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A Conversation with Michael Byers

Polly Rosenwaike

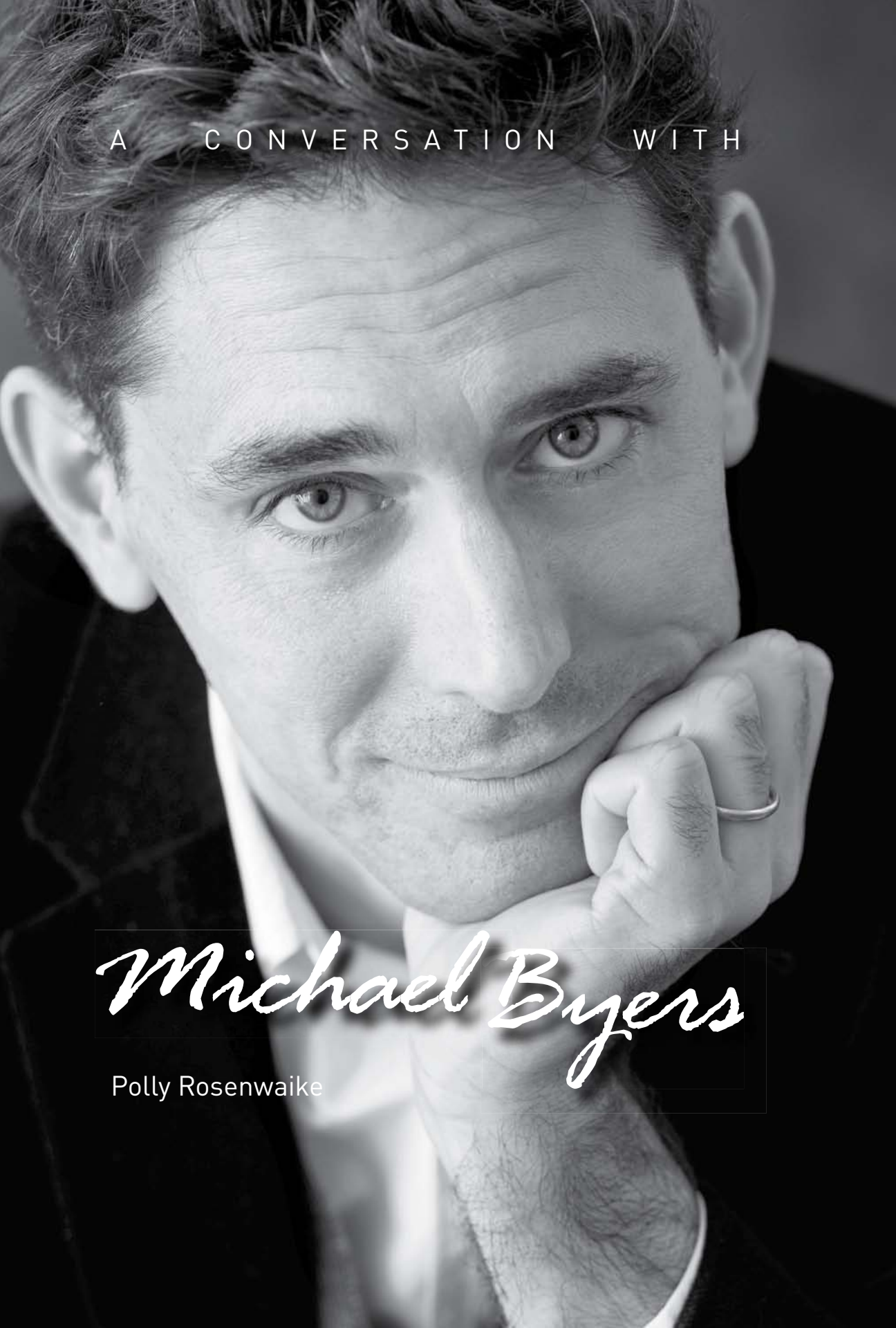
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A black and white close-up portrait of actor Michael Byers. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight, thoughtful expression. His hand is resting under his chin, with his fingers curled. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

A CONVERSATION WITH

Michael Byers

Polly Rosenwaiké

Michael Byers's first book, *The Coast of Good Intentions*, was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, won the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and garnered a Whiting Writer's Award. *Long for This World* won the annual fiction prize from Friends of American Writers and was a finalist for the Washington State Book Award. Both were *New York Times* Notable Books.

