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An Interview with Madeleine Watts

[WRITER]

by Jeannie Vanasco

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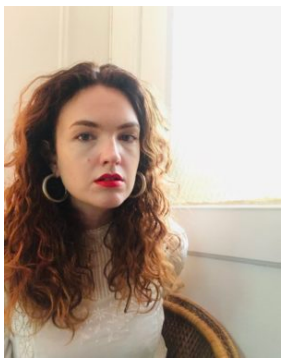

In the final weeks of 2020, my partner asked me some variation of: Didn't you just read that? How many times have you read that? Are you okay?

That *was Madeleine Watts's* The Inland Sea*, and in December I read it seven times straight-through, studying its plotlessness, or rather: the ways its narrator's reflection is the plot. On one level,* The Inland *Sea is about a young woman coming of age, and on another level, it's about the climate crisis. Both are out of control, and with both there is a lag time between what is done and what is felt.*

The unnamed narrator is a twenty-something writer feeling adrift and working as an emergency dispatch operator in Sydney. She fields pressing calls (about fires, violent husbands, and car accidents) and pointless calls (about brown boys standing on the corner, and strangers knocking on old women's front doors in the afternoon). Between calls, she reads articles on her phone about politics, books, and climate disaster. She reflects, "The reading, I thought, would keep me tethered to writing, to academia, to the life of the mind I thought was more important than being in the call center." When not in the call center, she drinks until she blacks out, hooks up with men whose names she never gets or doesn't remember, and has unprotected sex with an ex-boyfriend whose new girlfriend, an experimental poet, has no addictions (which seems, to the narrator, "to imply a level of fortitude and self-reliance that was unreasonable in a poet"). The narrator also interviews writers for a literary magazine.

The Inland Sea *shows her reflecting on personalevents that happened recently, and as a result the reader can see when she lacks insight about her risky behavior. Sometimes she acknowledges the ways she risked her safety and didn't—and in some instances still doesn't—care, or see a point in caring.* The Inland Sea *also shows the narrator reflecting on events from two centuries ago, like how her great-great-great-great-grandfather, a "feckless imperialist," had believed in an inland sea in Australia and had ignored all signs that it didn't exist. The narrator's inability or unwillingness to see the connections between her psychology and her ancestor's further contributes to her character's complexity.*

First published by UK-based Pushkin Press in May of 2020 (one of the worst possible times to release a debut book), The Inland Sea *is now available from Catapult here in the United States.* Kirkus Reviews *calls it "magnificently uncomfortable" and Leslie Jamison describes it as "almost savage in its eloquence." The American Booksellers Association named it a January 2021 Indie Next selection.*

Madeleine has been one of my favorite writers ever since I read her novella, Afraid of Waking It*, which won the* Griffith Review*'s 2015 Novella Competition.* Afraid of Waking It *is about a teenage girl who finds herself posing for a male photographer, a former teacher at her all-girl's school. "He was old enough to be my father," the narrator reflects, "although at the time that hadn't occurred to me as anything that might matter." The novella foreshadows subjects that Madeleine interrogates in* The Inland Sea*: art-making, absent fathers, mother-daughter relationships, substance abuse, the male gaze, climate change, sexual assault—the list goes on. Madeleine's stories have appeared in* The White Review, The Lifted Brow*, and* New Australian Fiction 2020*, and her essays have appeared in* Literary Hub*,* the Los Angeles Review of Books*, and* The Believer.

We talked over Zoom—her in Berlin, and me in Baltimore—shortly before The Inland Sea*'s 2021 US release. What follows is a condensed version of that conversation.*

—Jeannie Vanasco

THE BELIEVER: Your narrator interviews writers for a literary magazine, and so I like the idea of starting there—since that's what we're doing. One of the writers she inter-

views, he tells her that if she wants to be a writer, she should spend some time with "authentic voices." She then tells him about her job with the emergency call center, and he replies, "Oh, there's a story!" As a writer, what are your thoughts about his advice?

