



JAIMEE WRISTON COLBERT, *WILD THINGS, Stories*

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Your new linked story collection *Wild Things* vividly explores all kinds of loss. Set in twenty-first century, rural America, there are various thematic threads: drug addiction, job loss, the economic free-fall of the middle and working classes, environmental damage, and the accelerating extinction rate of species from our world. The stories take place in (or are linked to) Upstate New York, in a dying, post-manufacturing town on the Susquehanna River, where nature, both benign and devastating, becomes an emotional refuge for your characters. The abduction of a young girl that happens early into the story cycle is at the heart of the overarching “plot,” providing unifying moments in a community of otherwise disparate lives: lonely, yet not without grit, humor and moments of grace.

Q. What was the seed of inspiration for writing this story collection of “rural noir”?

A. It started with personal loss, then radiated out, as things often do when you’re an over-thinker, to the greater political and environmental losses around us. A decade or so ago, I unexpectedly lost several family members within a few years, and then someone else I cared for deeply. I was pretty devastated, and for awhile did the grown-up version of crawling in bed and sucking my thumb: binge watching *Mad Men*, eating packages of ginger cookies and drinking too much wine. During the days when I didn’t teach, and particularly in the summer, I started wandering the fields and forests where I live, seeking refuge, as I’ve always done, alone in nature. I love animals and feel most comfortable around them. I’ve lived in cities and have had some memorable urban adventures, but I’ve always been drawn to a more rural lifestyle. Maybe it’s my agrarian Scottish roots from the Isle of Skye, but trees speak more profoundly to me than bars—though I enjoyed my share of those in my earlier life, both as consumer, and as a cocktail waitress and bartender! *Wild Things* began in that post 9/11 decade where everything felt (and still feels!) like it was falling apart: wars, terrorism, the unconscionable disparity between the rich and the poor (and of course rural America has a large share

of these poor, particularly post-manufacturing areas that have lost so many jobs), drug addiction and the scourge of crystal meth in rural areas, climate destruction, the absolutely terrifying rate of species extinction in our world. So all of this seeded my stories, plus one more obsession: I became consumed with the story of the abduction of Jaycee Dugard by a man who held her for 18 years; she was found in 2009. I kept thinking about it from both sides: what it would be like being held captive by a stranger, and who was this man to erase a young girl’s life like that? When I become obsessed I write, but I didn’t want to use Jaycee’s story—that’s hers, and she is a most courageous young woman to have endured it and come out the other side. I was interested in developing a less-evil, more naive character as my abductor, someone who believed he was doing it for the girl’s good, to keep her safe from a dangerous world. I’ve always loved working with characters who do bad in the name of a rather twisted perception of good. This conceit became the glue I sought to form the stories into more of a novelistic arc, with the ‘what will happen to this girl’ as the thing that drives the through-line.

Q. When did you know you wanted to become a writer? Who was the first person to encourage you?

A. When I was five years old I had a bad case of chicken pox, followed by measles so debilitating I had to sit in a darkened bedroom because of the light irritation to my eyes, missing almost all of kindergarten. My dad would come home from work with the various *Wizard of Oz* books and read them to me. By the time I was well, we’d read almost all of them and I was in love with “story.” I read all the time once I learned how, but it didn’t occur to me I could write what I was reading. As a teenager



Author Jaimee Wriston Colbert

Photo Credit: Marisa Wriston

I wanted to be any “other” kind of artist—a painter first, but I couldn’t draw. Then a musician—I got as far as being able to play “Scarborough Fair” on the guitar, and “House of the Rising Sun” on my ukulele. I was being encouraged though, by several of my high school English teachers, to write—they saw the potential well before I did. Finally in college I began taking creative writing workshops and figured out that I loved it.

Q. Flannery O’Connor also wrote what is now called “rural noir.” Is she one of the authors who inspired you to write? Who are some of the authors you most admire?

A. She was indeed! I read her stories and *Wise Blood* in college, along with Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward Angel*, and James Agee’s *A Death in the Family*, and that’s what did it. I wanted to be a writer. I love O’Connor’s characters, her incomparable prose, her wit and her fierceness. And I love those Southern gothic settings. Wolfe is a poet on the page and a character-master, and that novel by Agee had about as much heart as I’d ever encountered in a book. I wanted to be all those things as a writer.

Q. Nature always plays a significant role in your writing – not only in your story collections, but also in your novel, *Shark Girls*. What would you say is responsible for your strong sense of place? When you’re creating characters, do you always envision them in their natural surroundings?