Byers's fiction has appeared in *Best American Short Stories* and *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*; his nonfiction has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Best American Travel Writing* and elsewhere. A former Stegner Fellow at Stanford, he teaches creative writing at the University of Michigan.

ROSENWAIKE: *Your first published story, "Settled on the Cranberry Coast," appeared in The Missouri Review in 1994. Has your approach to writing stories changed since then?*

BYERS: I'd have to figure out what my approach was then. My approach then was desperately trying to figure out if I could piece together a narrative that made any sense. I'm still doing that as a short-story writer. What hasn't changed also is the sense that the best stories—stories that people react to most strongly and that matter most to me as a writer—are the ones that inadvertently or painfully touch on some emotional core I'm uncomfortable with presenting. My acknowledgment and my recognition of those facts is more apparent. I can see that the stories that matter most to me, and most to people who read them, are those I would rather not tell.

In a way, writing stories becomes more of a challenge and more of a gut check, and with the stories I'm working on now, to the extent that I can, I work to make them difficult. Because one can write a story. It's possible. At this point one can write a story that's relatively readable and publishable and that will do its thing—that is, it will assert its purpose as moving from my computer to some printed page. But for all the effort that takes, I like to think that the stories I would invest in are those that are the hardest.

ROSENWAIKE: *As a young writer—you wrote the stories in your first book, The Coast of Good Intentions, in your twenties—your central characters were often middle-aged men. What attracted you to writing about older characters?*

BYERS: I remember a number of reviewers commented on the number of older-than-I-was narrators or characters in those stories. I didn't get it then, and I don't get it now, actually—why wouldn't a writer want to, and try to, write about all different kinds of people at all different parts of their lives? People who have lived longer than I know more about things than I do, and that was more true then, when I was younger. It also helped that I wasn't that keen to write about my own life, finding it sort of boring.

ROSENWAIKE: *About The Coast of Good Intentions, reviewers commented on the optimism of the collection, the sense of hope in the stories, amidst loneliness and loss. What is the bleakest story you've ever written?*

BYERS: The bleakest stories haven't found their ways into print, which might suggest that my talent lies somewhere in the neighborhood of channeling or describing a kind of delight in the world.

ROSENWAIKE: *I especially admire the dialogue in your stories. It feels very natural and efficient, revealing of character without ever being heavy-handed. Is dialogue something you've worked at a lot, or does it come pretty easily?*

BYERS: Thank you. I have a hard time with a lot of things, but for whatever reason dialogue does come pretty easily. I don't talk much myself, maybe because I don't want to be overheard.

ROSENWAIKE: *In "Shipmates Down Under," a story in the collection, a father introduces a book he loves to his nine-year-old son. You wrote this story before you and your wife had twins, who are now eight years old. What has it been like reading with your kids and watching them learn to read?*

BYERS: Like most good parenting advice, and maybe good teaching advice, it's basically, be attentive and honest, and also, sometimes, stay out of the way until your presence is obviously called for. When they were younger, my wife and I both read to them frequently. Now they read much faster and much more than I can keep up with. Their tastes are broad and rangy. I read very little of what they read now. There are occasional books we experience together, usually in the form of audiobooks on drives or books we have read ourselves and recommend to the kids. I don't read a ton of juvenile or young adult fiction. A lot of it is crap. And my kids, like I, read their fair share of crap. I think it's required as a good reader to read stuff that's not of particularly high quality. But the things that get them about good books are the things that get us about good books: a feeling of immersive reality, a feeling of surprise and investment, of danger and mystery and wonder. The things they respond to are very much the things that we as adult readers and writers respond to in the works we read.

ROSENWAIKE: *At the end of a short-short you wrote called "Wynn's Story," the narrator, thinking about his dead parents, wonders, "And what would his children say about him? What would he be remembered for? What moment would they choose and say, This was my father, can you imagine doing this, can you imagine such a thing, oh! what a strange and marvelous man he must have been?"*

This poignant and open-ended conclusion reminds me of something you say in your essay "The Copernican Author: On Point of View, Ptolemaic Characters, and Useful Unknowing" (published in Fiction Writers Review): "We can of course remember this about our characters—that to deliver them into complete understanding probably isn't what we're aiming for. More usefully we can also remember this about ourselves as writers—that our own ignorance can serve as

a useful model for the uncertainty we wish to deliver to our characters. . . . We might even be moved to amend the old-fashioned dictum. Maybe it's not write what you know. Maybe it's really write what you don't know, because what you know ain't much." How does this not-knowing operate for you in constructing a work of fiction?

