

Next Paisano Fellow shares tall tales, not-so-tall tales and “Birdisms”

Posted on **October 13, 2009** by **Kathleen Mabley**



Sarah Bird’s favorite description of herself as an author came from a high school student who was forced to attend a literary reading by her English teacher. She says, “Sarah Bird was tall and thin and wore these cute reading glasses on the tip of her nose. If I recall correctly, she forgot her reading glasses and had to borrow somebody’s in the audience. Regardless of the reading glasses situation, she was very genuine and you could just tell on her face she did not write novels for money, she wrote novels because she loved writing. Her short excerpts to me seemed like a complete novel of their own. I mean she specifically picked pieces she loved, but the details just filled up like a complete novel. I really enjoyed this reading, and I definitely got some laughs out of it.”

Laughs and enjoyment seem to be two key aspects of writing novels for Sarah Bird and they were plentiful on Thursday night (10/8/09) as Bird was welcomed as the next Dobie Paisano Fellow during an event in her honor on The University of Texas at Austin campus. Bird will hold the Ralph A. Johnston fellowship for established writers during her time on the Paisano ranch.

Bird enchanted the audience with witty tales of her younger self (who would be insanely jealous of her new fellowship), excerpts from her writing (including channeling her “Zen Mama” to deal with a teenage child) and stories from the front lines of Houston high society.

A columnist for *Texas Monthly* and the author of seven novels, Bird’s writing career has won her many awards and accolades. These include the *Elle Magazine* Reader’s Prize, Amazon’s Fiction

and Literature Editors and the American Library Association’s Booklist Editors Best Book of the Year and the Texas Institute of Letters’s Award for Best Work of Fiction (twice) among others.

Becoming an author was not Bird’s dream as a little girl. As the child of a military family, much of her youth was spent overseas with little exposure to writers. She says,

“The idea of being a writer never crossed my mind until I discovered a form so, hmmm, let’s say, ‘approachable,’ that it occurred to me that human beings might be producing it rather than the gods who wrote the books I loved. This form was the photo-romance. I discovered the photo-romance when I was an au pair in France. Ostensibly, I was in France learning French. Actually, I was fleeing a very bad love affair. In any case, I was a 20-year-old nitwit and the only person whose French was worse than mine was the three-month-old bebe I was taking care. So I started buying photo-romances as a shy person’s way of learning the colloquial language.

When I returned home, I sought out a comparable market in the United States and discovered true confession magazines.. .These publications allowed me to learn how to tell a story in a voice that was not my own, to sink deeply into a character and her world, but, most importantly, since these ‘confessions’ were all anonymous, they allowed me to simply learn how to fill up pages with no thought whatsoever that they would ever be associated with me.”

As she has clearly learned how to do more than “fill up pages,” Bird still expressed “utter delight and astonishment” upon learning that she was chosen for the fellowship. The last time she applied for a fellowship more than 25 years ago, (the Paisano fellowship, as a matter of fact) she was turned down. She says it took this long to get up the nerve to apply again. That might also have to do with the fact that her friend Terry Galloway, who did win the fellowship that year, tried to make her feel better by extolling the more rustic virtues of the ranch – including rattlesnakes and scorpions.

Bird, who will live on the ranch with her “Texas boy” husband, is undaunted by the critters and is looking forward to the proximity to nature as she works on a rewrite of her next novel for her publisher, Alfred A. Knopf.

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