

Heather Treseler

On her life as a blossoming writer: the beauty and strength of a woman of words

By **Melissa Dognazzi**

What does it take to be a successful working writer, to become an acknowledged, distinguished, and respected woman in the literary world? Whatever that answer may be, Dr. Heather Treseler, of Worcester State University, can at least vouch for the commitment, diligence, and passion that is required to achieve such a status. Both in the classroom and on the paper, this professor and poet is notably a master of her craft.

Since earning a B.A. in Comparative Literature from Brown University (2002) and, as a Presidential Fellow, a Ph.D. in English at the University of Notre Dame (2010), Treseler attributes her education to others with the same desire to learn. With her talents focused in creative writing and American Literature, she is an Assistant Professor of English at Worcester State University.

Apart from her duties to her students, Treseler has an array of established publications. Her poetry has appeared in the *Harvard Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Pleiades*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Boulevard*, *The Laurel Review*, and *Margie*, among other literary journals. It is her daring and sophisticated poetry that establishes this writer in the literary arena. In 2012, her poem “In the Apothecary” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Two years later, she was chosen as the “Emerging Poet” at the Massachusetts Poetry Festival, where she is a continuous presenter. Her essays about post-war American poetry appear in three books: *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century* (2012); *The Salt Companion to John Matthias* (2011); and *Dunstan Thompson, On the Life and Work of a Lost American Master* (2010). She is also a



contributing editor of both nonfiction and poetry at *Boulevard*.

With her witty way of words and personable sense, Dr. Heather Treseler is a role model for both scholars and aspiring writers alike. Although she is busy and dedicated to her wordsmith-trade, I was able to inquire about her life as a flourishing writer.

Q: Growing up in Boston, a city that is known for both its academic resourcefulness and beauty, certainly seems enriching. Would you say that your background influenced your writing? When did you first identify yourself as a writer?

A: Boston was a great backyard; I was born in Readville, a working-class section of Hyde Park. Later, my parents jitterbugged around the suburbs, buying and fixing old houses, [...] and eventually, my parents bought a dilapidated Victorian in Newton that had been owned by the nephew of the notorious Boston mayor James Michael Curley. The mayor's unmarried nephew, Arthur Curley, had died in the house, and he became the Miss Havisham of our childhood—whenever a door sprung ajar or a faucet was found running, we attributed it to our resident

poltergeist. I wrote my first poem (about a stained glass window) shortly after we moved into the Curley house. It was perfectly dreadful, but I was smitten with the music of words. I lucked into parents for whom schooling was everything; libraries were playgrounds; and Boston's theaters and museums were for children of any age. My father was an English teacher who became a professional running coach; I shared his inclinations and spent much of my childhood moored in books or running in circles. I was also the shy introvert in an otherwise rambunctious household of six: all of us were competing to finish each other's sentences. So, writing stories and poems felt necessary. Language was intensely pleasurable, and writing became a way to find—and finish—my thoughts. My first published essay was heretical. When I was twelve, I refused to go to church because I didn't want to "patronize the patriarchy." I made that declaration loudly in the church parking lot one Sunday morning, and the Jesuit pastor came to my parents' rescue: He knew, somehow, that I liked to write, and he suggested that I write an essay about my objections to church doctrine. So yes, growing up in a storied city with its heterogeneous mix of ethnicities, classes, and cultural traditions, with its libraries and universities, with its artists, Jesuits, and heretical opportunities was useful. After a spell in the Midwest for graduate school, I was glad to return home to New England in 2010.

Q: Is poetry your preferred genre or do you like to write in other genres as well?

A: Each genre offers constraints and possibilities. I find poetry the hardest and yet also, in many ways, the most attractive given its intense aestheticism. One of my mentors, the poet Michael Harper, quipped that "poetry is shorthand": It attempts to say something particular and even necessary within a limited space, with an economy of

words, with emphasis on both the sonic and semantic reaches of language. It's often hard as hell, so I retreat and work in other veins. I was trained as a literary historian, so I write essays about postwar and contemporary American poets as well as memoir essays and book reviews. I bought my first bright red car with a prize I won for a novella in college. Initially, I went to graduate school in literature because I wanted time to read and to turn the novella into a novel. Within a year, I realized I needed to get serious about training as a literary scholar, so I shelved the novel but continued to write poems and essays alongside criticism. And that's the mode in which I'm still working.

Q: When you write – in any particular medium – do you follow a specific routine?

A: I prefer to write first thing in the morning. But in reality, I've learned to write virtually anywhere and at almost any time of day. The responsibilities of adulthood keep one from being too much of an OCD-riddled prima donna. As it turns out, one doesn't *actually* need to be wearing the holy navy blue sweatshirt or gazing at a statue of Immanuel Kant to write a decent line. At some point, I realized that gentle zephyrs, absolute quiet, and a perfectly titrated latte are optional; the muse can be paused while you retrieve the laundry, greet the mailman with a suspicious level of enthusiasm, bargain with the neighbor's operatic dog, or reply to a student's email. Writing is physically and intellectually demanding, and you have to prime the pump.

Q: You've interviewed many writers yourself, including poet Maxine Kumin. Has the ability to connect with such prominent writers impacted or inspired your writing?

A: I was lucky in getting to meet Saul Bellow, Maxine Kumin, Peter Davison, Sarah Ruhl, and other writers while I was fairly

young. I also got to hear Salmon Rushdie, William Styron, and Toni Morrison read in intimate settings while I was in college. All of these writers were honest about the perspiration in inspiration, the inglorious labor in high art. They reinforced that there is no one portal, no set entry-point for literary achievement. No one is given a red carpet. While literature is part of the entertainment business, and it's very important not to be a Pollyanna about that, it is not any more exclusionary than any other profession.

Q: Is there any advice you would like to give to aspiring writers?

A: Read everything—from the classics to cartoons, from Charles Dickens to children's books. Investigate—and get yourself inside—another system of knowledge whether that's organic chemistry, mycology, or a foreign language. Find an audience (in any genre) and an honest critic. Remember that engaging an audience is the difference between a Saturday diarist, yodeling his or her angst and disillusionment, and the well-known memoirist, novelist, journalist, or poet.

Q: Could you say that teaching your craft makes a difference in your writing as a professional?

A: I teach [a poetry course] as a combination of a literature seminar and a workshop, so my students are sometimes surprised to find that the reading list is as comprehensive as an advanced literature course. Also, I ask students in the workshop to write in several "complementary" genres. So, while they compose a booklet of poems, they might also work on a memoir essay, a book review, a dramatic monologue, an exegesis, or a prose *ars poetica*. Dexterity in several genres—being able to adapt one's style and pitch to suit particular content and audiences—is important at almost every stage. Teaching poetry schools me in this fact, and it prompts

me to think critically about internal processes that might otherwise remain opaque.