

Discussion Guide for *The Blue Hour* (Counterpoint, Feb 2017)

Tell us a bit about the book . . .

The Blue Hour is set in a contemporary fictional Colorado mountain town, and the community members find their paths twisting and colliding after a tragedy inspires a major life-force change within each of them. Basically, they are so stunned, and in response, they react by charging into their lives with new vigor—and explore the landscape of passion, obligation, love. The novel really digs deep, I hope, into the hard edge of yearning and of loneliness, and the long road of desire, and the unexpected paths of mourning and lust.

Sounds like there's lots of sex! Would you consider this novel erotica?

I consider this novel “romance for the rest of us.” Not Hallmark, not Hollywood, not porn, not erotica. Somewhere in the Land of the Real. Messy, problematic, sometimes horrible, sometimes grand. I've always been interested in writing about sex—my library looks like a teenager rifled through it to find all the sex scenes! For decades, I've been studying how great authors wrote great sex scenes.

I imagined every character's sex life: What would it be like to be 80, newly single, and falling in love? What would it be like to be young, beautiful, gay, with an STD that really bothers you? What would it be like to keep searching for love and sex and simply not find it? What would it be like to be in tender love, but only be able to orgasm if there was a violent fantasy in your head?

I love sex! I love the human heart and body. What a mystery. It's a mystery we guard, too. Indeed, I'd argue that the most guarded place inside us might be our sexuality. Our sexuality and all that it entails: our hopes and fears about sex, our response to sex, our yearnings or distastes or preferences, our judgments, our bodily sensations . . . in other words, our existence as a sexual being. I say: let's shine some light on it all and put it on the page!

How did this project start?

This particular novel's journey started many years ago, when a short story of mine was published in *The Sun*. I got more fan mail from that short story than I've ever received for anything else, including all my books put together, probably – and the vast majority wrote to say thanks. Thanks for writing about sex, about violent fantasy, thanks for bringing up these subject, thanks for making he/she feel like he/she wasn't the only one who harbored such thoughts.

I kept several of the letters, because they were so inspiring (never think writing a letter to an author doesn't matter!) One fan wrote: “I was especially interested in the conversation between the women about sex/orgasms/fantasies and violence. I've never seen or heard it put together quite like that, but felt a big *poof!* of relief and surprise ... I thought I was just very peculiar, twisted, living out some sort of painful karma in that arena!”

Another emailed: “I have never written a note like this, and I am surprised at how intimidating it is to write to a writer. But I have to because I have lived with your story “Under the Apple Tree” for several

months now. . . I want to thank you for an honest, real, and intriguing look at the life of an adult woman. I wish more talented women writers would follow your lead.”

I was so honored by such responses. That correspondence got me to thinking about doing just that—trying to continue the conversation of honest portrayals of sex in literary works.

Those fan mails sent a clear signal. In a society that is wildly prudish on one hand, and pornographic on the other, I think we sometimes lose sight of the honest portrayal of sex.

Well, let’s talk about the bigger picture. How *do* you see sex represented in today’s literature?

For years, a decade at least, as I was working on this novel, I also paid serious attention to mainstream literary writers. You know, who was writing sex scenes well, and who was doing it poorly? What made one sex scene moving and another laughable? Who was writing about sex as it really is—not just wonderful orgasmic stuff, but the sometimes-mundane, irritating, boring, frustrating, hurtful, or, yes, lacking thing it can be?

I must say I was surprised. Surprised by the number of times good authors let the characters wander off into the bedroom, took a chapter break, and started us off on the next day. Years went by in these characters lives with no mention of sex or yearning at all! In some cases, that’s believable, I guess. But in other cases, I thought the authors were letting us down. They were avoiding the big elephant in the room.

Other writers seemed to be taking the subject matter on, and doing it well. Shakespeare, for one – but in contemporary times we’ve got writers like Nicholson Baker, John Updike, Susan Minot, Jane Smiley, a bunch, taking on the topic with gusto. I’m grateful to them for continuing upping the ante, pushing the conversation along. But always I was thinking, “We need more of this. More writers trying to tell it real.”

This book is set near a town similar to yours, and some of the characters might be similar to folks you know. How much of the book is fiction, how much non-fiction?

As always, there’s a mix. I think authors use their emotional truths and put them into fictional stories. But I *did* literally climb into a bear den for research for a nonfiction book. I did see my father’s brain in a jar. I also do really have a medical condition called Trigeminal neuralgia, which one of the characters has . . .

Let’s talk about the artistic decisions in this book. For example, there are many point-of-view characters instead of one narrator (as most of your other books have).

Yes, even I needed a map. But this was the sort of novel that needed to be told by many—it’s a bit of a Roshomon situation. There will be some confusion, perhaps. I get that. It’s a risk I took. Any novel with a wide canvas will have big cast of characters—that’s simply what this book needed in order to be told well.

Speaking of the multiplicity, talk about the influence of Walt Whitman in the book . . .

There's a lot of Whitman. Of celestial imagery. Of a universality. The book riffs of some of his images and themes. The first drafts of this novel contained Whitman quotes starting each chapter. But then it felt like I was just saying to the reader "Do you notice all this Whitman? Isn't it beautiful? Do you get how I'm using him in my own work?" and it was ceasing to be more about him, and less about the characters, so I cut the quotes out. However, astute readers will catch a poem hidden in nearly every chapter. There are nods to poetry everywhere.

Given your titles, you seem to like colors and celestial imagery . . .

I love using nature as metaphor—and metaphor, of course, is a writer's greatest tool. Personally, I frequently use the moon as my own temporal marker. I always have. "By the next full moon, I'll have the windows washed," I say. Or, "In two moons, I'll be done with my novel." A character in my new novel says, "By the next full moon, I'll be dead." I look forward to Spring Equinox the way some people look forward to Christmas. I love *l'heure bleue*, the French phrase for twilight, or the blue hour. I love the sky. I also might have a bit of synesthesia; colors are mixed into the way I perceive the world.

What's next?

A book I've been working on for several years called *Making Friends With Death: A Journal and Guidebook for your Impending Last Breath* will be released by Viva Editions. That sounds weird, I know. I've always been terrorized by death, and at one point, I thought it was close at hand, so I set out interviewing all sorts of people (dying people, hospice workers, death with dignity advocates, you name it) to make some peace with this one inevitability. And I made myself a guidebook which truly helped me face—and then mitigate—my fear. I turned that into a book for other folks who might want some help too.

Any last words?

I work really hard—not only tell a good story, but to explore and illuminate emotional and psychological truths. To my mind, that *is* the writer's hard task—and privilege. I wanted to dig deep and hard into the interior recesses of my characters, so as to render the human experience in all its wacky contradictory wonderfulness, especially in regard to sexuality and relationship. I really hope my readers enjoy it. As the dedication says, it's for lovers everywhere. . . .

*Dedicated to the mountains,
the people who live among them,
and lovers of all kinds,
everywhere*