BYERS: I think it's the most powerful tool we have—it's the mechanism that makes Alice Munro, for example, such a deep-seeing observer of our human ways. Her stories operate as thinking machines, really, in that the characters find it very difficult often to land with any certainty on a conclusion about themselves or other people or the way the world works. Characters who know everything are either too flat to notice their own errors, and therefore boring, or are heading for a fall. I'd rather start with the characters falling.

ROSENWAIKE: *You graduated from the University of Michigan's MFA program in 1996. Ten years later you returned as an assistant professor in the Creative Writing Department, where you still teach. What was it like to be a student and then a professor at the U of M?*

BYERS: My wife and I ended up living about five blocks from where we used to live as students. So in superficial ways it was very much like coming back to someplace I knew very well. In all important ways it has been, of course, a completely different experience. I remember walking around this town as a student and having what I think was an almost perpetual panic attack during grad school. I remember walking up toward the campus and being filled with a terrible dread and anxiety, which came from all of the pressures of being an MFA student—wanting to do very well and not being sure if you will, not being sure if you'll ever do the things you feel you can do. In retrospect, the MFA experience here was rich and rewarding in ways that you want it to be and scary and difficult in the ways that it should be. The teachers were great, including Charlie Baxter, who has left, and Nick Delbanco and Eileen Pollack, who are still here. I am no longer having a continuous panic attack.

ROSENWAIKE: *Recently you said, "Writer's block is, for the most part, a myth perpetrated by the lazy and bought into by those driven by psychology to self-destruction. Just writing is curiously simple. (Look at how many people do it.) Writing decently isn't much harder." So how do you advise your students when they say they have writer's block?*

Your first sentence almost never belongs. Your first draft almost never belongs. I don't want to call for anyone's courage because I'm certainly as cowardly as anybody. But I do think writer's block is an excuse, or a reaction to not being perfect the first time out.

BYERS: I tell them they're full of happy horseshit. I think writing is not unpleasant. If you're willing to suffer some pain, then it's not difficult.

ROSENWAIKE: *So it's more about pain than a block?*

BYERS: Well, putting words on a page is not difficult. Undergrads suffer very little writer's block, sometimes unfortunately. What I see sometimes with the MFAs is that they feel under a pressure to produce, to succeed, and to do everything they're doing well. It's very natural because they're in a new place where their bluff has been called. They've been told to come here and be writers, and now they have to do it. They fear they're going to produce something bad and confirm all their own suspicions that in fact they don't belong. That is something you have to get used to as a writer: that you don't belong. Your first sentence almost never belongs. Your first draft almost never belongs. I don't want to call for anyone's courage because I'm certainly as cowardly as anybody. But I do think writer's block is an excuse, or a reaction to not being perfect the first time out.

ROSENWAIKE: *You grew up in Seattle, and the stories in The Coast of Good Intentions are set in the Pacific Northwest, as is your first novel, Long for This World, which chronicles a family in Seattle during the dot-com boom. What do you miss most about that region?*

BYERS: Can I say seafood? But having just been to Lake Michigan last weekend and having eaten of the blueberries and plums of Michigan, I can say I am coming to love Michigan, which is a bit of a surprise to me. Michigan rewards the patient observer, let me note. But what I miss about Seattle

are very personal things: the extent of family reach and history I have there. Those are also things that are usefully experienced from a certain distance. One's own material, rich and complex as it is, is difficult to write about when one is mostly living in it.

ROSENWAIKE: *Long for This World* follows Dr. Henry Moss, a medical geneticist who specializes in a rare disease called Hickman, in which children age prematurely and have an average life expectancy of fourteen. The descriptions of Hickman and of Henry's research are detailed and compelling. I was surprised to discover that there's no such thing as Hickman, though it seems to be closely based on a rare disease called Hutchinson-Gilford progeria syndrome. Why did you decide to create the fictional Hickman syndrome? How much license did you take in differentiating it from progeria and the research that's been done so far on that disease?

