

An Interview with Sandra Gilbert

By Josh Cembellin & Samantha Lê

We sat down one afternoon to speak with Sandra M. Gilbert about her semester as Lurie Distinguished Visiting Writer at San Jose State University. Professor Gilbert was very warm. She invited us into her office, where we noticed that her only personal belongings were a few books resting on a large wooden shelf. Yet despite the lack of embellishments, Professor Gilbert decorated the room with her enthusiasm, optimism... and a Diet Coke.

Josh Cembellin: What was your motivation for accepting the Lurie Position?

Sandra Gilbert: That's easy! I retired from teaching at Davis three or four years ago, and what I miss the most is teaching verse writing workshops, both undergraduate and graduate ones. Especially graduate ones where you get people who really care about their writing and are devoted to learning more about their craft and trying a range of experiments.

Samantha Lê: Are the classes usually the same, or are they always different for you every time?

SG: Every class is different. The dynamics of every group are different. It depends on the individuals in the group, and I can't predict from year to year and group to group. That's what makes it interesting, too. And it's very interesting for me because when I give people, what I see a number of you call prompts—I guess that's a word that's in a lot of use now, but I used to call exercises or poetry ideas—I often do some of that stuff myself. So it's very good for me. I find that when I'm leading a workshop, I often write too.

JC: What are you most looking forward to during your time at SJSU?

SG: Well, I would have to say all my classes. My other class, Topics in Women's Literary History, surprisingly, because it is a mix of undergraduate and graduate students, struck me as very interesting and fun. So I'm very excited about that because I get to teach several books that I co-edited with Susan Gubar; but I've never actually taught the theory book, so I'm interested in that. However, I would be less than honest if I didn't say that I'm most excited about the poets.

JC: Is there anything that you would like to take from your experience at SJSU?

SG: I think what I take away from all my experiences teaching is that I learn a lot. I always learn. I hope I learn new strategies as a teacher, but I learn from students. I learn the ideas that my students have and from teaching different texts in different ways. Also, I learn how to read new poems and new stories in surprising fashions.

SL: Do you teach fiction as well or always poetry?

SG: I have taught fiction, but it's been a long time. And I certainly would not feel as competent to teach fiction as I do to teach poetry. Something I've never taught, which is what I actually write a lot now, is non-fiction, "memoiristic" prose. At Davis, for example, we only just started

having a specialist in creative non-fiction. I've never taught it, but I would be interested. Certainly, when I was teaching at Princeton where there was no graduate verse writing program, or creative writing, but there was a very rich and amazing undergraduate program, but I don't think there was any creative non-fiction.

SL: But that's very popular now. Everybody's going to that genre.

SG: It's so popular now. I know, that's something that, one of these days, I'll hope somebody will want me to teach. I know people who show me manuscripts that they would like my views of. And I would have to say that even though I write it, I would need to learn how to teach it. Because, since I've never done it, I don't know what works best with students. It would be challenging, but it would be interesting.

JC: Are there any particular authors, or memoirists, that you like?

SG: Oh, that's too hard. Impossible! I mean there are so many amazing memoirists—certainly Nancy Meyers, who writes a lot about disability, for example. You know, there are so many people. There was that Joan Didion book *The Year of Magical Thinking* that was on the top of the Best Seller's list for a long time. Every issue of the Times Book Review has another interesting set of memoirs that they blueprint. It almost gets to be too competitive a form.

One of my favorite creative non-fiction writers is Susan Griffin. She's wonderful, marvelous; she's got an uncanny way; she's a poet, but she's also a writer of creative non-fiction. And she's wonderful at incorporating personal memories and autobiographical material with meditative ideas and reportage; and that's hard to do. I note how hard it is to do, and that's why I would approach teaching such a course with some trepidation, because I would not know yet how to teach people to do it. I'm still trying to teach myself!

JC: In the graduate poetry workshop, you're focusing on the "Estrangement and the Art of Poetry." How did you come up with this concept and what makes it a successful approach?

