

# The Coachella Review



## Lenney on Lenney: TCR talks with Dinah Lenney

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**THE COACHELLA REVIEW** / **JULY 12, 2016**

**BY PAM MUNTER**



A graduate of Yale and the Bennington Writing Seminars, Dinah Lenney also trained at New York’s Neighborhood Playhouse School, home of the esteemed Sanford Meisner technique. Like writing, acting has taken her to myriad places—stage, screen and theater—allowing her to play a wide variety of roles.

Dinah has taught both acting and writing courses all over the country. She has also spoken at a TED conference at USC, a presentation integrating her interest in all the arts, “When Life Meets Art.” With Mary Lou Belli, she wrote *Acting For Young Actors: The Ultimate Teen Guide*.

And she has written two memoirs, the first (*Bigger Than Life: A Murder, A Memoir*) the story of her relationship with her father following his brutal murder. The second (*The Object Parade: Essays*) is a collection of autobiographical essays. More recently, she edited and contributed to a collection of flash essays, *Brief Encounters: A Collection of Contemporary Nonfiction*, with Judith Kitchen.

In between books, Dinah has written essays and reviews for literary journals, anthologies, and newspapers—both online and print. She is currently a Senior Editor for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She and her husband live in Los Angeles and have two grown children.

**The Coachella Review:** Let’s start at the top. Why did you start writing?

**Dinah Lenney:** I’ve been writing as long as I can remember—since I was a kid. I wrote to entertain myself and I wrote to let off steam—to figure things out—because if I didn’t write it down, whatever it was, I thought I’d burst. And that’s still why I write. I write, therefore I think, y’know? And not the other way around.

**TCR:** How does one learn to write well? Are writers born or made?

**DL:** Both, I’d say. It’s like anything else you want to do well—you have to look to your betters (as in, you have to read!); and you have to do it

a lot. You have to practice.

**TCR:** Do you keep a journal?

**DL:** I don't. I've only written in journals very sporadically, never in a disciplined way. I'm more likely to write out of urgency—with something specific on my mind—something that has to work its way out.

**TCR:** What process do you undergo when you begin a writing project?

**DL:** Well, each project is different, isn't it? I want to say that I don't have any sort of ritual practice—no special pencils or pens or mantras or anything like that. On the other hand, when it's going well, I'm a bit of a sloth. I wear the same clothes day after day; I spread out with no regard for the other guy. (My poor husband, right?) I much like to work at home. And I do need quiet—I'm not big on music or ambient noise. I have to be able to hear myself. That said, if I'm good and worked up about something, I can write anywhere. The sentences come in great spurts—at traffic lights, in Trader Joe's—and in the park when I'm walking. I walk every day—that's something I do. And walking is good for writing—it really is.

**TCR:** You have an attractive, professional website. How do you market yourself? Are you active in social media? How important is that to writers today?

**DL:** Am I active in social media? Hmmm. I'm more active than some and definitely not as active as others. I'm not so much trying to market myself (though when the shoe fits), but I do try to have a

presence as befits my role as an editor and a teacher and a member of various writing communities. But is it important? I honestly don't know. Probably not. Social media—gosh, it's like anything else, right? Binge eating or drinking or watching TV. At the point at which it begins to make me sick, I would hope I'd have the good sense to get away from the screen.

**TCR:** Who were/are your primary influences as a writer?

**DL:** Well, in the beginning, there was E.B. White, Louisa May Alcott, the Brontes, Jane Austen, T. H. White—Shakespeare and Shaw—John Knowles!—John Guare!—James Weldon Johnson, John Hersey (he was my teacher in college), Toni Morrison (ditto). Wallace Stegner, Mavis Gallant, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin. A bit more recently: William Maxwell, Virginia Woolfe, Natalia Ginzburg, MFK Fisher....

But my writerly influences weren't and aren't only writers. A lot of them were (are!) singers and musicians: Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, James Taylor, Nina Simone, Odetta, Gershwin, Kern, Sondheim, Chet Baker, Miles Davis, Marvin Gaye, Earth, Wind and Fire—also Bach, Handel, Haydn, Debussy....

And there were artists, starting with Da Vinci and Picasso (in grade school)—then DeKooning and Cezanne and Pissarro, and Monet and Matisse, and Bonnard—and Marie Cassat (a woman, phew!)—Giacometti! Calder, James Turrell, Frank Gehry.

