

THE TRANS- FORMATIONAL POTENTIAL OF WRITING

by *Monica Carol Miller*

Karen Salyer McElmurray. *Voice Lessons: Essays*. Iris Press, 2021.

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KAREN SALYER MCELMURRAY is the author of multiple award-winning books of both fiction and nonfiction, including her novel *The Motel of the Stars* (Sarabande Books, 2008), partially set in North Carolina, and her memoir *Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother's Journey* (University of Georgia Press, 2004), which won the AWP Award for Creative Nonfiction. Her other awards include grants from the North Carolina Arts Council and the NEA.

On Karen Salyer McElmurray's [author website](#), she identifies herself as, "Teacher, Mentor, Writer." The essays in McElmurray's new collection *Voice Lessons* explore all three of these aspects of McElmurray's life, especially as one who came to academia and academic writing as an outsider. At the heart of the collection is McElmurray's familial life, beginning with the book's dedication "to the ghosts of my ancestors" and its opening preface titled "Before I was Born." This preface consists of a rough outline of her family history conveyed through a series of anaphoric statements, from "Before I was born" and "Being young" to "Less young" and "No longer young" (9–10). Beginning with "Before I was born. My father tells me there was a shootout in Floyd County involving the Baisden's and the Gray's [sic], my mother's kin. I do not know if this is true. A history of Floyd County says one of my ancestors was Belle Starr" (9), McElmurray anchors her life story in a specific Appalachian place and outlaw history. Such themes reverberate through the rest of the section in statements such as, "Being young. There was a well with sulfur water," to "No longer young. I went back to school. I thought I wanted to study D.H. Lawrence, but my own poetry interested me more," to "Less young. I found my son because I wrote a memoir," and "Less young. I had cancer. I am glad. I love my life. I love being alive. The cat sleeps in the sun next to me right now" (10–11; author's italics).

The series of statements that opens the collection sets up the themes and content of the subsequent essays, in which McElmurray describes her struggles with her mother's Alzheimer's, through graduate school and finding her writing voice, to a career in academia where she searches for her role in a place that treats her like an outsider. In all of the essays, McElmurray consciously writes her way through various modes of pain, difficulty, tragedy, and confusion, explaining that she is using her writing as a way of "creating a map of scars" to follow (22). In "Geography of Scars," she explains her project: "If I follow the map long enough, surely I will find the path forward that will make me whole" (22). The uncharted ground that McElmurray finds herself on requires that she draw her own map, but the agency that it requires will also provide a way out.

Writing is not only a method for McElmurray but also the focus of many of these essays, like how her study of poetry as an undergraduate at Berea inspired her to write her own poetry, initiating her into a community of poets and scholars. As she describes preparing for her comprehensive exams and defending her choice of subject matter in her writing, she illustrates the ways in which her feelings of marginalization within the academy were exacerbated not only by her Appalachian identity but also by her choice to write creative nonfiction, a genre that was still suspect at that time.



COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE READERS PODCAST

Though she does not specifically discuss her work on *Walk Until the Dogs Get Mean* (2015), a compelling anthology of essays by contemporary Appalachian writers, or her North Carolina-set novels, she does refer obliquely to the growing place of Appalachian Studies-inflected work within the academy. In the essay "Knowing What it Takes," for example, she talks about figuring out what to say on a panel she was invited to be on with the title of "Kiss My Grits: On the Badass in Appalachian Literature" (115). Thinking about canonical literary works such as Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* (1954) and more contemporary works such as Robert Gipe's *Trampoline* (2015) series allows McElmurray to consider her own family history of resilience in the face of trauma, a resilience that may be invisible to many, but visible "if you look at the eyes, at the palms of the hands. The kind of strength you

see in the . . . mended places of the spirit" (117). McElmurray draws strength not only from her family community, but also from the community of writers, scholars, and students in which her academic life has immersed her, noting especially how "[p]oets and their poems . . . taught me to write, think, build, rebuild" (101). In multiple essays, she quotes her friend, poet Alice Friman, who told her, "Poems . . . are ghosts in our bones" (101).

The repetition of Friman's words is not the only repetition in the collection. In "Driven," for example, McElmurray describes the cognitive dissonance of undergoing cancer treatment while unable to divorce or divest herself from her more mundane work responsibilities:

I am sick with cancer, tied down by morphine and arm tubes and a monitor that keeps time with my heart. I want to sleep, but words, ground to an irritating powder, drain from an IV into my blood. I think of my list of things to do back in my office, two hours south of the hospital. *Applications. Proposals. Thesis students. Defenses. Offenses. Submissions. Guidelines. CV's. Cover letters. Reference letters* (88).

This list – immediately familiar to anyone in academia – seems outrageously insignificant in contrast to McElmurray's cancer treatment. The passage appears in a slightly different form in "Elixir" later in the collection:

I'm tied down by morphine, arm tubes, and a monitor that keeps time with my

heart. I want to sleep, but I'm lost in worry instead. *Applications. Proposals. Thesis students. Defenses. Offenses. Submissions. Guidelines. CV's. Cover letters. Reference letters. Words, ground to an irritating powder, drain from an IV into my blood.* (104)

Encountering such nearly verbatim wording as these two examples can be distracting, though a generous reading might understand the repetition as underscoring the importance of these ideas: that McElmurray takes Friman literally at her word. While the tragic realities of life, such as the painful life interruptions of cancer treatment, cannot escape the mundanities of professional responsibilities, such as writing recommendation letters, McElmurray is also able to give voice to the ancestral ghosts that she feels in her bones by writing poetry. Or, taken together, these essays demonstrate that the life of a poet – giving voice to the ghosts in our bones – requires so much mundanity of scheduled thesis defenses and letter writing. In fact, the content of the writing life, which consists of so many explanatory and defensive elements, such as literal defenses and recommendation letters, goes a long way toward explaining the imposter syndrome McElmurray describes throughout the collection, of a first-generation college student pursuing graduate education in creative writing. The pursuit of the academic writing life requires tenacity and badassery, the source of which McElmurray traces poetically throughout this engaging collection. ■