

PHYLLIS HERFIELD

Saint with Book, 2004
Oil on wood panel, 10 x 8 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

Writing the Ordinary As Strange

A conversation with
Karen Joy Fowler

Karen Joy Fowler lives in Santa Cruz, California, and was an early friend of Catamaran. In the spring of 2013, we published “Primate Study,” an excerpt from her soon-to-be-released novel We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves, which was eventually short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Fowler’s work has received much acclaim over the years. Her debut novel, Sarah Canary, was a New York Times Notable Book and won the Commonwealth Medal for the best first novel by a Californian. Her second novel, The Sweetheart Season, was a New York Times Notable Book. Fowler’s third novel, Sister Noon, was a finalist for the 2001 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. The Jane Austen Book Club was a New York Times best-seller and Notable Book. Fowler’s short story collection Black Glass won the World Fantasy Award in 1999, and her collection What I Didn’t See won the World Fantasy Award in 2011. She is the cofounder of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award and the current president of the Clarion Foundation.

Though it’s often remarked that Fowler moves between genres—literary, contemporary, historical, and science fiction—what’s consistent is the wit, richness, and complexity of her work, making her one of the finest writers of our time.

Elizabeth McKenzie: Here’s a moment from your story “Go Back” in the collection *Black Glass*: “I can remember a lot of fires and storms in Indiana when I was growing up, but what I remember is that they were never big enough. No matter how much damage they did, I was never satisfied.” Do you think this is a clue as to what it takes to be a writer?

Karen J. Fowler: That’s such a good question. I do think that as a child, I craved a certain amount of excitement and that some of that came from being such a big reader. The books I was reading were all about children who had great adventures, so I always felt I was on the brink of something that never quite arrived, or never quite turned out to be as big as I wanted. As an adult, it’s now very, very clear to me that I don’t want any adventures in my life. The best possible life is the one I have, where I read about adventures, but I don’t actually experience one. Although I do still like a big storm. It’s very exciting when the coast gets all whipped up and the trees are lashing back and forth. As an adult, of course, I’m more aware that someone is probably taking some real damage at their house and I should not be rejoicing in the wildness of the weather. Really, growing up has spoiled all of my innocent pleasures.

E.M.: What was it like to be an eleven-year-old from Indiana and wake up one day in Palo Alto, California?

K.J.F.: It was grim. There were a lot of things going on in my family at that same time—in my eleventh year. My father took the job that brought us to Palo Alto with a certain number of expectations about what the job would be. Those were not met, and they were not met catastrophically. My dad was a scientist and he was brought in to do research. He assembled a team, convinced a number of other people to leave their jobs and to come with him. This was his first experience with corporate America; he’d always worked in academia before. So when his team didn’t get the results that corporate America wanted, he was stunned to understand that he was to change his results, that he was in fact to get the results they wanted, not to do the science with integrity.

He couldn’t comply with this. One day, he and his team came to work and the locks had been changed, which