BYERS: One of the side effects of Hutchinson-Gilford is a cognitive decline that was inconvenient for me as a novelist. *Long for This World* features a character with the condition, and I needed him to be talking and thinking when it wouldn't have been plausible for him to do so. But I also felt it was more respectful of people with the condition to invent my own related version; there were various reasons I didn't attempt to represent the experience of someone who really had the disease, one of which was because that actually wasn't the point of the book.

ROSENWAIKE: *Long for This World*, as well as your new novel, *Percival's Planet*, is told through multiple perspectives. What were the rewards and challenges of writing from those different perspectives?

BYERS: It's not something I set out to do, and I suspect it's not something most people set out to do because it's just too hard. In *Long for This World* there are four narrative strands. I was just going to write from the point of view of the central character, Dr. Henry Moss. I wrote him for a while, and then his wife, Ilse, showed up on the page and started to talk. I suppose you reach a certain difficult crux in the novel where something isn't working, and you reach for some other means to tell the story. In that case it was another person in the story who could also tell parts of it. Then the kids came, Sandra first and then Darren. I had a very difficult time figuring out what to tell when, in whose point of view. How to balance the narrative machinery, to engineer, construct, run the whole thing. When I was done, I thought, I'll never do that again. Whereupon I set out and have apparently

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written a novel from the point of view of even more people, but it's a historical novel.

While writing a first novel, the constant struggle is to figure out whether you can do this, what a novel is for you. What does a novel in your voice sound like? At a point where Henry had stalled for me, I hoped that the world of the book was still alive and open and passionate in me in some fashion, so I turned to another voice to tap that passion. That's as much of a thought process as went into it. And that's the sort of thing you can't teach. I can describe that feeling and the process. I can point out the landscape to a novelist who hasn't written a novel yet, but it's their own journey.

ROSENWAIKE: *Henry wonders how Sandra and Darren (high schoolers in the present day of the novel) feel about his work: "What did they think of it all? 'I am a molecular geneticist,' he told them, and they accepted it with solemn nods." Your own father is a research geneticist in Seattle. Growing up, what did you think about his job?*

BYERS: His job impressed me because it involved engaging with the mortal world daily, something many medical people do. It strikes me now that one of the great gifts of living in the world as we do is the ability to, for a time,

put aside our thoughts of mortality—to live as though the world will last forever, as in a way for us it does. After we're gone, after all, it vanishes for us as utterly as we vanish for it.

ROSENWAIKE: *Percival's Planet traces the discovery of Pluto in 1930. Is astronomy an old love of yours?*

BYERS: Yes it is, though not in any studied or serious way. I come to astronomy from more of a science fiction angle. And from the feelings of grandeur and of exploration of the unknown that space travel and the mysteries of the cosmos present. Those feelings are engendered by the kind of scale that is not easily found elsewhere, except I suppose by people who have religious feelings, which I don't. For me there's a sweet mystery to astronomical and cosmological questions.

ROSENWAIKE: *At what point in your work on the novel did the International Astronomical Union demote Pluto from the ninth planet in the solar system to a dwarf planet, and how did that affect you?*

BYERS: That was a fabulous day. At first I thought the demotion of Pluto from planetary status was the end of my novel. Here I am writing an unfinished novel about a planet that doesn't exist anymore. Surely, someone will want to publish this. And then I saw the public reaction to Pluto's demotion. People were outraged. It turns out we love Pluto. It's the Little Planet That Could, way at the end of the solar system. It did feel as though my subject had been appropriated by chance, almost as though I'd been writing about a boat called the *Titanic* and then the *Titanic* had, coincidentally, hit an iceberg. But soon I realized, well, wait a second, this might actually be a good thing. When was the last time Pluto was in the news at all? And the question of whether Pluto is considered a planet or not led me much deeper into the discovery of the story, the questions astronomers were facing at that point, the mechanics and the history of the search itself. It led me in fact to think that the astronomers who found the object that would be called Pluto sort of knew Pluto was a questionable case for a planet in the beginning.

ROSENWAIKE: *There are people arguing for Pluto to be restored to its planetary status. Do you have a feeling about that?*

BYERS: I was talking to Kevin Schindler of Lowell Observatory, one of the great aids to this project. He was saying essentially that "planet" was the best, most appropriate word they had in 1930. There are many things called

planets that differ greatly from one another. Mercury is very different from Jupiter, and they're both called planets. Pluto, at that point, was as planet-like as anything else was. I think the astronomers who have reclassified Pluto as a dwarf planet don't mean it as a demotion. They mean it as a kind of further, more accurate description of what the object actually is. The fact that there are many of these things, at least one of them out there larger than Pluto, suggests that Pluto belongs in a category with these other things.