SG: Well let's hope it's a successful approach. I taught that course before at Davis with different texts. I added a new mix of texts and some new prompts. But I actually think that poetry is a way of defamiliarizing or estranging the world. I actually think that poetry is looking at everything in a new way, as if you were seeing it, not for the first time necessarily, but from a strange perspective, like in that poem by Craig Raine, "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home." Looking at the world with Martian eyes or in some strange way lets you really have a fresh sense. I think the most important thing is to get people to flee from clichés.

JC: Since women's literature classes are not often offered at SJSU, what are some important ideas you hope that your students will take away from your class

SG: I can't believe that! Maybe you shouldn't quote me, but I can't believe that in 2009 there aren't more courses. I have met a couple of people in the English Department who have said that they would like to teach those courses. The most important idea that I want people to take away...two major ideas: one is that there are female literary traditions; there are literary

traditions that are shaped by women as a gendered group. But moreover, there are ways in which writing by both men and women are shaped and reflected as we would expect: by gender identity. And it's just so important, and it seems to be now so, not obvious, but important. That's what I want people to take away.

SL: I think it's something that fell through the cracks here.

SG: There was a moment in the '70s and '80s when everybody was doing that and establishing Women's Studies programs and Gender Studies programs, and now there are even Masculinity programs. And if that moment went by, then the energy probably would have lapsed.

JC: How would you compare the Bay Area to other locations in which you've taught and lived?

SG: Since the Bay Area is my favorite part of the world other than Paris and Florence, I would say it's the nicest place to teach! There is a difference. There was always a difference between—I would say this particularly about undergraduate poets—my undergraduate poets at Princeton and my undergraduate poets at Davis. Graduate students are more sophisticated. But my California students were more free and imaginative. My Princeton students were more uptight. It was very hard to get them to think metaphorically. So some of the things I did with this estrangement course I may actually have begun thinking about while I was at Princeton, because they were very good at doing strict forms. They were better than my California students at writing sonnets, and they got very upset if I didn't assign sonnets and villanelles. I think that the general kind of student who goes to Princeton is maybe more "Sciencey" or more quantitative. It was hard to get them to loosen up.

SL: Do you think it's a cultural difference between the schools or a result of their location, such as a difference between East Coast and West Coast writers?

SG: I thought of it as an East Coast, West Coast difference. You also could say it's an Ivy League difference, but I'm not sure. I taught at Indiana, and it's true that the Indiana students are more like the California students--more good at being imaginative, and less good at uptight, strict, formal kinds of writing. I prefer to start working with imaginative students and then get them to learn how to write strict forms. It took me a long time to realize at Princeton what I had to do to get kids who weren't used to thinking in a visionary or metaphorical way to think like that. It was an interesting challenge.

SL: Do you think poetry can be taught?

SG: Yes. I think there has to be some innate passion for poetic thinking. But I think it's possible to, especially in a workshop where there are a lot of people collaboratively thinking about their art, get people to imagine new ways of writing and stretch themselves creatively. I mean if there's nothing there then there's no interest in it. But people who take a workshop must have some interest, and there must be something to be taught. I hope it can be; otherwise what am I doing?

SL: A lot of people think you can get better, but you have to already be a poet at the core.

SG: You could also make the argument that many, many people are potentially poets who don't even know they are. And then of course, there might be people who think they're poets...but I like to be very optimistic about the possibilities for what people can learn. I have a body of material to teach in the women's lit course. There are actual, not just ideas, but facts, that I can transmit. I don't think that's so much true in a verse writing seminar. I think there's something that people can get out of it, something people can gain, something that I gain. And if I can gain then other people can gain, to put it very narcissistically!

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Sandra M. Gilbert is the author of seven collections of poetry, a memoir, an anthology of elegies, along with a number of critical works and essays. For a complete biography and list of publications, please visit: www.sandramgilbert.com

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