

A “Greedy Writer” Shares All: Celebrating Theodora Bishop’s Novella *On the Rocks*

Brazos Bookstore will host the launch for *On the Rocks*, by first-year PhD student Theodora Bishop, at 7 pm on Friday, April 6. There will be a celebration at Under the Volcano afterwards. Cocktails, anyone?



Student Profile

As a first-year PhD student, what has surprised you about Houston? Any favorite spots or reading series or people?

Houston has proved itself to be a treasure trove of surprises. Brazos Bookstore is my sweet tooth; I love the reading series it offers, as well as the ones put on by Inprint and Poison Pen. I enjoy visiting the Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Arts, seeing productions by the Houston Grand Opera and Alley Theatre. I have also become somewhat perversely infatuated with the Humpty Dumpty statue in the Heights. Axelrad holds a special place in my heart: you can nurse a beer under the stars in a hammock. I did this the other night, while Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was projected against the backside of Luigi’s Pizzeria. I was not aware such a happy miscellany of things I love was an option until I moved to Houston. I doubt there will come a day that palm trees don’t seem inordinately wondrous and strange.

What would be the theme and on the syllabus for your dream class?

I’d love to teach a cross-genre intensive forms course in modern-contemporary iterations of the Gothic. I can imagine required reading would include Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Lydia Millet’s *Sweet Lamb of Heaven*. Selections from Haruki Murakami, Helen Oyeyemi, and Kelly Link, as well as Vievee Francis’s astounding collection of poems, *Forest Primeval*, Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars*, and Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* would also be on the list.

Texas Review Press at Sam Houston State University is publishing you, so Lone Star love is mutual. I imagine novella publishers are few. Can you tell us about the publication process?

Some of my favorite works of fiction are novellas: *The Turn of the Screw*, *Mrs. Caliban*, Muriel Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, César Aira’s novellas. My enthusiasm for the novella as a form is more likely to come up than not in any conversations I have about reading and writing.

I submitted the manuscript that became *On the Rocks* to the annual Clay Reynolds Novella Prize at Texas Review Press in the fall of my final year of my MFA. I learned in the spring that it had been runner-up for the contest and the press was interested in publishing it. That the press and its judge, Clay Reynolds, champion the novella, was reason enough for me to fall in love with the press. I have been so grateful to work with them and honored to have *On the Rocks* among their titles.

You’re the author of a short story chapbook, a novella, and many published poems. That’s both notable and enviable. How did you choose which genre to enroll in? How, exactly, does your mind work?

I can only work on a poem or a piece of fiction for so many hours in a day, so when my mind taps out in one project, I segue into another. I almost always have multiple burners going at once: there will be a poem percolating on the one, a short story brewing on the other; if I’m lucky, there will be a longer fiction project (a novel/novella) somewhere on that stove. Then there’s some other bizarre kitchen contraption where I’m keeping the pieces I’m revising.

I am a greedy writer; I want to write as often as possible, and working in multiple genres not only makes it possible for me to extend the length of time I spent at my desk, but to also work out something I’m thinking about in one genre that perhaps isn’t able to find its form in the other. While I am enrolled as a poet at UH, I continue to read and write fiction alongside my poetry, and am grateful to have been able to take classes in both poetry and fiction at UH. The goal for me is to write, so if I can find a sweet spot in whatever form or genre I’m working on, I’m happy.

Excerpt from *On the Rocks*:

It was springtime, almost a year after Sebastian died, when my mother phoned to tell me she was throwing a bridal shower for herself, and that I’d sure as Dickens better be there: “You’re the Maid of Honor, Eva. So no excuses, m’kay?”

My mother, Leonora Marino, was betrothed to the owner of a used car dealership called The Lemon Tree. One unfortunate detail about her fiancé’s claim to fame being that its office and lots were painted bladder-stimulant yellow. This meant it was only natural that upon crossing into The Lemon Tree’s domain, you became senseless, pervaded by a wild urge to pee. I often noticed potential customers swaying as they waited to be assisted, bouncing on their heels; their general conduct derived not from impatience, but rather from an effort to disguise their discomfort. But perhaps my mother’s soon-to-be-hubby designed the space precisely so the hooley of swapping countless tons of metal for the big bucks was done swiftly.

Should you have queries or wish to support the CWP: cwp@uh.edu