MADELEINE WATTS: I think it's horrible advice. When I first started writing the book it was right in the middle of a proliferation of first-person stories—it was when people began grouping Knausgard, Lerner, and Cusk together, like a kind of triumvirate, and there was a huge economy of personal essays on the internet. Arguments against the first-person trend often talked about navel-gazing and recommended looking outwards, away from the self. It was a classic argument: write what you know, or write what you don't know. Aside from anything else, it assumes that you as a writer will ever be able to escape your own subject position, and it assumes that one person's experience is more "authentic" than another, which is itself an idea circumscribed by a particular kind of sentimentalized class position. I don't think you ever can escape your subjectivity, not totally, and while I do think looking outwards is always a good idea for a writer, starting from the self does not seem like a bad thing to me.

BLVR: I agree completely. And I like how their exchange then transitions into the narrator's view of herself: "I liked this idea of the writer's; that I was in some way undercover in the real world reporting from the front lines of my own experience."But then, after some more reflection, she decides, "I was no different from anyone else who worked there, and my experience was the same as theirs. I was just the one writing it down."But judging by her observations of her coworkers, I get the sense she believes she is different from them. I'm wondering about the distance in the reflection—the distance between her narrating the story and her past self living the story.

MW: The narrator is somebody who doesn't have a lot of distance, or ability to reflect. And so to that extent, I think the narrator's statement—about being no different—is representative of an inability to reflect. *I* don't think she's any different from anyone else working in that call center. They're all doing the same job. The best way to do that job is to not dwell on the phone calls, and certainly not to write things down. But she's bad at the job. I don't think the act of writing or the act of recording makes anyone's experience more special than anybody else's. But I think the one thing that does make a difference is that writing makes passing thoughts concretize. She can never live in the present moment. If you're recording the present moment, you're inevitably always going to live in the past, and you're not going to be able to do anything other than dwell.

BLVR: Her belief that she feels things more intensely than others, is that important to her sense of self?

MW: Maybe to some extent? It's almost like she's a sponge. She both enjoys feeling things intensely, and wants to get a handle on it. The longer she works at Triple Zero, the more she tries to assert some kind of control over how the calls affect her. There's a scene where someone calls about his friend being attacked by a shark. She rolls her eyes a little at the man's panic, and then it's only later when she sees the shark attack reported on TV that she feels suddenly upset at herself. She doesn't want to want to continue being sponge-like, but she also doesn't want to lose her empathy.

BLVR: She does seem to believe that goodness is impossible. About Lachlan, the guy she's sleeping with regularly and who has a girlfriend, she reflects: "He was so worried about trying to be good, because, I suspect, he knew that he wasn't capable of ever really being so. None of us are." What are your thoughts about character development's relationship with the larger question of whether people are capable of change?

MW: I was really resistant, even as a child, to any kind of novel that was overly moral. You're taught to desire it, the very structure of the novel-as-novel bends towards redemption. You're taught to desire change in your primary protagonists, see them go through a journey and come out the other side. You're taught to expect a moral outcome. It's all stuff that comes from the Victorian novel, obviously, and I hated it. I've always hated it because it's not how the world is. And I didn't want to write that sort of book. The narrator doesn't really change. Nothing is resolved. There is no moral lesson to be learned. Sometimes as I was writing I would find myself writing toward a moral conclusion or personal revelation, and I would always step back from that because I didn't want the book to do that.

This all ended up blending in with nature and climate change as I thought through those ideas and kept writing the book. I was reading this excellent book by Lucy Jones, a seismologist in California. It's called *The Big Ones*, and there she talks about the history of how humans have experienced natural disasters, how they have always tried to find a reason for them. A lesson to be learned which might explain why something terrible had happened in a satisfying way. A lot of the time it was about God punishing humans for some moral infraction. I never wanted to bend the book along the arc of traditional narrative, in part because it simply isn't capable of accurately depicting how we experience the natural world right now, and what climate change does to our collective narratives.

BLVR: Climate change links the narrator's interior world to the larger world, and speaks to your novel's larger question: How or when is fear productive or rational? *The Inland Sea* also explores when we should fear ourselves. This comes up in your other fiction, especially in your novella, *Afraid of Waking It*. Were you working on the novella and the novel simultaneously?

MW: The novel came out of the novella. I wrote the novella over the winter of 2014, and it was then published in October 2015. At some point, I began thinking that I could turn the novella into a longer book. They ended up being quite separate projects, but the initial impulse was in wanting to write about women and the ways in which a particular kind of Australian masculinity has created a culture of fear over the course of the last two hundred years. There are a few threads that still tie the novella to the novel—for instance the character Clemmie is in both. I didn't want to completely tear the two apart.

