



THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

By Kate Racculia

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



A Conversation with Kate Racculia

Who are your favorite writers?

I love Kate Atkinson, Michael Chabon, Margaret Atwood, Jane Smiley, Richard Russo—I could go on. And there's nothing in the world like a vintage Stephen King and a glass of iced tea on a lazy summer day.

Which book/books have had the biggest influence on your writing?

Ellen Raskin's *The Westing Game* blew my ten-year-old mind with its multiple characters, multiple plots, multiple red herring, try-to-solve-it-yourself mystery. And years later, John Irving's *The World According to Garp* was an object lesson in absolutely stuffing a book to bursting—with characters, with ideas, with absurdity—and yet making it all ring true. *See author's Recommended Reading list to learn more.*

What are your hobbies and outside interests?

I watch movies all the time: the good, the bad, the unspeakably awful (the better to mock; thank you, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*).

I'm also a collector of everything from old records to antique postcards. I've never met an antique mall I didn't like.

What is your favorite quote?

"Still and all, why bother? Here's my answer. Many people need desperately to receive this message: I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people do not care about them. You are not alone."

—Kurt Vonnegut



What is the single best piece of advice anyone ever gave you?

My father once told me to never forget that TUMS spelled backward is SMUT. I'm not sure how to quantify the ways in which this advice has changed my life, but I've never forgotten it.

What inspired you to write your first book?

This Must Be the Place was inspired by many, many things: the art of Joseph Cornell; the Pixies's *Doolittle* album; the true story of John Myatt, an art forger who happened to be a single father (which got me thinking: What would it be like to have a forger in the family?); and a burning desire to justify the student loan payments I owed on my MFA.

Where do you write?

I like to write in noisy cafés. Anywhere there's plenty of ambient energy and easy access to a great cup of coffee.

What is the question most commonly asked by your readers? What is the answer?

Where did you get your ideas? And the answer is: I...kind of don't know. Does anyone? I imagine my brain as a melting pot of everything I've absorbed about the world—from my family, my friends, my coworkers, and my teachers; from movies and music and books—that simmers quietly, just waiting for me to decide to see what's cooking.

*About the
Author*



An Original Essay by the Author

“Writing This Must Be the Place”

BEGINNING

I started writing *This Must Be the Place* in the summer of 2006, at the very end of the repayment grace period for my student loans. This was not a coincidence. I had just moved into a new apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with one of my oldest and dearest friends. I was flush with the heady joy—read: financial solvency—of my first grown-up job. After approximately twenty years of school, it felt pretty magnificent to be earning a wage; but it also felt pretty *this-is-not-all-I-want-to-do-with-my-life*. I had played bassoon for years in youth orchestras; had a degree in illustration; had minors in art history and English; had stacks of notebooks full of stories and the beginnings of novels; and had a brand new graduate degree in creative writing. After all that time spent reading and analyzing and performing and imagining—and loving every second of it—I was now a full-time cubicle drone, writing fifty-odd page marketing proposals about (wait for it) equity investment strategies and compliance policies.

Nonetheless, I decided there were two things I would emphatically not do. One: I refused to send Sallie Mae a monthly loan payment without doing something to justify it. And two: I refused to let what I did for money—which was, all things considered, an extremely decent gig—define me.

I have always been stubborn. I have always loved to make things up and to write. The former trait has occasionally made my life difficult, but in deciding to write a novel, the two worked a kind of alchemy in concert. My MFA thesis, a novella about a young pianist returning home for her childhood friend's funeral, felt like a completed work. I wanted to take on something new. I knew it would be a novel, knew



I wanted the writing to last and grow over time, but I couldn't make the project insurmountable. It needed to be something I could do for the love of it, small scale and personal, that would remove me from the stresses of my nine-to-five and validate those loan payments one sentence at a time.

I'd already written a story about a school-picture photographer living in a boardinghouse who was poisoned by his landlady's daughter (it didn't make much sense, but trust me when I say the daughter had the best intentions). The photographer's name was Tim, I think; he became Arthur. He had a wife named Audrey who was dead when the story started. They lived in north Hollywood, not far from where I spent a summer working on an internship credit for my graduate degree. They had a cat named Ray Harryhausen and an overbearing landlord named Mac.

Then someone broke into my apartment and stole my laptop with the first chapter on it.

