

JESPER BLÅDER

Now and Forever, 2018
Oil on panel, 48½ x 28¼ in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

ELIZABETH MCKENZIE

An Interview with *Topics of Conversation* Author Miranda Popkey

Miranda Popkey's novel *Topics of Conversation* was published by Knopf in January, 2020. She has written for, among other outlets, the *New Republic*, *The New Yorker's* Page-Turner blog, the *Paris Review's* *The Daily*, GQ.com, and *New York* magazine's *The Cut*. She grew up in Santa Cruz, California, and lives outside of Boston, Massachusetts.

Elizabeth McKenzie's novel *The Portable Veblen* (Penguin Books, 2016) was longlisted for the National Book Award for Fiction and received the California Book Award for fiction. Her work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and others. McKenzie is the managing editor of *Catamaran Literary Reader*.

Topics of Conversation has been a topic of conversation all over, hailed for its audacity and brilliance. This is an unusually strong rollout for a first novel. Rather than a novel in stories, it's essentially a novel in conversations. The narrator moves through seventeen years with people either central or peripheral to her life—sometimes strangers, sometimes characters on a screen—devouring their narratives, often merging with them in the text. Our narrator is rapacious and passive all at once, hyperaware of the boundaries between herself and others, but also willing to let those boundaries dissolve, and these conflicting impulses vibrate through these pages. Oftentimes as she merges with her object, we feel a strong sense of solidarity, as if she's eager to try on the identity of others. Yet she often watches others reveal themselves in something like a psychological striptease. *Topics of Conversation* is restless and erotic and somehow irreducible, evading classification's grasp.

—Elizabeth McKenzie

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ELIZABETH MCKENZIE: *Topics of Conversation* is a novel you can analyze and think about a lot. I'd love to know how you came to write it in this form.

MIRANDA POPKEY: So, I think a good place to start is Rachel Cusk's Outline Trilogy. If you're not familiar with the Outline Trilogy, I highly, highly recommended it. Three books, *Outline*, *Transit*, and *Kudos*, and they are all written in conversations. And when I read that in the fall of 2014, I think it was the first one, *Outline*, it opened up this real space of possibility. And then it turned out I in fact really did need that space because as I discovered in the first year of my MFA program, I'm not very good at plotting.

I have a really hard time following that traditional three-act structure that I, in my second year, taught to my students here. You know, your setup and your rising action and your climax and your calling action and resolution. I just—for some reason it was really for me to tell a story by setting events up in that particular way. But what I knew I could do was tell a story, and what is the scenario in which you're telling a story? To a friend, or you're telling a story to maybe a stranger at a bar, for example. So, having the conversations as the place where these stories could be

exchanged, that made it possible for me to talk about the things I was interested in talking about without having to figure out like, okay, let's set this character interaction up so that we have some resonances later. So, yeah, I've been describing it as sort of a cheat, but one that interested me.

EM: You say you don't feel that you're good at plot, but the book has the kind of plot that I really love, which is that all the energy and contradictions in the narrator create the momentum. There are a lot of great contradictions in this character—she obfuscates about things like wanting to lose control, she's uncomfortable with intimacy but finds it erotic, and her frequent insistence that she's very practical, yet a lot of her choices don't seem practical at all.

I want to refer to a part that illustrates this, her having it both ways and struggling with herself in the same paragraph. It's in the chapter "San Francisco 2010" and she's gone to an art exhibition, the theme of which is female pain.

"Did I, do I, admire the artist for claiming her pain is worthy of art, or did I, do I, find the act of aestheticizing also trivializing, or in fact is that feeling, that impulse to call the art *trivializing*, a way to conceal the true feeling, guiltier, that her art is *vulgar*, that it is *indulgent*, because she is her own subject? Because she elevates herself *as* subject? The woman as object is less vulgar than the woman as subject. The woman as object is art and the man who objectifies her an artist. The woman as subject, well. Just a narcissistic bitch, isn't she? Not that I believe this. Not that I do not believe this."

Did you set out to emphasize that aspect of her personality?

MP: Yeah, absolutely. I think she is . . . I was a person who was socialized as a woman and soaked in the sort of soup of popular culture, which presents a lot of these contradictory notions and presents a lot of these archetypes that as you then grow up you want to push back against, but you find they're sort of embedded really deeply inside. And that was a question I was trying to resolve for myself as well. A movie I really loved and still love and that I watched a ton as a younger woman is *Moonstruck*, and that's just, it's an exceptional movie. I will not say a word against *Moonstruck*, but it also is a film in which the

Nicholas Cage character is insistent that he is meant to be with the Cher character even though the Cher character is engaged to his brother.

