

# STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

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## Midwestern Writers Need Midwestern Historians

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Thank you for inviting me to speak at the 2018 Midwestern History Conference. It is a pleasure to be here, and I feel right at home.

I am from the Midwest, where the work of our country gets done, where a lot of the cheap beer of our country gets drunk. My five books of fiction take place in the Midwest, in Michigan, to be precise. Though I met my husband in Boston thirty-five years ago, I now have all my sex in the Midwest. My husband grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts, where he used to beat up Conan O'Brien, but I lured him to Michigan by telling him about all the parking spots available. "Hell," I said to him, "half the time we just park on the lawn," and he was sold. Now he has a pole barn bigger than your house, and that pole barn is full of tractors and tools to fix those tractors. We call the pole barn the Tractorium. My husband's mother and brother moved here as well. Which is to say, the Midwest can be contagious.

Like all Midwesterners, I am not special—I'm just like everybody else, and so of course I do not have an accent—Easterners and Southerners have accents, so do Northerners and Westerners, but not us. If you want to know why I sound the way I do, read the article in *Belt Magazine* by Edward McClelland about the Northern Cities Vowel Shift where he linked to video of an interview with me. I understand this to mean that the way I talk is *extremely* not special.

As a writer, language is important to me. I am interested to hear the people around me say "the dishes need washed." And as I write this, my lawn needs mowed. I wear gym shoes and

<sup>1</sup>These remarks were given on a plenary panel titled "Writing on the Midwest," held at the Fourth Annual Midwestern History Conference in Grand Rapids on June 6, 2018. Bonnie Jo Campbell received her MFA in creative writing from Western Michigan University. Her 2009 book, *American Salvage*, published by Wayne State University Press, was a finalist in fiction for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

I travel the expressway. I eat pasties, and when I hit myself on the head because I forgot to buy pop at the store, I say “ope.”

Of course, I would rather eat swamp mud than speak with confidence, or, as we say here, *put on airs*. And I would rather hack off my left arm with a dull pruning saw than go to a therapist, though most of my east coast and west coast friends think I need one. I’d rather clean the manure spreader with a Q tip than suggest I am one whit smarter in any way than my brother the custodian or my sister, who is also a custodian right now, though usually she works in home health care.

As a Midwesterner who wants to tell stories, I know that my own life isn’t any big deal, and I have been raised better than to tell other people’s private business, so it should be no surprise that I write fiction, which is to say, I make things up.

As a fiction writer, my job is to create situations and scenes that are both plausible and interesting, and plausible means I have to be historically accurate. I live at the edge of Kalamazoo in a neighborhood of very small houses, and I ride my bike at night and thrill myself by looking in people’s windows from the curb (I do not lurk in lawns, or not as a rule).

A plausible scene I could write for a contemporary story would be a scene of someone sitting and watching a big flat-screen TV on the wall of a very small living room. Interesting is an alien abduction occurring next door. Plausible and interesting is a man turning up the TV so as not to hear another man beating his wife next door. Or beating his teenage son. Or beating his little nine year old daughter. Or his dog. Or his dog who has just bitten his sweet little nine year old daughter. And maybe the nine year old daughter can’t face the fact that her father, a Baptist minister, beats her, and so she tells her friends at school that she was abducted by aliens.

In order to write any of these scenes I have to know what objects would be in the living room, starting with what kind of TV they would be watching—in 1976 did people still have those big wooden consoles? And what would be on television at that time of night, whether it’s eight p.m. or two a.m., information I can get from the online TV guide. But if I am placing that story in 1976, I need to know what was on television, and what shows such a couple would most likely be watching—*All in the Family*, maybe? *Charlie’s Angels*? And I should try to get a sense of the laws and statistics about child abuse and spousal abuse. We need to know the habits of the community—beating a child looks different in *Huck Finn* than it does in Minneapolis today. Beating one’s wife was treated as a lighthearted subject in British fiction for centuries, and we

still read those books, but it won't fly for a contemporary writer. To hear what the child beater is shouting we need to know the way people talk in that neighborhood and region. I might need to know something about the role of the Baptist church in this community. All the work I do to give the characters in my stories their unique personality traits and set them on a plotted adventure means nothing if I don't have a good sense of all that background material; and while my characters can be made up, the facts about the community I put them in cannot.

If a version of this scene takes place eighty years ago, then there's no TV, and I need to go to the historians to find out what noise the people in the house would make to cover up the sound of beatings next door. They might play the radio, or a banjo, or rattle their pots and pans.

Historical perspective is critical for my work. If there's a birthday party for an eighteen year old boy in southern Illinois in my story, then it could be a happy day, but if it's 1863 or 1967 then it means somebody might be preparing to go off to fight and die. And I have to acknowledge that fact before asking you to care about a romance or even a murder. Even taking a drink of water from the kitchen sink means something radically different than the usual hydration if I'm writing a story that takes place in 2015 Flint, Michigan.

Have any of you bought a house and then discovered the place on that property or where people dumped their household garbage? As a writer I know how a contemporary reader is going to react when she reads about somebody tossing trash out behind the garage, and I can use that in my work, but I also have to know how people treated refuse of various kinds at various times in history. I love that people study outhouses and study that trash.

Whether or not we are writing historical fiction, our stories are full of the past because all but our youngest of characters have lived in the past, and our narration has to show an understanding of the personal past of the characters. Science fiction might be futuristic, but an awful lot of it depends upon knowledge of Nazis or Soviet Russia or Biblical times.