A. To me place IS character. It informs character behavior, who they are in the story or novel, in much the same way we are formed by where we grew up, and how where we live now influences the lives we lead today. One of my “hot buttons” as a fiction writing professor is when students don’t place their stories, telling me they want “everyone to relate to it.” The sure ticket to an anemic story that no one will care about. As a writer I can’t even separate the two. In *Wild Things* most of the stories take place in an unnamed town on the Susquehanna River, one that comes alive in the book as a definite place (with obvious allusions to where I live now, in the Southern Tier of upstate New York). It’s an area that like much of post-manufacturing, rural America, has seen better times. Job loss and the ensuing bleeding of wealth impact my characters’ lives, along with the beauty and

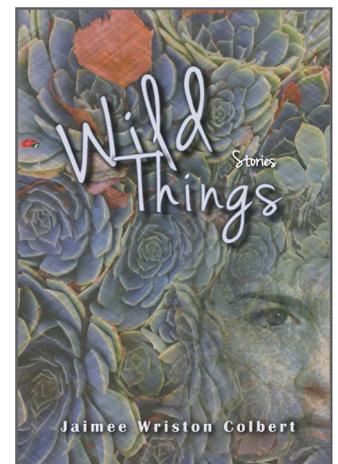
isolation of the landscape, and a natural world that can turn on you, such as the devastating flooding of the Susquehanna River.

Q. Butterflies always seem to find their way into your books. How would you explain your fascination with butterflies?

A. Ah butterflies... and it’s not even always deliberate, but they do indeed inhabit my fictional worlds. Picture an often lonely, scrawny, awkward, giant of a child who lived among the caterpillars and Monarch butterflies as her friends. I suppose it was their ability to transform, metamorphosis, and the many happy days of charting their progress, putting the large caterpillars in jars, watching them shed their skins and reveal a chrysalis, from which they would emerge as the beautiful Monarch butterfly. These I immediately set free. When I eventually shed my own skin, so to speak, and grew into my post-puberty self, both physically and emotionally, as a more confident (and very rebellious) teenager, those early experiences, as profound childhood experiences do, stayed with me. In *Wild Things* butterflies are absolutely a symbol of hope, transformation, freedom, even while Jones points out to Loulie how the Monarchs, the honeybees, and so many beautiful, essential creatures in our world are critically endangered.

Q. You grew up in Hawai’i and have lived in Maine, the Midwest, and Upstate New York. How would you say these sharply contrasting environments have affected your writing?

A. Well, we need to add Seattle, San Francisco, Providence, Houston, Washington D.C. suburbs, and Boston’s south shore to that list, as well. (And the Midwest encompassed Columbus, Ohio, St. Louis and Chicago.) For a Hawai’i kid who figured she’d never leave home, marry a gorgeous Hawaiian



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man and have beautiful part Hawaiian (*hapa-haole*) children, all of us living on Sunset beach, it is indeed quite the U-Haul record. I can't say I loved all those places equally, or that it was necessarily fun to move around like that. But, it was an adventure, and a way as a writer to open oneself to different places and people, which always helps. But for me, the biggest impact on my writing is seeing myself essentially as an outsider everywhere I live. Hawai'i will always be home in my heart, and sometimes I miss it so much it brings me to tears. I think it's this sort of longing and sense of displacement that carries over into my characters lives, as they are themselves almost always outsiders in some way, at odds with their environment, not always comfortable in their own skin!

Q. What kind of a reader were you as a child? Were you drawn to any particular books?

A. I read pretty much everything, from the classics, to Nancy Drew. I loved books! Probably in the same way I loved butterflies, for their transformational abilities. I wasn't always such a happy kid and they transported me away into other lives.

Q. Tell us about your writing day. Do you have any rituals or routines?

A. I'm just so grateful now to HAVE a writing day, as it's summer, and I am free to do that. During the school year it's more challenging, as I need to put my faculty responsibilities first. So no rituals, other than to make sure I'm well-caffeinated. My office window looks out over a wild yard, kept that way through a workable combination of laziness, and the love of wildlife over a chemicalized lawn. So often I will watch all manner of birds, foxes, coyotes, groundhogs, etc., their varying behaviors and instincts for survival, and I find these things inspiring.

Q. How do you determine that what you're writing will be a short story or a novel? Do you prefer one form over the other?

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A. I love both forms and have written both, but the funny thing is when I'm writing one, I can't imagine doing the other. How can I write a short story, asks the novelist? Interestingly my short story collections, in all but one, became linked stories, novels-in-stories, etc. I think what interests me in a writing project is the community my characters inhabit, and community often means various characters' voices, their individual stories, so thus a linked collection. *Wild Things* is very much about the community, disparate characters who are variously affected by community events, such as IBM closing and the loss of jobs, the Susquehanna flood, and the abduction of a young girl, all impacting their lives in some way.

Q. You've taught at numerous universities, writers conferences, and in prisons. How have these experiences informed your writing?

A. Teaching fiction writing keeps me fresh as a writer. A 'talk the talk' sort of thing, where you feel a part of the greater community of writers and readers, and can also give back in some way to newer writers trying to find their voices, help them to get a foothold. Plus I can get them reading! The number one requirement for being a writer—be a reader first.

Q. If you don't mind sharing, what are you working on now?

A. Two novels. I'm yet again revising a novel I've worked on for ages, about four generations of dysfunction in a Hawaiian family, affected by the Vietnam War, and a dad who believes he can surf himself into invisibility! And a newer project, a different sort of book for me as there is quite a large historical element—half of it takes place in 1800s Isle of Skye during the Clearances. Both novels have elements of magical realism, by the way, which I won't divulge quite yet!