

An Interview with ReLynn Hansen, author of *To Some Women I Have Known*

Do you think of *To Some Women I Have Known* as a collection of essays or poems?

I think of it as a series of memoirs, small and poetic. The brevity comes from the evanescence of the moment, the sense of impending loss in the midst of lively events. Capturing that paradox is poetic. One of the things you realize as you write is how long it took you—days and months and years—to write about a moment that was over in seconds. I am drawn to crystallized moments, brief, prismatic moments through which we can see life intensified. I think memories exist as a montage in the mind. If you write of them as a myriad-of-moments, as montaged events layered one upon the other, then you end up with prose poems. If you try to unravel them and create some narrative order, then you end up with a narrative essay. Sometimes a narrative has to go big. I have a few of them in this book—and I'll settle on the term essay/poem to describe them. One is about what Patty Hearst meant to me in high school. That piece is poetic when I'm writing about the vats of useless thoughts we had in high school—for instance, about rock bands or movies. But the piece gets more narrative when writing about that high school evening when a friend and I went to see another friend's dying mother and the friend wasn't home that evening, but the mother was there just lying in bed. So this book is somewhere between essay and poem. It distills a narrative and shines light on one small pulsing aspect. It's my hope that a collection of these smaller, luminous moments will resonate in larger ways.

What are some of the themes running through your book?

Heroism is one of the themes. I believe in doing the right thing and I think self-knowledge is always the right thing, but there are so many obstacles to that. So just the search for identity is heroic. It's dangerous, especially for women at times, to be curious, to ask why, to wander, to seek knowledge. For instance, my piece, "Woman in a Coma," is about Karen Ann Quinlan. When you read about her life, you find that she had dropped out of college, fallen away from religion, she was working at a gas station, hanging out with friends, going out to the same bar every night to discuss life's options. She was quietly exploring. She was wandering. She had done all the things I had done at that time. I had dropped out of school and left for Guatemala. I had no idea what I was doing in Guatemala. I was trying to sort out whether I was gay. I was reading a lot of books. Karen Ann Quinlan eventually died of a drug overdose, but not before igniting the whole right-to-die with dignity movement. In that piece, I wanted to honor Karen Ann Quinlan. I didn't want her life of wandering and searching for answers to go unnoticed. That's why I've titled the book *To Some Women I Have Known*. The book is an effigy, it's a monument. Women need monuments, they've made sacrifices in myriad and subtle ways, for years and for generations.

What do you do when you are not writing?

I take walks. It sounds cliché, I know. I mean all writers take walks, right? I like to look at the trees. I like bare-branched trees in winter and I like them leafed out in summer. I like the different patterning of leaves in the sky. I take photos of trees. I have a photo series on bark. The patterning of bark is amazing. I discovered a Southern Pine grove here in Michigan. Recently, I found an Oregon Ash that survived the ash borer. I tried to e-mail every forester in Oregon to tell them about this Oregon ash tree here in Michigan. I still don't know if I have their attention or not.

So as I take walks, thoughts come, and I'll get out my smart phone and record them. I also love to drive. I'm a good driver and I like road trips. I like to pull over and eat in the car. If I had my way, I'd eat every meal in the car.

My partner is a film producer and teacher and we chill out by going to movies. We do popcorn and candy and we watch perfectly average movies just to relax.

I teach writing so I know the power of image and the power of repetition of that image. As a nonfiction writer or memoirist I'm always aware of threading moments out—so if I'm not writing I'm thinking about what I might write. I sit around and go online to read craft essays. I read a great one in *Tri-Quarterly* the other day where Dinty Moore defines (finally) the lyric essay. He mentions poetic compression and musicality of language. I like to go in through the back door and read about what other writers think about their writing. The thoughts on prose poems and lyric essay are exciting and beyond post-modern. However, as long as there's a narrative, there's always going to be something about literature that feels well-worn and hand-tooled. I love paradoxes such as this.