NEMESIS

Wait. Let me back up. The new job, the loans, the stolen laptop—that's not the beginning. The real beginning of *This Must Be the Place* was an art project I did in the first grade. We were making collages. I don't recall the point of the assignment or the actual conversation I had with my first-grade teacher—a lovely woman I actually saw last summer when she came to a reading in my beloved hometown of Syracuse—but I imagine it went something like this:

Mrs. S: You make a collage by cutting out pictures from magazines and pasting them together on a piece of paper.

Me: You mean... all together? Touching? Overlapping?

Mrs. S: All together!

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Me, had I possessed the vocabulary: *WHAT INFERNAL ANARCHY IS THIS, WOMAN?!*

Collage was my nemesis. I was the kind of child who thought hospital-food trays, with their neat compartments separating the mashed potatoes from the meat, were the standard to which all plates should aspire. How could I possibly be expected to participate in an endeavor that was, as indicated by the work of my contemporaries, about haphazardly gluing as many pictures as possible of Barbie, Optimus Prime, and/or adorable lion cubs on a single sheet of oak tag? What was the point? Why couldn't I draw a tiny city populated with anthropomorphic cats (as was my wont) instead of creating this hellish "collage"?

The tide turned, as it must to make the story worth telling, in high school. My art teacher assigned another collage project, only this time the finer points of the medium were explained to me. If you'll allow another imagined conversation:

Mr. T: The point of collage is to create patterns and suggest meaning by placement.

Me: You mean, everything touching and overlapping, but with a point? An underlying meaning?

Mr. T: Yes, that's correct.

Me, now possessing the vocabulary, but unable to speak because my mind has been *blown*.

I went to the University of Buffalo and majored in illustration, primarily working in mixed-media collage. I understand collage now—not only as my preferred medium for visual artistic expression, but as a way of understanding my world. Everything we know about ourselves is itself a form of collage, a composite of experiences, memories, details, smells and sounds and sights; and how we interpret the patterns and connect the underlying dots is how we come to



understand our lives. It's how we find method in our madness.

Writing *This Must Be the Place*, then, was an act of self-collage, assigning method to the madness of my life up to that point, which had essentially been my childhood. Not to imply that my childhood and adolescence were overly dramatic. Sure, middle school was a little hairy, but—my love of order and partitioned food vessels aside—I had an extraordinarily happy, safe childhood. My gratitude for my luck, my parents, my family, my friends, and my teachers I was (and am) blessed enough to have by my side, guiding me, knows no bounds; especially since *they* are the real reason I was able to write *This Must Be the Place* at all. When the people around you say, over and over again, *you can write that story; you can paint those pictures; you can try out for that orchestra; you can go to school for art*; and, most important, *you are loved*; you're bound to grow up believing that anything is possible if you try, if you want it and you work for it.

Sometimes I look back and think my childhood was stupidly happy, like, living in a quirky eighties sitcom—happy, with wacky neighbors and catchphrases and the occasional moment of slapstick, like that time my mother and I broke two different chairs in one afternoon because I was too big to be sitting on her lap anymore but that didn't stop me from trying. Or that *other* time when I tripped over my bike because I was playing dryland Marco Polo in the middle of the street, and ended up needing two stitches in my chin. I have a shockingly clear memory of Glenn Frey's "You Belong to the City" playing on the radio while we drove home from the emergency room—floating through Syracuse at night, my chin bandaged and swollen and realizing, *grasping*, that I *did* belong to this city. Hadn't I shed blood, however moronically,

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on her streets that very night? I was exhausted, probably still in shock, but safe and awake enough to have a profound revelation (for an eight-year-old) about my place in the world in a dark moving car.

That memory is *absolutely* what informed Arthur, Mona, and Oneida's midnight run from the emergency room.

