

INTERVIEW: TARA L. MASIH

BY SAMIR RAWAS SARAYJI

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Interviewee: Tara L. Masih

Tara L. Masih has won multiple book awards as editor of *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction* and *The Chalk Circle: Intercultural Prizewinning Essays*. Author of *Where the Dog Star Never Glows: Stories* (a National Best Books Award finalist), she has published fiction, poetry, and essays in numerous anthologies and literary magazines (including *Confrontation*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Night Train*, and *The Caribbean Writer*). She is series editor of the annual *Best Small Fictions* anthology, published by Queen's Ferry Press.

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CWM: Tell us a little bit about yourself and your interests in interculturalism?

Masih: I have a bicultural background. My father is from India. He met and married my mother in the United States. She is of European descent. I grew up on Long Island, part of New York State, a great place for someone of my background during a time when there were few mixed children. Going to school with children of immigrants from all over the world made it easy for me to blend in. And exposed me to many different cultures—Italian, Greek, Jewish, to name a few. For the most part we were allowed to be different and hold on to our foreign traditions, while adopting those of Americans. There were clashes, but mainly between children and their parents. So I grew up with many cultures and many viewpoints and was taught by my

family to respect them all, being told that each culture has something to offer. I think we've lost sight of that and I hope in some small measure to bring that back by starting respectful discussions of our differences and similarities and what we can learn from each other. I'm appalled at the direction that discussions are going on the Internet. We are losing the ability to discuss tough topics respectfully, and it's hurting intercultural relations.

CWM: The new book *The Best Small Fictions 2015* just came out, in which you were series editor. Tell us a little bit about this anthology and how it came about?

Masih: I was preparing an introduction for *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction* and discovered that Robert Oberfirst had published an annual series titled *Anthology of Best Short-Short Stories* that ran from 1952-60. I wanted to bring that series back. However, our series is more inclusive of prose forms, as the short short has become experimental and hybridized in the literary community. And we are making a bigger effort to make the series international. My interculturalism peeking through again.

CWM: This is the second anthology you have worked on, after the successful collection of prize-winning essays *The Chalk Circle*; what draws you to work on anthologies of this nature?

Masih: Actually, in some regards, it's the third. The *Flash Field Guide* is technically an anthology as well. I love reading, writing, and editing. Compiling an

anthology uses all those skills and I get to work with the best writers out there and contribute something to the reading and teaching community. Who would not want that job?

CWM: You are, of course, a writer as well; your collection *Where the Dog Star Never Glows* received much praise back in 2010, when it was published. How does your knowledge of being a successful short story writer influence your work as an editor?

Masih: I think being an author myself helps me be a better editor. I know what it's like to get edited well and poorly. I've learned over the years to respect the author's voice and intentions and try to the best of my ability to edit in her or his own style and to approach as gently as possible. All artists are hypersensitive. It's what makes them creative.

CWM: It does seem timely to release an anthology on "small fictions", as people seem to want to read less verbose prose and more short, concise narrative, in these fast-paced times. What are your thoughts on the changing trends in reading habits?

Masih: Well, actually, that trend and change in reading habits has been going on since the Industrial Revolution. I discuss it in my introduction to *The Flash Field Guide*. Stories were getting shorter and editors and publishers were discussing the shortening attention span as far back as the end of the 1800s. What has changed is the proliferation of online journals and magazines that disseminates small fictions

worldwide. If *Best Small Fictions* is timely it's because it's capturing the burgeoning wave at a time when academia is starting to accept it. And because of this acceptance, and the added venues, more writers are experimenting and producing very creative prose.

CWM: If there's anything I learned in reading *The Chalk Circle*, it is that you compile a beautiful anthology as an editor, from the quality of the essays selected to the layout and style adopted; not to mention the underlying educational aspect of the content. What can readers expect from *The Best Small Fictions 2015*?

Masih: Well, thank you so much for noticing! Having been a production editor really helps me work with designers to achieve the right look, and having taught and having worked on textbooks allows me to anticipate the needs of instructors visually and content wise. In addition to interviews with a top journal editor and acclaimed author, readers can expect from *BSF* some of the finest small fictions that appeared in 2014 literary journals and collections worldwide. These are not always safe stories. They push boundaries in both style and subject matter. We hope readers will be illuminated and inspired.

CWM: Thank you.