I wish I had my own team of historians. I'd assign them to research the time of 1820 to 1840 when white European settlers first got to Michigan and lived cheek-by-jowl with the Potawatomi. It was a very interesting time, and probably a shameful time for many, at least in retrospect. And as a writer and general busybody, I want to know where and with whom everybody was sleeping. And I want to know a lot more about Midwestern hobos and eccentrics and whether two women or two men were allowed to choose to live together without scandal. I want to know about Midwestern utopian societies, so I can use that as a setting for a story, the way

Laura Kasischke did brilliantly in *Eden Springs*, where she wrote about the House of David cult in Benton Harbor. In a similar vein, I would like to know more about the history of atheism and agnosticism in the Midwest, what form it took—the popular culture would have us believe this tradition never existed. I would like to know more about black farmers in the Midwest.

I was writing an article about a musician, Loring Janes, who played the folk music circuit that was Detroit-Chicago-Toronto and cities in and around in the 1960s, and he kept talking about *hootenannies*. What a great word! But I had a difficult time finding out information about these clubs, all of which are closed now, and their musical offerings. If historians don't record what went on at these Midwestern places, then we'll lose a big chunk of our history.

Also, I would like to know the history of livestock in the Midwest, the history of donkeys and mules. I'd like to know how the racehorse industry in the Midwest has changed the practices of the Amish, who buy all those thin-boned three-and-four-year-old standardbred horses to do heavy work. But enough about what I want.

My first novel, *Q Road*, took place in Michigan in the 1990s, but for a few casual references, I needed to know what people in Michigan ate in 1840, both the Potawatomi and the white settlers, because the book needed to have that awareness. My best source of information was from Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society journals. On the website of the Michigan State University Libraries, George Newman Fuller is quoted (1914): "The first seven volumes contain very little documentary material, but are made up almost entirely of pioneer reminiscences, biographical sketches and memorials, and the proceedings of the local pioneer societies."<sup>2</sup> There I learned that many white settlers disapproved of eating red ripe tomatoes because they were too decadent. The only acceptable way to eat tomatoes was green, breaded and fried.

What I need right now for the book I'm writing has to do with medicine. Nowadays doctors are in charge of most medical activity, but this wasn't always the case, even just a hundred years ago. What were dentists doing? Midwives? Local herbal healers?

I think you get it. We writers need you historians, and I have a lot of questions for you all. But you didn't invite me here to ask you questions. I'll finish with a few observations I've made about us.

<sup>2</sup> George Newman Fuller, "A Sketch of Historical Societies in Michigan," Michigan Historical Commission, *Bulletin* No. 3 (May 1914): 12-13.

We are the middle of the country. We are the heart of the country, the lungs and spleen and reproductive organs of the country, and our profound influence is everywhere, though we keep quiet about our influence because we think humility is a virtue, and we know that getting on a high horse usually results in falling off the other side of that horse after a few drinks. I'd bet you a dollar that if you go to New York or L.A., most of the most interesting and helpful people you meet there will turn out to be from Ohio or some other Midwestern state. My editor at W.W. Norton, Jill Bialosky, is from here. So was Fred Astaire, Harry Houdini and Erma Bombeck.

The upper Midwest is a land of many lakes, really big lakes, small lakes, even smaller lakes. Ten million, four hundred sixteen thousand and seven lakes to be exact. And don't even get me started on the ponds.

We are a land of many farms, and in those farms are many fields, and writing is one of those fields. Probably a disproportionate number of your favorite writers are Midwesterners or from Ontario (we consider Ontario the Midwest of Canada.) Kurt Vonnegut, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Joyce Carol Oates, Hemingway, Louise Erdrich, Gwendolyn Brooks, Marilynne Robinson, Jane Smiley and Toni Morrison to name a few. For certain, most of the nation's reading gets done in the Midwest. Every Midwestern woman worth her salt is in a book group or has been in a book group or is looking for a good book group right now, one in which the other women don't care how much wine she drinks. Take my mother. She reads a book a day, and especially loves books in which men are killed or in which menopausal women steal bulldozers and drive them over men's cars.

Most men in the Midwest are unemployed or addicted to methamphetamine and so can't pay their cable bills, and so their TV screens have turned to fuzz, so what the hell else are they going to do besides read?

We Midwesterners go about sheepishly, humbly, shuffling along in our winter parkas that cover our giant asses, but we have nothing to apologize for. We have everything that anybody else has in this country, except maybe mountains, but we get complicated cloud formations—after a few drinks they resemble mountains against the sky. The Southern grotesque is a kind of writing we hear about, but I claim our writers are just as grotesque as the southern writers, starting with myself.

If you just drive down the road, you'll see we have the wide spaces of the great American west, and we even have rattlesnakes here, the Massasauga rattler, to be exact, who has adjusted

well to life in in the swamp. And just around the corner from the swamp, we've got restaurants in Ann Arbor and Chicago that are just as crowded and as overpriced as restaurants on the east coast. We make delicious food here that comforts you, and we know how to melt cheese. My old-fashioned homemade fudge, made by recipes my granny taught me, is the solution to many of your problems.

We are nice in the Midwest, we are sometimes passive aggressive, but we only fight you after a few beers, and only if you are asking for it. We are wholesome, even our sluts are wholesome. I married my Boston husband in Kalamazoo at the courthouse. The woman who made my wedding cake was a slut. And she frosted the whole cake with a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other. We are humble. We are wise. We are wide and growing wider.

We are the Midwest. Writing is a discipline that requires us to sit on our asses for long periods of time without television. Writing requires humility. We are very well suited. You betcha.