WHERE IT ALL CAME FROM

In 2006, I was twenty-six, officially done with school, vaguely unsatisfied with my job, and ripe for a quarter-life crisis, or at the very least an extended mental vacation frolicking with the loves of my youth. Like: Ray Harryhausen monster movies (Medusa was and is the biggest movie badass, ever, hands down, no contest). The music of the Beatles, which completely defined my life between 1993 and 1996. The songs of Foreigner and Journey, which I didn't realize were tattooed on my soul until I rekindled my love for them during the Napster revolution. The delicately inscrutable shadow boxes of Joseph Cornell and the dreaming mysteries of Salvador Dalí introduced to me in my art history classes and by my father, respectively. And the places—Ocean City on the Jersey Shore, where I traveled every summer with a high school concert band. Ruby Falls, which isn't based on any one place in particular but is itself a collage of all the little towns in upstate New York where I spent the first eighteen years of my life—full of huge old houses and strange characters, breathtaking in the autumn. To my characters I gave the world I grew up in; my characters themselves were built from bits and pieces of myself. Arthur got my eye for art, which is also where he got his name. Oneida got my antisocial only-child tendencies and my curiosity, and took her name from the lake I've vacationed on since I was three. Eugene got my love of music and



my (would-be) rebellious streak. Mona got my sense of humor and my love of food, especially cake. Amy, even, is me—the stubborn part, the workaholic part, and the dreaming-it-into-reality part.

LOVE STORY

When I set out to write a novel, knowing that two of the main characters would be a single man and a single woman, I promised myself I would RESIST romantic comedy conventions. I was *not* writing a love story. It was *not* a foregone conclusion that Mona and Arthur would end up together (in other drafts, they didn't). I was writing about people in a small town unraveling their pasts into the present, caroming off each other like soap bubbles, who might fall in love or might not; I was writing about art and expression and growing up and not knowing who you are, at least not yet, and being lucky enough to meet and recognize a kindred.

Which doesn't mean it's not a love story. In fact, I think it means it *is*; it just isn't the kind of we-know-where-this-is-going-nothing-new-to-see-here kind of love story I never wanted to write. But more than that, it's a love *letter* to the places and experiences I knew growing up, recombined and collaged into something new.

I am a repressed romantic. I violently eschew schmoop. I cry foul on flowers and hearts. But at the end of the day, like the Beatles said, I truly believe that all you need is love.

TO SUMMARIZE

Between 2006 and today, I've changed jobs twice and moved three times. Friends have gotten married. Babies have been born. People I love have moved away and moved closer; people I love have gone. I've drunk over two thousand cups of coffee; eaten sever-

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al hundred turkey, pesto, and cheddar sandwiches at Diesel Café in Somerville, where I wrote most of *This Must Be the Place*; and had my laptop stolen twice (the second time from the aforementioned café, and yes, there are two unfinished versions of this book floating around Cambridge). The stock market tanked and my day job in investment marketing became about a thousand times more stressful. We elected a new president. Zombies lost their cool; vampires were hot; zombies are making a comeback. I became utterly obsessed with *Gilmore Girls*, *Twin Peaks*, *Mad Men*, and *Doctor Who*, in that order. Start to finish, from a Word document on my laptop to a paperback on my shelf, writing this book has been the most excellent of adventures, one even my wildest daydreams couldn't have foreseen—with a cast of amazing (real live) characters who made it all possible, whom I can never thank enough.

But I don't think *This Must Be the Place* is a book I could write again, the same way that you can only grow up once (even though it might end up taking longer than you expect). If, in the end, parts of it feel a bit uneven, I'd like to think that's because it's the story of how I got here and where I came from; that I'm simply not done cooking. That this is only the end of my beginning, and there's a long way left to go.



Recommended Reading

Reading
Group
Gold



Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*

The gold standard in novel-as-collage.

Traces (and unravels) multiple generations of an English family in the insanely captivating first-person voice of one Ruby Lennox, youngest of the clan, who begins narrating at her own conception.

Kate Atkinson is a phenomenal writer, and this (her first!) is one of the best books I've ever read.

Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*

I want to be Margaret Atwood when I grow up.

These two novels—along with *The Handmaid's Tale*—are probably my favorites of hers, if any book that crystallizes the many ways girls and women can be cruel to each other can be called a “favorite.”

Beaches

Because sometimes you need a really sincere, totally unironic sobfest. I'm glad I saw *Beaches* for the first time when I was too young to be cynical and make fun of it; consequently, now I never can.

Guster, *Ganging Up on the Sun*

The album that had the most direct influence on the writing of *This Must Be the Place*—from the name of the town (Ruby Falls), to being haunted by the past (“One Man Wrecking Machine”) and the unbearable unknowableness of others (“Satellite”). I hear this album and Darby-Jones comes alive in my head.