BLVR: The narrators of each seem to view themselves, or their relationship to the world, differently. The narrator of the novella, still a teenager, prioritizes how men look at her. She examines the male artist's photographs of her as if they give her insight into herself. The narrator of *The Inland Sea*, though, is looking at herself more than she's being looked at by men. She wants to be looked at by men. And men do give her attention. But men's perceptions of her don't completely define how she looks at or understands herself. How much does power influence the narrators' decisions?

MW: I think it's important that the novella's narrator is seventeen, and I think it's also important that there's no father present and that she goes to an all-girls school. She's been very sheltered from power. If you're in single-sex education for six, or even thirteen years, and then you're thrust into the world as an adult woman, it can be very confusing. It was confusing for me. If men haven't been a part of your daily life in a substantial way, then you can really stumble when you first encounter male attention and gendered power dynamics for the first time. You're fantastically ill-equipped to handle them. That was my experience, at least. When you were a teenager or in your early twenties, did you ever like the idea of being a muse?

BLVR: Definitely.

MW: I've met lots of women who at that age liked the idea of being a muse, and I definitely did when I was still at school and hadn't really encountered power. I thought it was very romantic. And now I hate the idea of it. It makes my skin crawl. But I gave the narrator of the novella that perspective. She thinks it might be romantic, but she doesn't know that she will be assumed to be powerless, and that power is relational and structural, not something you can simply assert. I was reading a lot of art books when I wrote the novella, particularly about Egon Schiele and his relationship to his models, and Francesca Woodman, who mostly took photographs of herself. I was interested in how the person being painted or photographed can shape their own image, even if they aren't the one behind the camera. And I was interested in how power can shift. It's not stable.

The narrator of *The Inland Sea* is less interested in how people perceive her. But she also has less of a sense of who she is than the narrator of the novella. When I finished the book, I immediately wrote two essays, which covered a lot of the ideas I'd been thinking about in the novel. "Leave No Trace," the *Believer* essay about the lost girls of Australia, connected very much to how I was thinking about power in the novel and the way in which the narrator is playing into ideas about white womanhood in Australia and also trying to resist it in the slip-shod, half-formed way that she can. She is very afraid, but responds to the fear with a kind of pig-headedness. She puts herself in frightening situations, and so frightening things happen to her. There are so many ways in which fear is like a tumbleweed that catches everything. And the tumbleweed can't really be undone.

BLVR: How did the writing of *The Inland Sea* begin? In an essay you mention that you worked for a call center in your early twenties. Did you know back then that the job would find its way into a novel?

MW: In terms of the genesis of the book, the way it started is quite different to how it turned out, when I was still very interested in writing about those ideas I'd been thinking about in the novella—young women, agency, shifts in power. At any rate, as I went on I started writing some of those calls into scenes. I think someone read a bit of the work in progress and said the narrator needed a job. So I thought, *Well, here's a job*.

The most nonfictional parts of the book are those set in the call center. I did work at Triple Zero the year after I left university. Originally, I never intended to write about the call center, and when I was there I never wrote anything down. I never made notes, in part because that would have violated privacy laws. But the call center ended up being incredibly important because it helped channel into the book my preoccupations with the environment and apocalyptic thinking about nature. The call center ended up being the vehicle for a lot of those anxieties, and a mechanism for situating the narrator within the wider world.

BLVR: You also weave in the colonial legacy of Australia in really interesting ways. The character of Lachlan, for example. That's not his real name. She names him after the Lachlan River—which her ancestor John Oxley believed would lead to some inland sea—and so the name then gains all of this metaphoric potential. Do you think Lachlan is more of a concept than a person she actually desires?

MW: Definitely. He's an idea more than a person, to her. He represents the idea that someone or something can fix things for you, or at least lend life a sense of cohesion. She believes that he will give her some sense of stability, but he's also a way for her to structure things. I was interested in drawing a metaphorical connection to wrong-headed beliefs that exist within the context of the culture the narrator comes from: the hubris of colonialism, the violence of Australia's history, particularly as it relates to the

land and whose knowledge is privileged and respected. She has so few borders between herself and the rest of the world that internal and external emergencies become conflated to the point of being indistinguishable. It's not a perfect metaphor, but that's partly the point.

