



BALTIMORE WRITERS CLUB

## Vivid Bursts of Imagined Lives: Q&A with Marian Crotty, Author of 'Near Strangers'



by Katie Cortese  
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Marian Crotty's short stories do not waste time. Every carefully crafted opening line in her dynamo of a collection, *Near Strangers* (Autumn House, 2024), kicks off both plot and character development with the satisfying jerk of a roller coaster about to take the reader on one hell of a ride. "I'm writing to apologize," begins the epistolary story "Dear Matt," as one estranged sister tries to reconcile with the other through the new Mormon husband who indirectly caused their rift in the first place. In the story that opens the collection, "Halloween," which was also chosen for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories 2020*, the narrator begins by telling the reader, "My grandmother Jan had fucked-up ideas about love." Each of the eight stories begins with a bang and then proceeds to illuminate the tumultuous, engrossing, and deeply human lives of characters who, while distinct from each other, have in common either their queerness or storylines that engage with queer themes.

As quickly as Crotty gets the emotional thrill rides of her stories underway, she simultaneously envelops her readers in the minds and hearts of characters navigating real-world, and often devastating scenarios that cause them to reevaluate long-term relationships with spouses, siblings, romantic partners, parents, children, and complete strangers, as in the title story, which follows a rape crisis advocate who seeks out the temporary rush of being needed by strangers in extremis to assuage the pain and examine the cause of being cut out of her adult son's life. *Near Strangers* was selected for the 2023 Autumn House Fiction Prize by Pam Houston, who praises the book for its “funny, soulful, wry” characters “coming of age in the death throes of capitalism, at the rise of gender fluidity, doing their best to forge an identity at an increasingly precarious time.”

Also a writer of nonfiction and the author of the short story collection *What Counts as Love*, which won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize and was longlisted for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize, Marian Crotty is an Associate Professor of Writing at Loyola University Maryland and a contributing editor at *The Common*. Recently, as she navigated an unstable Internet connection from one of the hurricanes recently sweeping up the East Coast, Marian and I met over Zoom to talk about her recent book, her writing process, and who has the right—and maybe the imperative—to tell stories.



**Baltimore Fishbowl: *Near Strangers* is a gorgeous collection featuring a cast of female characters, many of whom identify as queer. Do you consider this a linked collection?**

Marian Crotty: Thank you, first of all. I think of it as a collection of stories in which people are wrestling with similar questions. When I wrote a lot of this in the early days of the pandemic, I was thinking a lot about how much I missed the small everyday interactions with people I didn't know that well. I realized that I was writing a lot of stories about people whose seemingly insignificant relationships meant a lot to them. And then, on the other hand, I was writing stories, sometimes the same stories, about relationships people thought of as close but that they didn't understand as well as they thought they did.

**BFB: Relatedly, the narrators in *Near Strangers* range from teens to senior citizens. Obviously, you can relate to some of those experiences, but how do you write from the perspective of characters who are different from you?**

MC: What I like most about fiction is the ability to imagine and empathize with people and

experiences that I haven't had, while at the same time I'm always trying to think about being fair to people and being conscious of my own blind spots. Coming up with characters is always a balance between what I've experienced, what I've observed, and what I can research. I remind myself that I'm creating one individual person and not trying to represent a group.

**BFB: In a previous interview, you described place as being “huge” for you. In *Near Strangers*, stories took place in Michigan, Utah, North Carolina, South Dakota, and elsewhere. How did the settings end up being so diverse.**

MC: I read this nonfiction book called *Real Queer America* that argued the experiences of queer people in the center of the United States were misunderstood. The assumption was their lives were bleaker than they actually were. I was inspired by that book and intentionally chose places that weren't New York or LA. I visited South Dakota, and when I came back, everybody was like, “Oh, like that must have been weird and interesting.” It was actually really delightful. People were really nice and had a lot of progressive ideas, at least the people I was talking to. But there were also challenges that I don't see in my day-to-day life. I met a lot of queer people who either weren't out or had coworkers and friends who weren't open about their identities. Like, “Oh, yeah, I've known this lady for twenty years. She just came out to me.” That's not something I see in my life, but in many other ways, I left thinking that Sioux Falls would be a really great place to live.

**BFB: How did you decide where to visit?**

MC: Some of it was fairly strategic. Sioux Falls, South Dakota, at the time, had the lowest score from the Human Rights Coalition's state equality index. It's sort of a testing ground for a lot of anti-LGBTQ legislation. I was wondering what it would be like to live there. Too, I wanted to go to Utah because, on the one hand, for a while some of the most progressive laws were coming out of there, which surprises people, but it was because of an agreement between the legislature and the LDS church. People agreed to keep things separate. On the other hand, there were a lot of queer kids in really difficult circumstances in Utah, and rates for self-harm and suicide were particularly high. So, some of it was an intellectual choice because I couldn't go to, like, nine different places. Some of it was places where I had lived or where I had visited and found it interesting. Such as Las Cruces, New Mexico.

**BFB: That wonderful place. Wonderful food. Your stories also vary in style and POV. There's first person, third, collective. "Dear Matt" is epistolary. What advantages do disparate perspectives offer?**

MC: In the writing process, there's a huge advantage, because a perspective often allows me into a story. For instance, in "Family Resemblance" all these families are connected by the same sperm donor. I was really struggling to write that story for, I would say, over a year. I could never figure out the crowd control because it was about these families meeting up, and there were so many people, but once I told it in the "we" perspective, it made more sense, and it was much easier to write. It's the story of a group as opposed to being the story of an individual. It was more fun to write it that way, and it also was possible to tell the story in that way.

**BFB: So trial and error, but the story also teaches you how to write it. Your sentences have music to them, but they're also precise. Are you more driven by the sound and emotional impact of language or by its utility?**

MC: Thanks. Definitely the second one. I love reading books by people that are thinking about language. I just read an interview with Justin Torres, and he was talking about how he writes sentence by sentence, and that's just not how my mind works. I'm trying to make sense first, and when I reread it, I'm thinking about how it sounds.

**BFB: Ah, the rhythm comes in during revision. What barriers have you faced in your writerly journey?**

MC: I've definitely had periods of time where I've struggled with self-doubt. I'll be sending a story out for a year, and nobody wants it. It's helpful to remember that all of this takes time, and you can't judge yourself by one thing you've written. Not everything I write is going to be for everybody. As a reader, there are books that I respect, that other people love, but for whatever reason, I just don't get them. They're just not for me, but I'm still happy they exist in the world. It's important not to conflate yourself with the work. And I always feel inspired to write when I'm reading something great. That's a way back into wanting to write again.

**LAUNCH** Marian Crotty will discuss and sign copies of her book, *Near Strangers*, at The Ivy