

MALINDA MCCOLLUM'S

Metaphorical, Messed-up Masterpiece

Malinda McCollum presses her lips closer to the microphone; her voice becomes assertive as it pounds from the speakers. “Ohh!” she exclaims, followed by a volley of laughter from the audience. “I’ve been told to eat the mic, and now I know what the difference is.”

Malinda McCollum, Author



She flashes a playful glance; her lips tightly pressed together in a smirk. **“Now, I must say that what I am**

reading is fiction. It is not autobiographical.” She begins her post-sabbatical with some clarification concerning her “in-progress collection of stories,” [The Reunion](#), assuring the audience of her mental stability. “All of the stories are from the point of view of a narrator who just *happens* to be a college writing teacher,” she notes, “and this narrator is somewhat troubled.”

Having been a writing professor at the College of Charleston for nearly two decades, McCollum has plenty of

experience in the field of her aforementioned character. Because she reflects aspects of her narrator’s professional life, she jokes that **“current, former, and maybe future students will have concerns about my stability.”**

Audiences could not have been offered a more gripping introduction to McCollum’s wit, humor, and rich imagination. Her teaching experience at Stanford, CofC, and the University of Iowa allowed her time to refine the art of literary expression and sharpen her mastery of metaphorical fiction.

Whether it is her story, [The Goldfish](#) where marital instability drives a college professor to the brink of insanity, or [The Alley](#), where suicidal thoughts echo like a bell in a mother’s brain, Malinda McCollum’s stories bleed with topics and metaphors concerning the unstable and unspoken.

This seasoned writer has published a broad assortment of literature, where much of her collection can be found on her website, [MalindaMcCollum.com](#). The rest is packed neatly into her novel, *The Surprising Place*. Arguably her most notable work, [The Surprising Place](#) is heavily praised for its realistic depictions of struggling people set against the backdrop of Des Moines, Iowa. A native Iowan herself, McCollum reminisces with the setting: “a high school, a park, a pool,” she notes in our

interview, “**some of the stories’ settings are pulled from my time as a child.**”

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Though McCollum’s mental state is cleared by her persistent reassurance, there is no question that past sights and experiences somewhat seep onto the page.

“**The city’s nickname used to be ‘The Surprising Place,’**” notes McCollum, to provide a literal reasoning for the title. A suitable choice, but McCollum rarely keeps her writing literal. Take the narrator of her short, *The Wave Pool*, who remarks, “You’re in the Wave Pool [...] waiting for the waves to begin.” Knowing McCollum’s rich use of metaphor, the wave pool is perhaps less of a physical pool and more so a depiction of emotional turbulence and distress. In the same vein, the title for *The Surprising Place* refers to the metaphorical “**surprising places**

where our outsized longings lead us,” where fate sets the finish line in our quest for understanding and purpose.

Though many places resemble memories of her young life, she reiterates that, “**none of the characters in that story or the rest of the book are stand-ins for me or moments from my life. (Thank goodness, because there’s a lot of messed-up stuff going on in my stories)!**” McCollum seems overwhelmingly grateful that she didn’t inherit the same trials as her characters, and for good reason. One story, *Think Straight*, has a recurring character, Green, calling his ailing father and fighting a concerning pain in his shoulder. *Sharks*, has Coach J knocking back whiskey and refusing Codeine from his coworker with the excuse that, “I’m already taking a million pills anyway.”



“I’m already taking a million pills anyway.”

The Surprising Place is no stranger to abuse and uncertainty but is

nonetheless beautifully and intricately sewn together. As the phrase, “it’s a small world,” would have it, the characters and their stories intermingle to create one large portrait of interwoven life. “When I was revising the book for publication,” McCollum notes, **“I realized other parallels had popped up, with certain images recurring and multiple incidents in which characters were surprised in various (often unsettling) ways.”** Brick by brick, the collection was slowly fitted together like a scattered puzzle, with new pieces appearing every day.

To my surprise, McCollum also dabbles in writing recipes. She described the preparation of her delightfully sweet and sour novel, claiming that the book’s creation was a slow and lengthy process, stirred nice and steady with a silver whisk. **“The Surprising Place is a book that took shape over many years, as I gradually accumulated narratives.”**

Her stories play on common characters, many being teachers or college students struggling to make sense of their lives. In one way or another, anyone could relate to some aspect of a character or struggle that makes its appearance in McCollum’s fiction. But oftentimes, thinking up these broken and gradually healing characters can be the most taxing part of the process for most writers. **“In terms**

of writing an individual story, I typically start with only a seed,” she advises, “a line of dialogue I’ve overheard, a striking action, an anecdote I’ve been told. Whatever the initial spark, **I try to wade into a narrative without a set destination in mind, so I don’t shut the story down before it opens.**” It is seldom advised to jump into a project headfirst, but perhaps it is the age-old secret to literary excellence and creativity.

Although her post-sabbatical was a short and sweet introduction for her works, she promises a future of enticing literature that readers can look forward to: **“The story I presented during my reading is from an in-progress collection of linked stories [...]** stories from this collection have been published in print and online journals.”

It is safe to say that **Malinda McCollum**, the wonderfully entertaining finalist for the L.D. and Laverne Harrell Clark Fiction Prize, and the (hopefully sane) winner of the Juniper and Plimpton award, has a ravenous appetite for fiction that is not yet satiated.

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