

UNDER THE BLADE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY TURZILLO

By David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of *Bleeding Saffron*

Author Mary Turzillo has as many writing accomplishments hanging on her belt as she has fencing medals. Mary, an avid fencer, who regularly competes, has applied her razor skills to writing as much as fencing. In fact, in 2016, Mary was a member of the U.S women's foil team at the Veterans Fencing World Championships in Stralsund, Germany. Mary earned her Ph.D. in English from Case Western Reserve University and has written



a number of scholarly works including on Philip José Farmer, an early favorite of mine who ushered me into speculative literature. Mary was awarded the Nebula Award for Best Novelette in 2000 for her story *Mars is No Place for Children* and was a Nebula award finalist for best short story of 2007. Mary is a former professor at Kent State University and attended a number of workshops including the Clarion Workshop in 1985. Her volumes of poetry have been nominated for both the Elgin Award and the Bram Stoker Award. Mary won the Science Fiction Poetry Association's Elgin Award for best poetry book three times. In 2013, her collection *Lovers and Killers* (Dark Regions, 2012) and in 2015, her poetry book *Sweet Poison*, a collaboration with Marge Simon (Dark Renaissance Books, 2014) won the award and in 2018 for *Satan's Sweethearts* (Weasel Press 2017). Several

other collaborations with Marge Simon have garnered Elgin and Bram Stoker nominations.

Q: Looking back on some of your scholarly publications, you published several “Reader’s Guide” volumes under the pen name Mary T. Brizzi. Why did you use a pen name for those publications? Was there a bias against science fiction in some academic circles that made you think you shouldn’t use your own name? Or was there some other reason for it?

A: My son's last name was Brizzi, and my contract with Kent State was under that name. It's inconvenient for a kid to have a parent with a different last name, so I kept my ex's surname until my son reached an age where it didn't matter. Then I changed back to Turzillo, my family of origin name, and one I'm proud of (my sister, Jane Turzillo, is an award-winning historical crime writer). I will never change from my born name again.

Q: Have you ever taught writing or poetry in your teaching? If so, what lessons did you think most important to pass on to students about the craft of writing, especially budding poets?

A: I relished teaching creative writing courses and was one of the two faculty advisors to the creative writing club/workshop at Kent Trumbull. I've taught creative writing elsewhere, including a remote high school learning course for NASA. Not all of it was poetry; I also taught Continuing Education classes in short story writing.

I like kids (and adults) to experiment. I like them to recognize cliché, whether it's of word choice or event. Find something new. Challenge the reader.

My main premise as a teacher is that I want to encourage talent, not just judge results. I'm not going to name names, but I know writer/teachers whose main aim is getting their own name out there, puffing their own ego, and discouraging anybody who doesn't have truly superior talent (and maybe some that do). I prefer to encourage writers, especially timid ones. I never decide somebody is a total loss. The issue is always whether the student writer keeps experimenting and working and learning.

I also try to avoid judging students' work on political bias. At one time, I had to request that my freshman comp students (not creative writing, I admit) refrain from writing for or against abortion.

Q: Have any of your former students gone on to become published authors, including poets? Any you can share with us?

A: The late Rick Harvey only published one book of poetry, *Sword of the Samurai*, but one of his poems is engraved in stone in the Veteran's Memorial in downtown Warren. Jeannie Bryner, who was never actually my student, but a student friend at Kent Trumbull and a member of our Creative Writing Club, has published a number of books, both poetry and short fiction (*Tenderly Lift Me*, Kent State University Press, 2004). Nyla Bright took my continuing education class blossoms with stories in *Page & Spine*, *Escape Pod*, *Dreamforge*, and elsewhere. Her

husband, also a victim of my con-ed course, is not far behind her, although he hasn't broken into print just yet. One grad I'm so proud of is Dr. Deborah Workman. In addition to poetry and essays in print, plus a doctoral dissertation, her achievement I'm most impressed with is her narratives for Sanctuary for Senior Dogs. She regards these bedraggled, pitiful-looking old dogs and writes essays about them that make people want to hug and adopt them. It's a work of love and genius: she illuminates the beauty under the surface. That, to me, is a poetic gift.

There are others; I find their names unexpectedly in zines and on line.

Q: Of recent note are your collaborations with Marge Simon which almost always garner nominations for both the Bram Stoker Award for Achievement in Poetry and the Elgin Award. I had the privilege of assisting in the editing of Satan's Sweethearts (Weasel Press 2017) which was nominated for a Bram Stoker and was awarded the Elgin Award for that year. Several other collaborations with Marge have either been nominated or awarded. How did this partnership begin?

A: I admired Marge's work for decades, both her impressive literary accomplishments and her service to the field of small press writers and editors. When I met her, I was immediately charmed. I asked her to collaborate with me on a whimsical book about dragons. We decided we had a common ancestor, a great-great-great grandmother who happened to be a dragon. Ultimately, our combined strength ran more to serious work.

Her empathy for victims is seasoned by her wry sense of humor. It's a very unexpected combination.

