

THE FORGETTING TREE

by Tatjana Soli

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A Conversation with Tatjana Soli

*“Writers are
foremost
entertainers.”*

***The Forgetting Tree* is your second novel. Was it easier or harder to write than the first?**

I joke that it is my second first novel (as you’ll see in the “Behind the Scenes” section of this Gold guide). I had written drafts of it before my first novel was accepted for publication. So, at the time, I felt free to do something that interested me, without really thinking about audience. I had just completed my MFA, and I wanted a different challenge than my first book. Writers I admire such as Jennifer Egan and David Mitchell reinvent themselves with each book, and temperamentally that appeals to me. I was interested in combining realism with mystery and fantasy elements. This is an area that Southern writers freely write in, but I was also thinking of the fantasy or poetic realism in books that I love, such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, even *The English Patient* and *Housekeeping*.

What pleased me was that my editor immediately said she recognized many of the same preoccupations and themes as my first book, yet the books are entirely different in subject and tone. In terms of being easier, no it wasn’t easier at all. If it was, I’d be worried that I wasn’t taking enough risks.

You mentioned the combination of realism with mystery. Would you talk about that?

I do think *The Forgetting Tree* is a mystery, both on the level of plot and character. There’s a line in the book: “Exotic is on the inside.” In my first book, *The Lotus Eaters*, the exotic was on the outside, and in this one the setting is very domestic. Yet, as the story progresses, it becomes strange, exotic, violent. I joke and call it California Gothic.



Where do you get your ideas?

It's always different. With this book, I really wanted to explore the clash of cultures. People with wildly different life experiences and behaviors living side by side. The relationship of the powerful and powerless. The temptation of victim to become oppressor. So the relationship between Claire and Minna is almost an allegory. For Claire, from a middle-class American background, there is this myopia toward the larger world.

In your last book, you gave balanced points of view between Americans and Vietnamese. In your latest, you give us both an American point of view and a Haitian point of view. Is it difficult to write across cultures?

I find it very hard and potentially scary. Yet it is the story that fascinates me as a writer. So I drive myself, and everyone around me, crazy with research to try to get it right. As essential as it is, it is not a documentary; the factual is only the foundation on which to build the fiction. The particularity of characters is also a saving grace. Claire certainly does not represent every middle-aged, white woman in Southern California; by the same token, Minna is not a representative of every Haitian woman.

How do you see the writer's role today?

I always surprise my students when I say writers are foremost entertainers. I mean simply that we are competing against so many other things for attention that we must give the reader an experience he can get nowhere else. My new favorite quote is from an article by Askold Melnyczuk: "However he identifies himself, every good novelist is at heart an anarchist."

*About the
Author*

You wrote that your favorite new question at readings is “What’s next?” So?

When I get asked that question, it reminds me that writing is a continual process. I’m much happier and saner when I’ve got my head working on the next project. I’ve had the idea of expanding a long short story into a novel for years. Slowly I’ve been researching and jotting notes, and finally its obsessing me so much now I can’t bear to put it off any longer. That’s my mental home for the next few years. I’m too superstitious to say more than that.



Photo © Marion Ettlinger



*An Original Essay
by the Author*

“The Second First Novel”

Readers can be forgiven for believing that books are published easily, that authors take a grand view of the world around them, choose a subject—*mix and bake*—and two years later a beautiful new book appears. The reality, like life, is always much messier and more complicated.

I'd devoted a good six years off-and-on to writing my first novel, *The Lotus Eaters*, about a photojournalist in Vietnam. The book had been roundly rejected, and my agent told me none too gently (he's of the tough-love school) that I needed to move on and write something new. I was in mourning. The first lines in *The Forgetting Tree* are Octavio's, but to a much lesser extent my own feelings of loss at the time were mirrored in his.

*But he also was in mourning for the missing boy.
Did they not see?*

What I did during this difficult period in my life is the same thing I do almost every day when home—take long walks in the regional park where I live. When I first moved to this area in Southern California, one could walk through orange, avocado, and eucalyptus groves and rarely run into another person. It was incredibly beautiful and peaceful except that over the years it began to change. A eucalyptus grove on top of a hill where we used to picnic is now a gated, luxury development where we can no longer walk. The flat, sandy bed where my puppy loved to run is now paved road. One of the most painful sights that I can remember was driving past bulldozers tearing out orange trees. This scene found its way into the book:



*Behind
the Scenes*

*"The story
burned
inside me..."*

*Each tree was an individual, with a personality,
and this treatment seemed a desecration of nature.
When the trees were dead... bulldozers came and
tore their roots from the earth, piling them into big
heap from where they were trucked away to be
shredded for compost.*

One of my favorite writers, J.M. Coetzee, writes, "To imagine the unimaginable" is the writer's duty. Novels grow from complex root systems. I don't know what the turning point was, but during those walks in the groves the story of the Baumsarg ranch, and the struggle of its owner, Claire, against the dark forces that confronted her began to form in my mind. Hers was a family torn apart by tragedy and time. The crown jewel, though, was Minna, who appeared to me like the Indian god Shiva, both creator and destroyer, concealer and revealer, ultimately unknowable. At this stage these were all simply pieces that would take months to put together into a story, but they captured my imagination.