I haven't even mentioned any actors. And not enough playwrights. And I almost left out James Beard.

**TCR:** That raises the obvious question (to me, anyway): How did your non-writerly influences inform your writing?

**DL:** I'm much inspired by the arts—all of them—it's not only when I read something gorgeous or hilarious or tragic that I'm moved to give it a try. It's when I see a painting or a play—and when I hear music (music!)—it's in museums and galleries and in clubs and at the movies: something bubbles up in me. How to explain it? I want to talk about it—I want to imitate it. I want to love it out loud; to get as close to it as I can. Each time, I'm responding to “voice,” don't you think? To the soul and the sensibility (and syntax—that, too) of another. If only I could sing and play like Nina. Or paint like Bonnard. But I can't. I also can't write the way she sings or he paints—but how not to try?

**TCR:** Which writers working today do you most admire?

**DL:** Rachel Cusk, Zadie Smith, Elena Ferrante, Ursula Le Guin, Shirley Hazzard, Rebecca Solnit—all women, yikes. I'll tell you something. There's a whole lot of hoopla at the moment, this noisy fuss on the part of younger women about the influence of old (white) men—about how they've been compelled to please old (white) men. Honestly, that was never a problem for me, not ever. I mean—I want to please everybody, sure; I want to be loved as much as the next guy. But I never wanted to write like a man, whatever that means. I don't get it, that particular hoopla—I just don't. However: Are there live, male writers whom I admire? Of course there are: Patrick Modiano, David Grossman, Geoff Dyer (but reluctantly a bit because he's all the rage, right?); Ta-Nehisi Coates (no reluctance), Tobias Wolff... (I'm purposefully leaving out my friends but I very much admire them, too

—the women and the men.)

**TCR:** You have an MFA. Who were your mentors at Bennington and how did they (and the program) help you become a better writer?

**DL:** I worked with Lucy Grealy, Dan Hofstadter, Phillip Lopate, and Sven Birkets. Lucy used to write in the margins: Be smarter. Which stayed with me—ow. Dan put me on the defensive (unintentionally) and bolstered my confidence (unintentionally?). Phillip likes to laugh—to make him laugh is a treat and ultimately instructive. Sven, on the other hand, will not abide shtick. And he asks lots of questions—which gets you thinking about the work which ultimately allows you to be smarter.

**TCR:** Both your autobiographical works—*Bigger Than Life* and *The Object Parade*—deal with your colorful family and specifically with your unresolved relationships with your parents. How has writing such disclosive works affected you? Your family members? Any blowback?

**DL:** Blowback. Yes, all kinds: straightforward and from an angle—the strong affirmation, the snide aside. But has it affected me and my relationships? I don't think so, not really. I'm not looking for approval from family members (husband and children excepted. I do care what they think) and that's a good thing because they don't usually approve. My mother doesn't much like my work, no. (Well, to be fair, she likes some things, not others.) My siblings, as far as I can tell, would mostly prefer not to talk about this stuff. My dads are dead, both of them. But chances are they'd have felt as my mother does. And who could blame them, right? By the same token, as much as I've

revealed, there's so much that I haven't—I've been selective!

**TCR:** You are an actor, too. How are the processes alike or different in accessing yourself toward producing creative work?

**DL:** Golly, that's so well put. I very nearly answered in a rehearsed sort of way. I was about to say, as I have before, that the strategies are similar (less is more, show don't tell, yadda, yadda)—and that the urge is absolutely the same: to mark the moment, to reap the meaning, to honor the inner life, to locate myself in order to give a good performance—but what you're asking is about how I locate myself; and that's a different question, isn't it? So—what the process has in common in both disciplines is language. In the case of acting, I have to find my way into somebody else's syntax. I have to make the words sound as if I invented them—as if, in the moment, they came out of me. Which can actually be easier than sounding like myself in the first place—you wouldn't think so but it's true. In any case, either way, I need quiet and time. Although perhaps less time when I have a script already in hand.

**TCR:** You've written a memoir, book of essays, an anthology, a how-to book and flash nonfiction, among many other things. What's the easiest for you? The form to which you are most drawn?