Q. As a poet, collaborations always seem very difficult to me. For one you are attempting to merge your thoughts and writing style in a volume with someone who writes wonderful and powerful poetry. You and Marge have done this superbly. What insights can you I provide to your fellow poets on how to collaborate well with another poet? How do you meet expectations, your own and the other poets? How do you resolve differences (though for you, I suppose challenging the person to a duel by swords is always an option)?

A: Marge's tongue is sharp enough she needs no sword. No, I'm joking. Marge is patient even when I've written something egregiously bad. Although *Victims* [an upcoming collaboration] is a very serious collection, I feel our collaborations develop from a playful method. We throw things at each other in order to get a reaction, and our responses surprise even us. I think good poetry should have an element of the unexpected, and Marge never fails to amaze me. I try to throw that astonishment back at her, successfully or not.

Q: Do you prefer collaborations to creating a volume of your own poems, such as with *Lovers and Killers*?

A: Love both. But the thing about the collaborations is the challenge, which I think teaches me and raises me to new levels of creativity.

Q: Your husband Geoffrey A. Landis, is also an accomplished speculative poet (and fiction author) Have your ever collaborated with him on a poetry project?

A: We have a couple of collaborative poems. I've got them scored for open-mic readings.

Q: Is much of your poetry written as part of a book project or do you also write single poems as well?

A: I am, alas, one of those poets who writes when the mood hits, which is pretty often. Right now I have a novel in process, a novel being critiqued, and a novel under consideration. And I just finished a draft of a story about a time-traveling Sphynx (not the Egyptian kind--this is a hairless cat who doesn't realize he's a cat).

Q: How would you describe your creative process for your poetry? Do you try to write something every day or when the “muse” strikes you or some other practice you have found successful?

A: . For [the upcoming collaboration with Marge Simon] *Victims*, I read extensively about the cruelty and suffering of the world, historically and in the news. I write every day. I think there is some organ in my brain that languishes and makes me depressed and anxious when I don't write. Or perhaps it is a demon sitting on my shoulder. I have to satisfy its needs.

Q: I note that many of your works seem to involve murderers and killers of some sort. I know that your husband is also accomplished with the foil, so perhaps that allows him to sleep

more soundly at night given these themes. Do you have a fascination with this in your poetry? Do you have any other poetic tropes, themes or archetypes you like to draw on and if so why?

A: David, I belong to an extensive underground who are fascinated with murder stories, and especially stories of serial killers. It's a disease. The lure of the horrific. But yeah, that's something that impels me. As for the fencing, I use it to temper my anger issues, anger issues that involve the loss of my talented son Jack to suicide.

Q: What projects can we hope to see from you in the future?

A: Some novels: *A Mars Cat & his Boy*, *Callisto*, and *Isidis Rising*. The latter is quite dark, about a prison on Mars where illegal and dangerous research is done on the worst kind of offenders. But there's a love story, too. As to poetry? I will no doubt do more collections, as I collect same-themed works. And of course, I would LOVE to do another collaboration with Marge.

[NOTE: As mentioned above, Mary's next collaboration with Marge Simon will be *Victims*, which is still in the editing stage.]

[Please share 5-7 poems with us for the blog]

Lava
by Mary Turzillo

The lava glows,
burns the air.

Fire chases us down the mountain.
You, fitter than me, drag me by one arm.

You trip, are stunned.
I stumble back to you:
I pull, try to win you free. Please!
I cannot pull you to your feet.
The lava kisses your boot
Sluggish wave surging a hellish beach.

It has your feet.
It has your legs.
It has your hips.
It has you to the waist.
The lava devours your body as I yank and yank.
But you cannot run. You scream as lava grabs you,
a parched monster hungry for the juices of your flesh.
I am frantic, I pull and pull and
finally you come free.
But not all.

I have your head, your left arm, shoulder, right arm to the elbow,
your chest--
Your upper self comes free.
The lava has burned away your legs, your belly —
Lost to me. Eaten. Dead.

Your legs and all below your waist are Lava's meal.
But look: it cauterized your veins.
Your head and chest are here, with me.
My hysteria jets higher.

I see a hillock and drag you there.
Your heart still beats.
I wave.
The helicopter passes over, once, twice, three times.

[Originally published in HWA Poetry Showcase: Volume VI,
2019, ed. Stephanie M. Wytovich, 2017]

Afterwords
by
Mary A. Turzillo

Once you are good and dead, you will wander
into an enormous library,
take down a book,
and read read read of what was and is no longer.
You will choose another and read without flagging,
eyes flicking tireless over pages,
faster and with greater understanding
than ever you did in life.

You will read without stopping, never growing thirsty;
nor will you hunger or lust:
not for exquisite flesh
nor for the love of another
nor for the sweet empty darkness inside yourself.

Only for words will you lust,
reading without dreaming or drowsing,
in that library which goes on forever,
like stars beyond stars and infinite worlds.

Then suddenly you will see
how without warning
the library could burn,
or the doorkeeper could usher you out
because you had broken some rule,
or the books could without reprieve lose all their words,
pages pages pages, white like a too-bright cloud,
or the gray of a washed blackboard,
and you are afraid.

