

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

Carol Smallwood

Interview with Judith Skillman

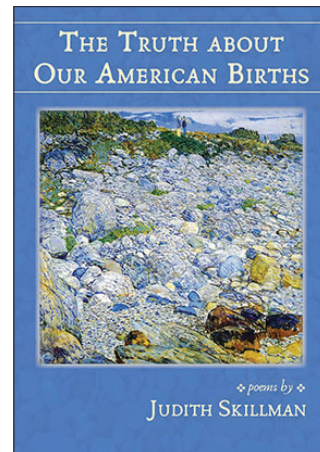
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Judith Skillman is author of around twenty collections of poetry. She is the recipient of an award from the Academy of American Poets for her book Storm (Blue Begonia Press). Her work has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes, the UK Kit Award, Best of the Web, and is included in Best Indie Verse of New England. A faculty member at the Richard Hugo House in Seattle, Washington, Skillman also paints.



Smallwood: You hold a Masters in English Literature from the University of Maryland and have done graduate work in comparative literature at the University of Washington. When did you begin writing and was it poetry?

Skillman: I began writing poetry as an undergraduate student and then, when I went back to get a master's in English Literature, I got it with an emphasis in creative writing. The MFA degree didn't yet exist. It was quite a privilege, as I got to hear the excellent poets who came to read at University of Maryland's reading series: Galway Kinnell, Tess Gallagher, Stanley Kunitz, and others. Actually, looking farther back, I wrote my first poem in fourth grade as an assignment, after Kennedy was assassinated.

Smallwood: your poem, "Blue Note" notes:

*those holocaust stories told
and later taken back,
as the most difficult facts
come to be handled by time
and distance.*

The Truth about Our American Births asks questions about a German Jewish heritage and of generations. Do you think it takes a certain time in one's life to really delve into family history?

Skillman: Yes, I think the family history has to be somewhat removed by time in order for it to stand out as a subject matter. It wasn't until my children were in school—two of them even in college—that I began to have the detachment necessary to ask questions about how I'd been raised. I knew I'd felt like an exile in Prince George's County Maryland, where we lived when I was age six until twenty eight. I felt "different" than my peers, who had Christmas and other things I envied. The feelings were there, but I had no way to articulate any coherent questions about the past.

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Smallwood: the collection shows your easy relationship with other languages. How did it come about and what use have you made of it?

Skillman: Well, that is kind of you to say. I am not fluent in any language except English. But I do love the sound of other languages. My maternal grandfather was Russian born and spoke English and French with a Russian accent. And as it says in the poem(s), my paternal grandmother spoke five languages fluently. My parents talked to one another in Yiddish when they didn't want us to understand them.

Also, I spent three months in France as a high school student, and some time in Quebec, so I'm a definite Francophile. I think it is good for poems to employ foreign words where they make music, and not artificially, but from a memory of a conversation or having heard the particular words. This may be true even if one doesn't know what they mean.

Smallwood: reviewers have noted your figurative language and imagery in the 47 poems in the book. I particularly enjoyed these lines from "Rift:"

*Hardened is the name of woman.
All hands and arms.
Hangnails come to tell.
Chores for the charwoman.
See her bend into soap.
Lean away from leisure.
In her stained rag a map of the world.
Countries never seen.*

Why did you use a period at the end of each line?

Skillman: I suppose end-stopping these lines seemed appropriate when I wrote it because the persona is angry. She is enraged at the misogyny that exists in society and culture and religion throughout history. And so the poem became deliberately choppy.

Smallwood: Agatha Christie is mentioned in poems. Please tell us why:

Skillman: Well, as the story goes my grandmother wasn't good at tending a house, or let's say, "housewifery". She would put a roast in the oven, and then she'd forget it entirely. The meat would burn because she went back to reading her Agatha Christies. She was an avid reader and loved mysteries.

Smallwood: In "Dahlia:"

*Inside the kitchen
the woman who fed them
on manure, who would turn
their white shallot-heads
in shallow graves
once they finished*

You express sharp contrast; please give readers another sample:

Skillman: That's an interesting observation. I love to paint with oil, which is all about relative contrast. *from "Polish Mother"*

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*She lights the apple orchard
with a lamp called moon
and then goes to bed
in a dirty housedress.*

Smallwood: who is Marie Luise Kaschnitz you quote in the beginning of your collection?

Skillman: A colleague introduced me to the work of Marie Luise Kaschnitz and I fell in love with her. The quoted poem is excerpted from her *Selected Later Poems*, published by Princeton University Press. She was nominated for a the 1967 Nobel Prize for Literature. Kaschnitz (31 January 1901–10 October 1974) was a German short story writer, novelist, essayist and poet, and is considered to be one of the leading post-war German poets.

Smallwood: what have you noted about the generational role of women?

Skillman: This is a big question. Women give birth, nurture infants and children, and hold families together. I would say that from my own experience, women create in many ways, and provide a “generative” force as well as one that spans the generations. In addition, because we are trained to be verbal from an early age, we women often end up as the “storytellers” of the family. This is important role in that creating family certified “tall tales and legends” may enable those who are young to better understand their own origins.

But because ours is a patriarchal society, more often than not the work of women isn’t recognized financially. My views are admittedly 20th century, but in fields where women abound, such as teaching, they are under compensated. In arenas where women compete, including the arts and sciences, still females often are the ones who take it upon themselves to provide for basic needs of family and offspring. There are so many strong women I admire, including my mother and sister. All have had substantial obstacles to overcome.

Smallwood: what are some magazines in which your work has appeared?

Skillman: I’ve had poems in many journals, including *Threepenny Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Midwest Quarterly Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Seneca Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Poetry*, *Southern Review*, *Tampa Review*, and elsewhere.

Smallwood: did you paint the cover of *The Truth about Our American Births*?

Skillman: No, though I can’t help but be flattered that you would ask such a question!

The cover art is “Rocky Beach, Appledore,” by Childe Hassam. He is one of my favorite artists. I chose this piece because it depicts a shoreline and at the top—which is just a fraction of the painting, a relatively small couple, a man and a woman, stand together against sky. For me the rocky climb up represents immigration and assimilation.

Smallwood: what are you working on now?

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Skillman: I am working on a manuscript that pulls work from six books and contains poems written over the past couple of years. Also I'm co-editing an anthology on domestic violence <http://www.persephones-daughters.tk/submit/>

Smallwood: readers can learn more about Judith Skillman on: www.judithskillman.com

Carol Smallwood, MLS, MA, Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award recipient, is a literary reader, judge, interviewer; her 13th poetry collection is *Thread, Form, and Other Enclosures* (Main Street Rag, 2020)