**DL:** It's always easier to have an assignment. I love assignments. (Also, I hate them—but you know....) The form to which I'm most drawn is the letter. I'm dying to write a book of letters. But seriously, I think I'm most drawn to the thing I haven't yet tried to do.

**TCR:** What was your relationship like with Judith Kitchen? How did you meet? How did you work together? How did the two of you select

essays for *Brief Encounters*?

**DL:** Judith. Whoever ever got so lucky as to know a person like Judith? Judith was my friend, my mentor, my reader, my boss, my confidante, my cheerleader. She was so generous. You know how generous she was? She almost made me believe that I was as helpful to her as she was to me. Which simply isn't possible, it isn't, but that's the sort of person she was. I first met Judith at AWP in New York, but very briefly. It was after I applied to teach at the Rainier Writing Workshop—after she and Stan decided to give me an “audition” and eventually the job—that we got to know each other well. And how did we work together? Brilliantly, I'd say. We had so much fun. That's how it seemed to me anyway. We were usually entirely in sync; and when we weren't one or the other of us was very convincing. And for the book we went to writers we admire (lots of overlap there)—many of whom (but not all) who were also friends and/or colleagues.

**TCR:** Critics of the memoir form claim it to be a substitute for psychotherapy. How has writing helped heal you after your major personal losses?

**DL:** I once heard a writer say that writing for therapy isn't usually good writing. Whereas if you write to write well, it can very often turn out to be therapeutic. The point being that memoir isn't a substitute for psychotherapy—or if it is, that's not the kind of memoir that's interesting to me. And—I once heard another writer say, “There's no such thing recovery, only integration.” Which makes sense to me. But writing has helped me to think better, to make connections—to integrate. That is certainly true.

**TCR:** How do you handle negative reviews?

**DL:** Not very well. I did once actually write a letter to the editor because I thought a review was unfair—and it was!—but when my letter was published, I didn't feel better, really not. So I don't suppose I'll ever do that again. Honestly, in the face of rejection I've been known to wallow out the week, shame on me. But it's awful, isn't it, when someone doesn't “get” you—or gets you wrong. And therefore important to remember that none of us is writing for everyone. Nor should we try. If we did, we'd write crap.

**TCR:** On a more personal note, what do you like to do when you're not working?

**DL:** Well, lucky me, I actually like working—teaching editing, reading, writing. I also love to cook—and I love food shopping (hate all other kinds)—and eating, of course. I love dining with friends, dinner not lunch—lunch gives me a pain. And I love to walk (so I keep saying, huh?). I much enjoy hanging out with my husband. And when they're available, with my kids.

**TCR:** Your husband is a screenwriter, meaning both of you do a lot of work at home. How has that worked out?

**DL:** Pretty beautifully, actually. Fred and I give each other a lot of space and quiet and it's nice to kind of check in with somebody now and then in the course of a day. It really is.

**TCR:** Are either of your kids interested in writing or acting?

**DL:** Neither is interested in acting, but they're both good readers and

writers and my daughter is an excellent editor—not of my work (I wouldn't impose on her in that way)—but professionally, both for print and radio. She works as a producer at NPR and has a roster of private clients as well.

**TCR:** What advice would you give new writers?

**DL:** Read, read, read. And watch TV (the good stuff) and see movies and go to museums and concerts and events and walk a lot. Get out into the world and ask yourself what you think. Cultivate opinions. Take things personally. Enter the conversation! And once you've completed a draft, don't decide you're done. Don't cheat yourself of the great fun and reward of revising and revising again (I'm not kidding—that's the fun part.) and, by the way, do consider critique (coming from the right reader, of course) the gift that it is.

**TCR:** At this point in our life, why do you write? What are your writing goals now?

**DL:** “I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.” (Thank you, Joan Didion.) I don't suppose I can say it much better. I can add to it, maybe. I write to make connections; I write to remember; I write because I want to take nothing for granted. Writing is my way of paying attention—of insisting that this business of living and dying (and everything that happens between) actually matters.

***Pam Munter*** has written several dozen articles on dead Hollywood movie stars for *Classic Images and Films of the Golden Age* and has

*published several books, most recently When Teens Were Keen: Freddie Stewart and the Teen Agers of Monogram. She's a former clinical psychologist and performer, currently a student in the MFA low residency program at the University of California at Riverside. Pam is at work on a deconstructed memoir and a series of short stories that fictionalize Hollywood history.*

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