BLVR: Do metaphors or symbols come easily to you as a writer? So many of your details create atmosphere through their layers of meaning. For example, there's the marriage announcement from 1932 that disintegrates in your narrator's fingers. And then there's the clean mug that Lachlan's girlfriend, Cate, has at his place. It's the only clean dish there. What is the process like for you as a writer in finding or developing metaphors?

MW: The metaphors you just cited, those came fairly naturally. There are certain metaphors I come back to all the time. They form a pretty consistent symbolic register I'm always writing within. So, for instance, water and snakes are in just about everything I write. I'm interested in the ways in which you can use something like a snake or something like water, which are both highly symbolic. You can lean into the symbolism—like a fear of snakes being about sex, like water being liminal—and you can resist their symbolism at the same time. I try to use them responsibly, and I try to make them animate the text in a way.

BLVR: Many of your metaphors are very bodily. Your narrator bruises easily, and when she tries to get an IUD, it won't fit because her uterus is too narrow. It reminds me of your essay "Fall Risk" where you write about being first exposed to Conceptual Metaphor Theory in your university class "Metaphor and Meaning." There you write about the theory's relationship with the body. I'm wondering if you can talk about Conceptual Metaphor Theory's influence or relationship with *The Inland Sea*.

MW: I don't think I was making those connections when I was writing the book, but being exposed to Conceptual Metaphor Theory has been quite influential to how I write. I first heard about it in a class I took at university. Conceptual Metaphor Theory was proposed in the '80s, I think, and the idea is that all our most common metaphors arise from bodily experience. They come from a universal experience of things being up and being down, say, or that we speak of love in terms of journeys. It's fairly easy to pick apart because it doesn't operate seamlessly across different languages or cultures. Because nothing is that universal. But I loved it. I loved it because it felt so intuitively real to me. It's sort of how I experience the world and my body.

When I'm stressed my shoulders will seize up, or I'll get muscle cramps in my calves, my stomach will make gurgling noises. My experience of emotion is very embodied, and that bleeds into the way I write. I wanted some of the ideas of fear and control which are threaded through the book to manifest in the ways the narrator can't control what's happening to her body. She has no sense of sovereignty over her physical being. The bruising easily and the IUD failing, all of these things reinforce a feeling of being out of control. She can't achieve even the basics of good health and hygiene and personhood, even if she tries.

BLVR: I'm sure you'll get asked this a lot, but can you talk about your decision to leave your narrator nameless?

MW: One of my big preoccupations when I first started writing the book was the idea of naming things and the relationship that has to colonialism. In Australia, I grew up knowing that everything had multiple names—I lived in Sydney but I also lived on Gadigal Land, for instance. I was very aware of the historical processes that led to places being named the way they were, and I was very interested in the changeability of women's names, because my mother never changed her last name, and I'd get terribly cross if anybody called her Mrs. Watts. There was originally a lot more about naming in the book, about women changing their names for different reasons. It's still there in bits and pieces.

A lot of the books I was reading at the time had nameless narrators. I'm thinking about *The Flamethrowers* and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. In McBride's book, the character is just called Girl. And in *The Flamethrowers*, Reno is known by the place where she's from. I wanted the narrator to be namelessness because she is half-formed. I keep using the word *half-formed*, which obviously I get from Eimear McBride, but it so perfectly describes, I think, that experience of a particular kind of young womanhood. I never wanted it to resolve. I wanted her to have the potential to be anything she wanted, which comes from being left nameless, and also the loss of identity that comes from being left nameless.

BLVR: In your essay about *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, you mention that reading took on a sense of purpose for you when you were fourteen years old. It helped pull you out of your reality and conceive of a new one. The problem was, most of the books about being young that you were reading were by men. Salinger and Kerouac, for example. What are the books—not by men—that you'd recommend to your teenage self now?

