

# *Michael Kimball Interviews Deb Olin Unferth*

## **Michael Kimball:**

I think of you as a fiction writer first, probably because that is how I first encountered you, but *Revolution* is a memoir, so I'm wondering about the differences between writing fiction and memoir. I'm asking because there are certain incidents that I wouldn't have believed if I were reading fiction, but I read along amazed because I'm reading a memoir.

## **Deb Olin Unferth:**

When I decided to write *Revolution*, I read dozens of memoirs and autobiographies to try to get a sense of how memoirs are put together, how they have changed over the past hundred years, how I might contribute to the conversation that "memoir" is—which is really a conversation about memory and its mishaps, time, the narrative of the self, and much more. I'd been terrified to write a memoir. I'd told myself this was because I doubted its intellectual validity (ha!), but I see now it was because I didn't want to deal with the problems memoir presents.

A few of these are: the search for and commitment to factual and emotional truth; the willingness to reveal oneself publicly; the need to settle on one "self" or one interpretation of what happened; the filter—what sort of a filter to use (you must use a filter! you can't just write down every single thing that ever happened to you) and why you use that particular filter, and how to tell the reader what that filter is and what doubts you have about it—the need to resist building an artificial but tempting arc (life doesn't work as an arc, even though almost all of our experiences with human-made narrative do), etcetera. None of these are problems in quite the same way in fiction.

**Kimball:**

This is why I love interviews. Let's talk about the filter. I think we use a filter in fiction, too. There's a pretty clear filter in your novel, *Vacation*, and the filters are even more obvious in your short stories. Can you talk about the particular filter that you used in *Revolution* and the doubts that you had about it?

**Unferth:**

The hardest part was determining the voice I wanted to use—a voice is a filter. What sort of a stance did I want to take toward this subject? I had many doubts. After all, here I was, an American, turning up at someone else's war and trying to "help," and, all these years later, here I was writing about it (and writing about something is, in a way, owning it or laying claim to it). It takes a lot of audacity to do that. Furthermore, I wanted to have a sense of humor about it, mostly because I feel like I can only speak seriously through a filter of humor. And what kind of a person would write humorously about someone else's war? It seemed inhuman, and yet I wanted it to be very human, and very respectful. For this reason, I abandoned the book over and over, but it felt urgent to me to finish it, and urgent on many levels, so I kept returning to it. All I could think to do was to integrate my doubts into the text, be very open about it.

**Kimball:**

The voice, the tone of the voice, is one of the things that is striking about the book. Some of what happens in the narrative seems so terrible or so absurd that humor seemed necessary—that is, the narrative would have seemed unbelievable without that sort of temper for it. Said another way, there are places where the narrative seems both earnest and ironic at the same time. Do you think of that as one of the ways that *Revolution* contributes to the conversation of what a memoir is—or, what a memoir can be?

### **Unferth:**

Well, I hope so. I wanted to capture that feeling of simultaneous earnestness and irony. It's the way I tend to feel most of the time—urgently earnest and yet aware of the absurdity of earnestness. Even then, at eighteen, I felt that way, though the feeling was a little deeper below the surface. I try to get that across in places in the book, such as when I call my family to tell them I'm getting married and I feel a sudden surge of terror that I might not mean what I'm saying and doing the way George does.

I don't believe irony precludes deep emotion in writing, the way some people say. Irony can indicate deep emotion—pain, fear, doubt, strangling desire. The important thing is not to stop at irony. Let the irony curtain fall around you, then push it away (it comes away so easily!) and look at what it hid.

### **Kimball:**

One of the fascinating things about *Revolution* is the way that this shifting perspective happens in so many places, on so many pages—and it kind of teaches the reader to read the book in a particular way. This is partly possible, I think, because of the subject matter—we're given a narrative with a very personal, idiosyncratic story that is set against a backdrop of a narrative that might be told in a history book. What I'm wondering is how you decided to balance these two narratives—how much of the political revolution versus how much of the personal revolution?

## Unferth:

The book began and stopped in fits and starts over a period of many years while I tried to figure out just what sort of book I wanted to write. I had written drafts of scenes of both the war material and the personal material. I had, scattered all over, pieces of scenes and mini history lessons I'd written. They were in different boxes and on scraps of paper, some typed into e-mails I sent to myself from Central America in the early 2000s, some in notebooks starting with the ones I'd written during the 1987 trip. Because I'd tried so many times to write this book, I'd done a lot of research over the years, also in fits and starts. I'd say there were four distinct periods when I read almost exclusively books about Central American politics, and I took extensive notes and made hundreds of note cards. (I'd been taught to do this in eighth grade: When writing a research paper, put all your facts on note cards. Probably no one does that anymore, right? Why have them on note cards anyway? What's the point? It's mysterious.)

When I finally decided what I wanted to do and surveyed the mountain of material, somehow the balance came very naturally and organically. I didn't have that much trouble figuring that part of it out. I did not want the book to be a history book. I did want the political backdrop to be an important part of the book. The challenges were: 1. figuring out how much background information to put in (I initially assumed a lot was common knowledge—that turned out not to be—so I needed to fill it out a little), 2. including the factual information in a way that didn't lose my voice.

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