



# THE WRITING LIFE

## Where I am From and Literary Thievery

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By Julie Strand

*“For thousands of years...poets have talked to each other, by reading [and responding to] the work.” --Alice Notley*

Today, I am three quarters of the way through the book *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. I had never heard of this book until a month ago, nor had I heard of the author. All of the lit lovers around me were appalled. How could I not have heard of Willa Cather? Well, Willa Cather wasn't on the reading lists in the schools in Massachusetts where I grew up. This led me to wonder, do the places we grow up dictate the books we read in school, and therefore shape the type of readers we are?

People are often so identified by place, the place where they were children, the place where they became an adult and discovered who they “are.” Since I have only lived in Boise for six months, I'm asked, “Where are you from?” at least once a week. For me, that is a hard question to answer. Having lived in several places, I don't feel like I am from a piece of land. Does land have to define me? Why can't it be books? Why can't it be the books in which I was a child, in which I became an adult, in which I found myself? If I can be from books, I am from *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein, *The Wizard of Oz* Series by Frank L. Baum, *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, *Anthem* by Ayn Rand, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Gurllesque Anthology*, and the poems of Christine Hume, Bhanu Kapil, Elizabeth Bishop, Helen Adam, Novica Tadich, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

I felt compelled to read Cather's work, and maybe become “from” her writing as well. However, as I made this decision I worried, would I like it? Since I had grown up in such different literature I wondered, would I somehow be ill-equipped?

With these worries in mind, I went to the Library (!) and picked up a copy of *My Antonia*. About ten pages into the novel, I was still skeptical, doubting if I was the right reader or if I could be at home in the writing, but then something happened. It is what always happens when I enjoy a book. I began to write down phrases in my notebook, phrases I liked from the novel.

It is a strange thing in the writing world, thieving lines, being influenced. A year ago, I was giving a reading and I said, “This poem really came from Marie,” (a lovely friend and poet). “Yes, I wrote it, but I think I stole so much of it from listening to her.” The room went awkward. Like I was a bad person and they were all waiting for Marie to start howling in outrage. She didn't. Some people may find this action questionable. However, while I understand these feelings, I am not convinced the act is wrong.

For the past few years the work of others has not only inspired my writing, it has been the bones of it. My process has been to scan the poems in the literary journal 6X6 and catalogue all of the

concrete nouns. From there, I wrote small narrative poems that created glimpses into the lives of “unmanageable” females. These glimpses were made out of “thieved” words, and on occasion I have been able to meet the authors I stole from. Usually, the author reacted blankly about my use of his or her words. Only once did an author seem bothered.

As a writer, specifically a poet, I get many of my ideas from other people’s words both oral and written. It is just too hard to ignore! When you come in contact with a fantastic phrase, words placed together in such a way that the sound becomes just as important and influential as the definitions of the words, you can’t just let it fall away from you into the ether. You need to have it, keep it, and not forget it. After all, when that happens, when you connect deeply with a piece of writing, you are within the literature. You are from it.

Today, as I write down Willa Cather’s lines in my notebook, I am moving away from the project which gets its bones from others. However, it is clear that I will never totally move away from thieving lines. The inspiration they provide is a definite part of my writing process and is a mark of finding my home within a piece of literature.

Julie Strand is in the MFA in Creative Writing program at Boise State University and works at The Cabin. She is the former Education Coordinator at Woodland Pattern Book Center, a literary center in Milwaukee, WI. Julie is the author of the chapbook *The Mae West Defense*, (Dancing Girl Press, 2009). Her poetry has appeared in *Caffeine Destiny*, *FOURSQUARE*, *Wicked Alice*, *Arsenic Lobster*, *WOMB Poetry*, *Boo: A Journal of Terrific Things*, *Weave Magazine*, *Cant Journal*, *Delirious Hem's 2010 Advent Calendar*, *O Sweet Flowery Roses*, and others.

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