hold in his arms, a proof of his love, something that he could spend the rest of his life showing his love to—all this had worn him down.

Evin craned his neck. Something on the top branch wiggled, and a small flurry of leaves drifted onto his head and shoulders, then piled at his feet. He heard a whimper and, a few seconds later, a sneeze so close to his ear it raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Then the deliberate crack of a branch, a fluttering from the laurel hedge, a pair of small white hands.

"Wait!" Evin called out.

FROM GINA OCHSNER'S SHORT-STORY COLLECTION  
*PEOPLE I WANTED TO BE* (© 2005 HOUGHTON MIFFLIN).



wacky with the voice. There's something structurally different than what everybody else is doing.

**When you submitted your stories to the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction competition, which you won in 2001, how did you decide which ones to include?**

They were all I had. I just sent them all off to the University of Georgia Press.

**That took faith!**

Yes. But I thought, What the heck, Flannery O'Connor is a saint, right up there with Peter.

I'd lie in bed at night and pray, "Dear God, please make me more like Flannery O'Connor. And if I can't be her, can I write just a tiny bit more like her? And if that's too much, can I have a pet peacock?" My husband heard me praying, and he vetoed the peacock.

**You've won several other competitions, too, such as the Ruth Hindman Foundation Prize and the Raymond Carver Prize. Has winning contests affected the kind of stories you write?**

No, and I've really thought about that. I really didn't want to fall into the 'clever Hans' syndrome, where I figure out there's one kind of story that seems to catch people's eye—one set of themes and one way of doing it—and keep replicating like crazy. I always try to do things a little bit differently, to push myself in terms of technique and craft.

**But winning the Flannery O'Connor Award was a big step for you, since the prize included publication of your first collection. Did publishing that collection change your life?**

It did because it opened some doors—and really built up some

confidence for me. There are "mountain writers," who seem to be born with confidence in their skills, and they know they're going to get their work out there. And then there are the "valley writers," like me, who labor under paralyzing self-esteem issues. Winning gave me hope that there's a place in this big world for the kind of goofy, strange stories I write.

**Do your story experiments still fail?**

Oh, yes. Half *really* fail. One quarter limp along like three-legged horses. It's only the last

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quarter that kind of come together. But then, sometimes it's three failed stories that sort of blend together to become one story that works.

**How far do you take an attempt?**

I might give it four years, five years. Because in that time, I may have gained a tiny bit of wisdom, or learned something from somebody else, or studied somebody else's novel, and then the light bulb turns on, and I see what I was doing wrong. If the idea is still fun—if I get that little tick in my heart—then I might go back and work on it.

**Are your stories autobiographical at all?**

Accidentally or not, I put in little pieces of myself. I don't keep a journal or a diary, but I can look through some old stories, and I'll remember, oh yeah, my son was

teething, that's why there are teeth in that story. Or that's the question of faith I was grappling with at the time.

**Speaking of faith, in "The Hope Barge," which won first prize in the 2002 *Writer's Digest* Annual Writing Competition, an angel with one wing collects people's old toasters and worn wedding gowns and delivers them up to God. That story has death and some darkness, but also humor and hope.**

Michael Chabon said something like, the short-story writer has a

call to honor mystery, and to locate, in times of lies and brutality, "the evanescent, glowing heart of it all." I think that's true. We work in that tremulous, dark underbelly of mystery, but we do it in a way that honors life. So instead of a study in despair, a story becomes a revelation of light.

**Yet so many short stories are dark, aren't they?**

I myself go for the hopeful ending. People have accused me of being sentimental, but that's OK. I think people want the evanescence. It's all right for the writer to suggest that there's both light and darkness. That there's hope in hopeless times. **WD**

Barbara Brooks' short stories and interviews have appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *The Ledge*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Inkwell*, *Prima Materia* and elsewhere.