Keep on
Reading

John Irving, *The World According to Garp*

Garp didn't directly inspire *This Must Be the Place* so much as show me how immersive a novel can be, and all the tricks a writer can pull to make it that way.

There's so much going on in *Garp*—so many characters, so many ideas, so much perverse tragedy and heartbreaking comedy—and yet it hangs together, all of a piece, like a symphony of kazoos that moves you to tears.

Lorrie Moore, *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?*

Another story about an intense friendship between two teenage girls that is anything *but* "another story."

Moore can write a novel about a paper bag and I would show up to read it.

My So-Called Life

I didn't watch *My So-Called Life* when it was actually on television, even though, age-wise, I was the target audience—I was nerdier than I was angsty at the time, so I was watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *The X-Files* instead. I was twenty-seven when I finally saw it on DVD, and it took my breath away. This show is an EXACT representation of how it felt to be a teenage girl in the nineties, painfully, joyfully, and completely.

Richard Russo, *Empire Falls*

Nobody writes upstate New York like Richard Russo.

Nobody writes like Richard Russo, period—every sentence is a phrase of music, every paragraph a song. You lose yourself in his words.



Ben Sisario, *The Pixies' Doolittle (33 1/3 Series)*

Essays and stories about each song on one of the weirdest, greatest albums of all time.

Charles Simic, *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell*

Simic distills the inspiring enigma that is the art (and life) of Joseph Cornell in short works of criticism, fiction, and poetry. A dream you can tuck in your pocket.

Rebecca Stead, *When You Reach Me*

An incredible book about growing up, friendship, family, New York City in the seventies...and time travel. My number-one recommended read of the past year.

Un Chien Andalou

Because some brands of crazy you simply must experience for yourself.

*Keep on
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. Very early on, Max Morris says to Arthur that “sometimes you let the people you love believe what they want to believe.” Do you think that’s true? How does that statement play in to the rest of the novel?
2. What role does food play in the novel? Mona bakes cakes for a living, and also feeds her tenants each night—it’s pointed out several times that both Mona’s meals and cakes are especially delicious. Do you think her skill with food is meant to imply something about her personality as well? Is she a nurturing person in general?
3. The novel opens with a young Amy on a bus headed toward Hollywood. What were your initial perceptions of teenage Amy? How did your opinion of her change over the course of the novel?
4. We never get to see Amy as an adult, except through Arthur’s eyes. Do you think she was a different person as an adult with Arthur than she was as a teenager with Mona? Or are Mona and Arthur’s perceptions of Amy just different? Are they reconcilable? Do you think it’s possible for people to ever change in any fundamental ways?
5. Mona notes fairly early on that “the past was never past. It always came back to kick your ass.” Is that true for the characters of the novel? In what ways?
6. The novel follows the development of several romances, some between adults and some between teenagers. Think of Oneida and Eugene’s relationship and compare it to Mona and Arthur’s. How do age and maturity alter the development of each relationship? How do the teens act differently? Do you think there’s anything to be said for the naïveté that the teenagers bring to their relationship? Or the experience that the adults bring to their relationship?



7. Secrets play a large role in the novel. Do you think that any of the secrets that are revealed should have been kept? Do you think that one person can ever truly know another? Or are we all bound in some way by the secrets that we keep?
8. When Oneida's real parentage was finally revealed, were you surprised? How does Oneida deal with the revelation? Do you think that it changed her feelings about Mona in anyway?
9. Eugene tells Oneida that "life is art." What do you think he means by that? How does the novel illustrate the point?
10. Art is a major theme of the novel. Many of the major characters are artists: Amy, a puppeteer and animator; Arthur, a photographer; Astor, a forger; Mona, a baker. How does each person's chosen medium suit his or her personality?
11. The novel also deals closely with misconceptions—how do art and misconceptions relate to one another? What do you think the novel is trying to say about art? What do you think of the fact that Oneida goes on to become an art historian? That Eugene becomes a forger?
12. In Eugene's dream, Joseph Cornell tells him that he will grow up and die, and that "it's the single greatest thing that will ever happen to you." What do you think this is supposed to mean? How is this a novel about growing up? Do all of the characters mature in one way or another—even the ones who are already "grown up"?

*Keep on
Reading*