

## **INTERVIEW WITH KAREN CHASE**

### **Why did you write *Land of Stone*?**

When I was working at the hospital, I knew it was privileged work. It was extraordinary to get to know the patients in the context of poetry. The only goal was to write poems. It was something relatively simple, considering what these people were up against. I kept detailed notes of all the meetings I had with them. The work was golden and it was thrilling to be able to revisit the notes, relive the story, and tell how Ben became part of the talking world again.

### **As a poet, was it difficult to write a book of prose?**

Yes. As a poet, in my heart, I believed that the poems Ben and I wrote told the whole story, that there was no need for anything else. But I realized that I had to add something more. In early drafts of the book, I concentrated heavily on the poems, completely leaving out the story of what happened between us. Eventually, I was moved to write the larger story, relying less on the poems, yet still giving them their due.

However, the experience of writing prose sentences was thrilling. I found that having written poems for so long was excellent training when it came to fashioning sentences. Rhythm, sound, disjuncture – many of the things I take into account when working on poems – were crucial in prose writing. Now I find that going back to poems is affected by the prose writing. It's a wonderful process at this point, each form ricocheting off the other.

### **What was the hardest part of the book to write?**

I found that including aspects of my own life in the book was very difficult. I resisted writing about my mother's death, my girlhood polio, and maybe most of all, what I felt about Ben and what I thought he might have felt about me. I believed that the book did not need me in it. In fact, after a number of drafts, I realized (and it was pointed out to me) that I was leaving out important elements of the story. The story was more important than my own wishes. So I threw privacy out the window.

So much of the book focuses on silence and the lack of words. What about silence in your own life?

I like it. I don't like to talk a lot (although I can really get going sometimes). I am sure this tendency drew me to Ben right when I met him.

I think I have always been drawn to poetry – reading it and writing it – because of a deep frustration with words. Language always seemed paltry when it came to expressing myself. Poetry has given me a chance to break the boundaries of normal communication to get my inside worldview outside.

Because poetry gives me a kind of solace in my life, it came naturally to share this with patients who had trouble with words, those thorny things.

### **Did you consider studying psychology?**

No. I treasured my job at the hospital, in part because I was an outsider, something I always prefer to be, for some reason. Being an outsider with a fresh point of view was valued in the setting of the psychiatric hospital.

My husband is a psychologist, as is my sister and many of my friends are workers in the field, one way or another. But I can't imagine a life doing anything other than writing.

### **Did you consider your work with Ben therapy?**

It certainly wasn't therapy in the conventional sense.

I just came inside after shoveling a lot of snow off my deck. Shoveling made me feel great! Is this therapy? Or, I love to cook. It calms me down, it gives me a chance to make things and make things up. All that makes me feel good. It helps me. Is that therapy?

For centuries people have made paintings, written novels, composed music, etcetera and these activities have helped people in a deeper way than shoveling snow or cooking. Was writing poems therapy for Ben? It was an activity he wanted to do. It interested him. It stimulated him. I think it made him think.

The intensity of our work and our relationship shared some elements with psychotherapy. Poems acted as a mask for Ben to begin to tell his story, which, I think, helped him gain a degree of insight. And I believe that the relationship that he and I had while writing together was an important part of his beginning to speak again, but much of this is mysterious.

You had polio as a girl. Did that affect your work with Ben?

During most of the time I was working with Ben, it didn't cross my mind. But later on, I thought about it and now believe that my polio did have an effect. I talk about this in the book. The first day I saw Ben standing in the hallway of the ward, he looked frozen. He looked like a statue. I was intrigued and drawn to this.

I was paralyzed after I had polio for a while. I'm fine now, as you can see, but it was traumatic. I couldn't move. Ben appeared so rigid - now I am talking about his mental state - and I think that I felt a particular kind of compassion for him, based on these parallel, but very different, experiences.

### **What drew you to do this work in the first place?**

I came to the work because of a hard time in my life. I had recently gotten divorced. I had two young sons and had to make money. I was desperate to keep writing, however. So I dreamed up the idea to write poems with psychiatric patients and wrote a grant proposal. No one thought it would ever come to pass. Luckily and happily, a few generous souls at a few foundations were intrigued with the ideas and funded the work. That's how it got started.

### **What happened to Ben?**

I called him about a year after he left the hospital and he was working in the garment district in New York City pushing dollies around. This was very good to hear. Then I called him a couple of years later and told him that I thought that I might write a book about the work we did together and he seemed glad. Then when I tried to reach him a couple of years ago, when I was working on the book, his phone had been disconnected. I made some attempts to find him with no luck. Nothing would make me happier than to know that *Land of Stone* found its way into his hands.