*The tree had not resurrected—rather, its life was simply
hidden to the eye, beating deep in the soil, trembling
within the roots hairs, in sap, wood, and bark.*

So I wrote my "second" first novel not with the idea of an audience, or the idea of it being published, but because the story burned inside me, and the writing of it was the thing that fulfilled me as a writer. As I finished a first draft of this book about Claire and her search for redemption, I got the surprise call of my life that my first novel had sold. Was I ecstatic? Of course. But I had already proved to myself that even during the most fallow times, story could appear mysteriously. What made one a writer ultimately was the daily laying of those words on the page.



Illustration by Gaylord Soli



Recommended Reading

***Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë**

Yes, it's a classic, but it's so much fun to reread. It was considered ahead of its time in its exploration of a strong female character's feelings, a proto-feminist text. Plus, you need it fresh in your mind as you learn about the madwoman in the attic, Bertha Antoinetta Mason, for the next book.

***Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys**

My college professor said reading this book will change you, and I agree. The imagery and prose are stunning in their own right, but it is in the telling of an alternate history of the above that the novel really gains its power. Our assumptions and prejudices of the infamous madwoman are turned on their head. It is considered a post-colonial novel in that it tells the story of those whose voice is usually silenced. It deals with racial inequality and displacement. The relationship between the two texts inspired much of the structure of my book.

***Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson**

This is one of my favorite novels of all time. I'll admit that I took a long time coming to it; the plot description of two young girls growing up in a small town in northern Idaho doesn't begin to hint of how beautiful and profound the writing is. Hiding in the trappings of a domestic novel is a deeply subversive story about the freedoms to be found in nature and in throwing out society's expectations. Ruth and Sylvie will haunt you long after the book is closed.



*Keep on
Reading*

***The Dew Breaker* by Edwidge Danticat**

Danticat is an exquisite writer. The book is a series of linked short stories. The title comes from the Creole nickname for torturer, in this case referring to the Tonton Macoutes of the Duvalier regimes. Danticat was born in Haiti, and although she has lived in America most of her life, she writes about Haiti's history with beauty and thoughtfulness.

***The Rainy Season* by Amy Wilentz**

This is my only non-fiction book on the list, but it is a fascinating look at Haiti after the "Baby Doc" Duvalier regime and the rise of Aristide. The added bonus (especially for readers of my last book, *The Lotus Eaters*) is that Wilentz is a female journalist navigating a dangerous and tumultuous country, and her vivid writing brings the experience alive for us.



Reading Group Questions



1. Why do you think Soli named her novel *The Forgetting Tree*? How does the meaning of the title relate to the characters in the book?
2. How does the Baumsarg citrus farm shape the characters in the novel?
3. How does the loss of Josh Baumsarg affect the family? Forster and Claire react differently. How do you feel about the way they chose to live their lives afterwards?
4. Describe Minna. What is it about her that makes such an impression on Claire and her daughters?
5. How does Claire view herself as a mother? Did this perception change after losing Josh? As her daughters have grown into adults? In what ways did Claire's relationships with Gwen and Lucy evolve throughout the novel? What particular dynamics between parents and their adult children does Soli seem interested in exploring?
6. Describe Claire's relationship with her mother, Raisi, and her mother-in-law, Hanni. What life lessons does she learn from them? How does she pass these on to her own children? To Minna?
7. The novel is structured in four parts. Why do you think Soli chose this way to tell it? What do you think of this technique? Does it change the way you experience the story?
8. In Chapter 17, Claire "could no longer tell the difference between her white and Minna's black." What does she mean by this, and how does this suggest a theme of the novel?

*Keep on
Reading*

9. Does knowing Minna's past absolve her from responsibility to Claire? Do you think she overcomes these motivations by the end of the novel?
10. Jean-Alexi states that the "lost got to help the lost in this world." In what ways are Claire and Minna lost? In what ways do they help each other out of this state? In what ways do they fail?
11. Why does Claire eventually let the farm go? Do you think this is a good or bad thing?