So, he turns out to be right. But I think that that sends a message, and it's not the only film or book that I've read or watched that sends this message, which is that if you're a woman, it's quite possible that a man will know you or does know you better than you know yourself. And I think that that's another aspect of what she's talking about in that section that you read. That a woman seen through the eyes of a man is an artistic object. But as soon as a woman turns the lens back on herself, that's, what? That's narcissism. That's sort of egotistical self-involvement, and I think that you can be a very smart woman who has read a lot of feminist essays and has thought a lot about this and still find in yourself this sort of gut-level reaction of, "Oh, isn't this man supposed to know what I want?" Or, "Oh, isn't this woman who is making art out of her own pain, for example, shouldn't I be critical of that?"

EM: I did think about *Outline* when I read your novel. Cusk has been said to have chosen to submit her character to a "radical experiment in passivity." So, I guess that's kind of what you've been talking about. She also said in an interview she started the book with cruelty and I recognize that theme in your novel as well.

MP: Well, I did start writing the book in the fall of 2017, and this was right around the time that the first wave of allegations against Harvey Weinstein came out. So, I was thinking a lot about the various ways in which women are subjected to male cruelty and also the ways in which those men, I mean Harvey Weinstein in particular, but he's not the only really powerful man about whom very serious allegations were made, are the men who are shaping the cultural products that we're then consuming and that was really interesting to me.

If you have a man who's interested in being cruel, and then you have him be in charge of a movie studio and you have him picking the projects that are going to move forward and you have him maybe getting notes on those projects, how are those films then reshaped by his desires?

EM: There are two things here that this is making me

think of. There's a very terrifying scene in the middle of this book with a cruel man, and there's also the chapter where she's in dialogue with the outtakes from a Mailer documentary about the night Mailer stabbed his wife. It's just incredible. Where did that come from?

MP: So, I was in a class in my MFA program called Unoriginal Genius. And the idea was to take existing texts and figure out how to make your own work out of them. And it was sort of the anti-anxiety-of-influence class, the exhilaration of influence. I don't know exactly how I decided to focus on Norman Mailer. I think a couple of things were happening. One is that by that point, the sort of allegations of sexual misconduct had reached the New York literary world and that's where I worked for many years. So, I was thinking about bad things that men did to women in New York literary society, just sort of generally. And also there was this interview I remember that Norman Mailer's official biographer gave, I believe, to a woman who wrote for the *Village Voice*.

And in the course of this interview, he seems to forget that Norman Mailer stabbed his second wife and in fact nearly killed her. And then the female interviewer has to sort of break in and remind him that the violence that Mailer wrote about was not merely on the page, and his hatred of women had this at least one really appalling physical manifestation. It made me think about the fact that I haven't read a ton of Norman Mailer, but I read *Advertisements for Myself*, which is one of his sort of big essay collections. And I don't think I read that with the knowledge that he had nearly murdered his second wife. And I really do think that should be maybe the first thing you know about Norman Mailer, that he is a failed murderer.

And then I was thinking, so how far have we moved? How much have we progressed since that moment? Could a famous novelist right now walk into a party in New York and stab his wife and then after he is sentenced to, I don't know, three hundred hours of community service, go back to that community and be welcomed back as Norman Mailer was? And I think the answer probably is no, but I'm not totally sure how far we are from that.

EM: That chapter is a tour de force. I also appreciated the list of "Works (Not) Cited" at the end, three pages

of things that you were reading and watching as you were writing this, and I just wondered if you could talk about that.

MP: It does come from a really specific place, which is I read a novel called *Fra Keeler* by Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi and she does have in the back of her novel a similar list of writers and thinkers and artists that she was consuming and thinking about when she was writing. And I was so excited by that list that I think even reading that I decided, you know, if I ever actually figured out how to finish this book and get it published, that is going in the back.

The other thing is that I really did want to acknowledge the various places that I was drawing from. I think, especially with a debut novel, it can sometimes be, there's the suggestion that this has sort of sprung fully formed from the author's head, like Athena being birthed from Zeus, and I'm not a very creative person. I don't think of myself as a very imaginative person, but I think of myself as someone who consumes a lot of culture and then sort of digests it, spends a lot of time thinking about and chewing over and sort of metabolizing it. And it felt important to me to acknowledge that.

And I also wanted to be honest with the reader about the kinds of garbage that I was consuming while I was writing this book. I did watch eleven seasons of *Frasier* while I was writing this novel.

EM: Were there any conversations that didn't end up in the book?

MP: Yes. There were two that my editor very smartly cut that were just not as good as the others. And that's a really great example of why it's important to have an editor, because I do not have a great perspective on my own writing. There are times when I think that everything I've ever written is amazing, but more often I think that everything I've ever written is pure trash. And so, I need someone to point out, "Well, actually this part's the real trash, and the other part we can keep." Yeah.

— excerpts from an interview at Bookshop Santa Cruz,
January 16, 2020