MW: The books were there! But I didn't know about them. This is the problem with the canon. In terms of what I'd recommend: one of the best things I've ever read is an out-of-print novel called *For Love Alone* by Christina Stead. My novel is very much in conversation with that book. Also, *Monkey Grip* by Helen Garner. The writing of Qiu Miaojin and Mary Gaitskill and Vivian Gornick. And *Cassandra at the Wedding* by Dorothy Baker, which is the best portrait of a woman behaving badly I've yet encountered. I do

wish I had been exposed to Joan Didion earlier than I came to her. Also, Martha Gellhorn's work. I wish somebody had thrown them my way. I didn't have friends who read really, and my mom didn't read very much. My dad did, but my dad was the one who bought me Kerouac, as well as some admittedly more interesting books like *Anna Karenina*, and novels by Javier Marías, Frank Moorhouse, and Patrick White. I'm grateful for the direction he could give me, but I don't remember him ever giving me a book by a woman. There used to be a Borders in Sydney and it was the biggest bookstore in the city when I was a teenager. I read books from their displays, like *The Bell Jar* and *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras. Their displays were how I came to a lot of writers. When I became a bookseller, I had an understanding of how important the book display can be.

BLVR: Are there books you remember loving but can't return to out of a fear that they won't live up? For me, it's *Franny and Zooey.*

MW: I have the same feeling about that book. I loved it so much. I read it over and over and over again, but I worry about returning to it as an adult.

BLVR: I've definitely read your book over and over and over again. Mostly to study, as a writer, how its narrator assembles plot out of reflection. It does what the best essays and memoirs do. I don't mean to imply it's nonfiction, but the way it's constructed makes the narrator feel so three-dimensional, as if *The Inland Sea* is the book she wrote.

MW: The associative quality comes from the nonfiction I was reading while I was writing it. The books that were really exciting me the whole way through writing *The Inland Sea* were creative nonfiction. I really studied your first book, *The Glass Eye*. Also the work of Maggie Nelson and Eula Biss. And nature writers like Philip Hoare, or historical writing like Eduardo Galeano's. Those books made me feel excited about what books could be. The ways in which the book can feel nonfictional is because I was learning narrative strategies from nonfiction, or from essay novels, like *Speedboat* and *Sleepless Nights.*

BLVR: *Speedboat*, that book blew my mind open. I wish I'd been assigned it in college. Speaking of which, I'd like to assign your novel to my nonfiction students, if you'd be okay with that. I'm always looking for ways to fit fiction and poetry into my nonfiction classes. I'd make sure that students understand the narrator isn't you. I'd assign it along with your essays.

MW: I would love that. I find especially at an MFA—and I know this is, to some extent, shop talk—but it drives me insane that in most literary programs, if you're writing fiction, you're taught to study only novels and short stories. And if you're writing nonfiction, you read strictly nonfiction, and if you're writing poetry, you read poetry. But you can learn so much from other genres, regardless of what you're studying. It was groundbreaking for me to study writers like William Gass and Anne Carson and Annie Ernaux.

BLVR: Oh, Annie Ernaux. I read and reread and reread her books. My partner laughs at me because I'll make a big bowl of popcorn before I read Annie Ernaux, as if to prepare for a movie.

MW: Every single time I read anything by her, I feel like I've been knocked over the head with a brick. She's a wonderful example of somebody who isn't easily bound by genre. Her books were so important in how I started thinking about what books could be and what novels could be and how you could break things down.

It's interesting you say that my novel can be read alongside some of my essays, because I think a lot of the essays that I'm most proud of are very much in conversation with the novel. Some of them were written right after finishing it, but before doing edits on it, and were very much instances where I was thinking through what I'd written.

BLVR: Words like *brilliant* and *masterpiece* get thrown around a lot, but your writing—I can't easily express how much I love it. I hope *The Inland Sea* gets the attention that it deserves. 2020 was a hard time to release a book, but I think 2021 will be better.

MW: It seemed like nobody read anything for the first three months of the pandemic because of the stress and fear we were all feeling, and then everyone started to hold art close to them. It's the greatest consoler.

CONTRIBUTOR

Jeannie Vanasco is the author of two memoirs, *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* and *The Glass Eye*. *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl*—a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a *Kirkus* Best Book of the Year, and a *TIME* magazine Must-Read Book of the Year—was published by Tin House Books in 2019 and comes out in paperback this fall. *The Glass Eye*—honored as an Indie Next selection and an Indies Introduce selection by the American Booksellers Association—was published by Tin House Books in 2017. She lives in Baltimore and is an assistant professor of English at Towson University.

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