But the other thing that's interesting to me is the reaction that people have and the attachment that they have to the thing they were taught in school, the thing they grew up with. Nine is a cardinal number. It's three threes. It feels orderly; it feels as though the universe has been made in some rational fashion. It's uncomfortable to think of there being, say, fourteen or seventeen planets. Those numbers don't fit in the brain very well. And the fact that new planets are being discovered all the time, that there may be hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these Plutoids out there, feels distressing to people. They like to have a contained world in which to believe. It's interesting to me that the number of planets in the solar system, which has literally no impact on one's day-to-day life, should be something that people get so worked up about. It suggests how carefully we build our mental structures of the universe. To see them disrupted would be like telling us that the universe was the shape of a straw, and it was a twisty straw. It would be weird and uncomfortable.

ROSENWAIKE: *On your blog you talk about the story of your grandparents as an initial spark for the novel. Your grandfather wasn't at all involved in the discovery of Pluto, but the central romantic relationship in the book, between the astronomer Alan Barber and his mentally disturbed wife, Mary, was inspired by your grandparents. Why did you decide to write about them?*

BYERS: I never decided. They just kept presenting themselves to me as subjects. I knew my grandparents a little, but what I knew about them really was their story, which had its beginnings in what feels from this remove like glamour—they were both very successful very young—but which quickly became sordid and unhappy. My grandmother was in and out of mental institutions all her life. She lived a long time and lived alone for most of it. So the relationship I write about, that I create between Alan and Mary, is not the relationship my grandparents had. But in writing the fictional Alan and Mary, I was able to write about the difficulty of being mentally ill in the '20s, when most successful treatment amounted to a kind of benign neglect

or benign caretaking. There was very little of the medical or chemical intervention that we know today.

I suppose I wanted to write about the kinds of people I saw them to be and to see if I could explore, rewrite to a degree, the marriage they had. But that was very much a starting point. I'd been writing about them even before I was writing *Long for This World*. I had my granddad in law school at Harvard, where he was, and it was very boring to write about. So I put it down. I wrote another novel and then went back to the story of my grandparents, and somewhere along the line I picked up or remembered the fact that in the late '20s when my granddad was at Harvard they were also looking for Planet X. I thought, how interesting it would be if he were not in law school but an astronomer, whereupon his character in the novel went in a completely new direction.

ROSENWAIKE: *Alan in the book reflects on Mary's mental illness: "You did not learn about this in school. No one ever broke the news of madness to you behind the fence the way one learned about sex; this was territory no one ever spoke about." Did your family speak about your grandmother's mental illness? I guess to some degree they did, since you learned about it.*

BYERS: Like many families, mine has many people with various shades of mental illness in it. It was something that was talked about and managed and fretted over, so it was never a secret or a taboo subject. I suppose in some ways it was felt that the delicate, intelligent, too-good-for-this-world people naturally suffered from that sort of imbalance. Which is a marked change from the way such things were treated in the 1920s, despite the new emergence and infusion of psychoanalysis into the culture at that time. The work that psychologists and psychiatrists were doing in the '20s was almost anthropological, in that many observers were simply trying to figure out what happened to people who lost their minds, attempting to record what their experiences were like—in a medical, scientific, clinical way. Still, despite the careful work that was being done then, the disjunction between the medical world and the popular world was very stark.

ROSENWAIKE: *At what point in writing the book did you visit Lowell Observatory, where Pluto was discovered?*

BYERS: I had written a few drafts of the novel and had constructed what I felt was a sturdy scaffold of plot and character, so it was about two years into the writing. Visiting the observatory was incredibly instructive in

The worry one has is that there are dangers and risks of engaging in what we could call seriously empathetic experiences. You risk investing emotionally in something, feeling bad, and nobody wants to feel any worse than they already feel. Everybody feels bad enough. So the risks of engaging in some serious emotional synchrony with someone are high. . . .

many ways. The predictable ones: seeing where the buildings were, how big they were, how long it took to walk from one place to another. The factual ones: talking to a gentleman named Henry Giclas, who was a friend of Clyde Tombaugh's—the boy who discovered Pluto—and who worked with Tombaugh right after he found it. Giclas was the guy who told me where he would buy bootleg liquor and how much it cost.