You stand stunned:
then
begin to write.

[Originally published in *Dreams & Nightmares*, September
2012]

FAQ

by

Mary A. Turzillo

Is death contagious?

*Death is transmitted by a spirochete endemic to fresh peaches,
phytoplankton, and dreams of empty houses.*

Does death wear a disguise?

Death has a splendid set of polished pewter teeth, worn only at the decease of royal infants.

Is it true that a new dessert incorporates sugar, creme fraiche, and crystallized death? What is the calorie count per hundred grams?

You would find that fatiguing.

Is it polite to hum along if the bereaved bursts into flames? Should one intervene before the etheric stage?

Yes, and never.

I have seen skeins of gray linen draped on bare trees. Are these sacs of freshly laid death eggs?

One should not offend the modesty of mothers.

Might one dance with death at an afternoon tea and still call oneself holy?

If decorously clad.

What is death's favorite beverage? Should bottles of absinthe be concealed when death visits?

Absinthe is entirely correct, garnished with fresh thujone.

Can death estivate in the shells of the fighting conch?

In temperate zones.

Does death preen before mirrors staged in infinite regression?

Wouldn't you?

If death is seen walking on an interstate carrying a leaking gas can, should one offer assistance?

How could you resist?

Is it true that if you draw four deuces in a row, or if you fail to promote an eligible pawn, death will slash your hamstrings?

This is a superstition promoted by Borges cultists and the Penitentes.

Does death experience orgasm?

Only if you like.

Am I going to die?

No.

Is anybody I know going to die?

Only persons you know very remotely. Your touch confers immunity.

Does the thicket conceal death better at dawn or dusk?

Both.

Does death have a favorite number?

Yes.

Does death have a home town? A native language? A weakness for leibfraumilch?

Yes.

Will I know to close my eyes?

Yes. Yes.

Yes

[Originally published in *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, Jan. 2005]

Care and Feeding

by

Mary A. Turzillo

"They may sulk," it said, " when first let out of the cage.
But if you throw the ball directly at their faces,
they'll catch it, never fear. And let them get a little hungry.
Then they'll go for the sugar lump on the string.
That's right; drag it across the floor, just a little too fast.
See? He's interested now. And let him have the sugar
after a while. The young ones are the most fun.
They like to run free; the cage constricts them.
Exercise them daily.

"Don't let them interact too much with each other.
Make them depend on you for companionship and fun.
Keep them healthy. Sugar is okay for a treat,
but give them mostly primate chow.

It has all the nutrients they need,
though some of them go on hunger strikes
out of sheer obstinance. Then you might have to offer
maybe a piece of fruit or possibly a dead animal.
But don't spoil them.

"They do make pitiful noises, possibly mating calls.
I tried to teach one to talk awhile ago.
It had trouble with real speech sounds, but it was cute.
If you find that sort of thing cute. One of them hung itself
awhile ago.
Bored, I think. That's their great weakness, boredom.

"So we need to catch more, or breed them
or maybe offer a more stimulating environment.
I'd suggest chasing them across the plain
throwing rocks at them,
or maybe using them for laser target practice.
They always come back, with their wonderful sense of direction.

"Because after all, where would they go?
Their little blue planet is far away, and before we arrived,
they really never ventured beyond their moon."

[Originally published in Asimov's June 2012]

the snow
a candle flame
my son

[Originally published in Best of Ohio Poetry Day, First Place,
Haiku for Betty, 2012]

The Thing that Ate You
by
Mary Turzillo

After you died
the thing that ate you
clawed its way into my mouth
I tried to scream it out
but it made me a garter snake
and went only one way
down the hatch
I tried to close my throat
but it smothered my screams
kindly *now now*
and rested a minute at my clavicle
then down into my lungs
and I can scream
as loud as the furies
and it feeds on the scream
delicious oh thank you
dining on my endothelium at twilight
resting a dull hour, then
clawing inside my breast in darkness
eating
growing and no doubt
breeding

[Originally published in *Poetry Showcase Volume IV*, ed. David E. Cowen, 2017]

BIO:

Mary A. Turzillo has published stories and poetry in *Weird Tales*, *Star*Line*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Goblin Fruit*, the HWA showcase, and other venues and has been translated into French, Mandarin, Italian, Czech, German, and Russian. She won a Nebula award ("Mars Is to Place for Children," *SF Age*, 1999) and two Elgin awards (*Lovers & Killers*), *Dark Regions*, 2012, and *Sweet Poison*, with Marge Simon, *Dark Renaissance*, 2014). Mary has been a British SF Association, Pushcart, Stoker, Dwarf Stars, and Rhysling finalist. Her recent books are *Mars Girls* (Apex, 2017) and *Bonsai Babies* (Omnium Gatherum, 2016). Her current project: *Isidis Rising*, a darkish novel of Mars colonization. She fenced foil for the US at Veteran World Championships in Stralsund, Germany, 2016. She lives in Ohio, with scientist-poet-fencer Geoffrey Landis.