But also there were things I didn't know I needed to know. I observed Clyde Tombaugh's handwriting in the actual observation logs, the very tidy, extremely careful, night-by-night observational work that he did, and the physical record of it in the logbooks. His flawless handwriting suggested to me the kind of kid he was. I was able then to see exactly the link between the boy who was able to make a telescope with mirrors on his own in the middle of a barnyard in Kansas in 1928—the incredibly meticulous work involved—and the guy who was able to pore over these photographic plates night after night after night, finding an incredibly minuscule object. I hadn't put it together in my brain yet that it was something about his nature that allowed him to do the work required to find Planet X. And I didn't know I didn't know that until I saw it on the page, whereupon it became obvious. Especially when compared to some of the earlier attempts to find Planet X and the logbooks I was able to see, which were kept by people who were looking for this object before Tombaugh. They were much more haphazardly

kept, more erratically filled out. It was a job that could be accomplished only by this kid, from this background, who didn't know what he was doing here, who was hired on a whim, who turned out to be the perfect guy for the job. Just another one of the weird cosmic coincidences that brought us Pluto in 1930, rather than in 1975 or so.

ROSENWAIKE: *Your father helped you with the representation of his field, genetics, in Long for T is World. Did you have an astronomer checking your work in Percival's Planet?*

BYERS: No, I did not. Although I have had some astronomers read it since. I think as far as it matters, the astronomy is okay. It's accurate enough. There are things I confess I still don't quite understand about the story I've written but that I feel are relatively accurate representations of what the case may have been. In such things you hope to get a minimum of hate mail from the astronomical community, and you hope to minimally bore the people whose interests lie elsewhere, not in the technical details of how to run a telescope.

ROSENWAIKE: *You've expressed the view that "serious narrative novels are among the very few artifacts that can effect a net increase in the amount of empathy in the culture. Narrative novels offer an opportunity to be concerned about other humans whom it is impossible to manipulate or from whom it is impossible to gain any advantage." What do you think we can do as a culture to get more people to read novels?*

BYERS: Oh, probably nothing. Narrative novels are particularly engineered to produce an empathetic response. But there are other ways to engender the same sort of feelings. Excellent movies, excellent television, excellent music can do all those things. The worry one has is that there are dangers and risks of engaging in what we could call seriously empathetic experiences. You risk investing emotionally in something, feeling bad, and nobody wants to feel any worse than they already feel. Everybody feels bad enough. So the risks of engaging in some serious emotional synchrony with someone are high, and they're deeply felt, which suggests the vulnerability that we have to all forms of art but also the importance of the exercise to keep one's empathetic urges or muscles in use.

It finally would come down to a matter of making people more comfortable in other ways, making them feel less threatened, allowing them the kind of mental and physical and economic space to take certain risks with their own emotional lives. When people are at risk of going hungry, or not

getting a job, or losing their house, or just feeling like they're wasting their lives with the crappy job they do have, it's an act of real daring and courage to invest in anything else that could possibly hurt you.

ROSENWAIKE: *At the end of Percival's Planet, Clyde thinks, "There's always solace somewhere if you know where to look for it." Where do you look for it?*

BYERS: You know, it feels right to write a sentence like that, but I don't have an answer to that question. I suppose it's more a question to me than a statement, although it takes the form of a statement in the novel.

ROSENWAIKE: *I'm catching you just two weeks before Percival's Planet is scheduled to be released. How are you feeling?*

BYERS: Hmm, curious. Publishing is a roulette wheel. You never know what's going to happen. Early reviews have been positive, but you can't predict how a book is going to sell or be talked about, or whether it will sink like a stone into the vast ocean of other published novels that will appear on the same day mine does. It's its own thing now, of course, like anything that's finished and published and out there in the world. In a way it has very little to do with me. It has to do with everybody's experience of it. That is where you have to trust your own effort in the past and allow yourself to think, well, I have done the best I could possibly do, and that has to be good enough now. It is, in its way, like a little space probe traveling out beyond the reach of my alterations. Its orbit cannot be changed. Its path is set and unknown to me. I am its observer.



Polly Rosenwaike

Polly Rosenwaike's fiction and book reviews have appeared in *Zyzzyva*, *River Styx*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, *The Millions* and elsewhere. She lives in Ann Arbor and teaches creative writing at Eastern Michigan University.

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