



Q&A with Daphne Kalotay

By Baylea Jones

Q. The fine arts, especially music, play a major role in your novel, *Sight Reading*. It's the thread connecting the three main characters Remy (a violinist), Hazel (an artist), and Nicholas (a composer). What is your personal relationship to music, and how has it shaped your writing of this piece?

A. Music was an important element of my upbringing. My mother taught modern dance and was knowledgeable about music in general, always up on the latest experimental this or rock-n-roll that. The radio in my parents' bedroom was permanently tuned to the classical station and always on; when I began playing viola in orchestras as a young girl, works from the classical canon became an even stronger part of my childhood. In terms of how music shaped my writing, there is the simple fact that it offered itself up as a subject for *Sight Reading* and that I felt I knew enough about the topic not to shy away from it. On a more specific level, I was able to access the inner workings of my characters through their relationship to music rather than the usual personality descriptors; I had a whole other entry point into their psyches. I should point out that because music itself is a language, with its own specific vocabulary and techniques, an understanding of music is excellent preparation for the work of crafting prose. I noted this when I spoke to a class at Berklee College of Music; because they were musicians, the students immediately grasped the concept of craft, which is something not all new writers understand.

Q. *Sight Reading*, weaves seamlessly between three alternating perspectives (Hazel, Remy, and Nicholas). How did you handle the shifts in voice? Was it ever difficult to juggle all three distinct personalities?

A. The shifts in perspective came naturally to me, as did any subtle changes in voice. One thing I do remember consciously deciding was that the shifts should not rely on stating the character's name; that is, the reader should sense innately, from the tonal attitude of the narration, whose perspective I'm in. Early on I was

able to imagine Hazel and Nicholas in any scene and know exactly what they would think, say, do, but Remy was longer in coming to me. It took me years to figure out exactly what her character arc would be and to locate where she would end up, emotionally, by the end of the book.

Q. *Sight Reading* is your second novel. How was your writing process different, if at all, from your debut novel *Russian Winter*?

A. While *Russian Winter*, too, is told from three points of view, the prose in *Sight Reading* is much more internal, closely tracking the emotional shifts of its three protagonists. The challenge was therefore to create a compelling narrative out of quotidian subject matter such as love, heartbreak, professional ambition, and friendship. In *Russian Winter*, the storyline involved matters of life and death: political betrayal, escape from the Iron Curtain. The main challenge was to portray the objective "truth" of the situation even when the characters themselves were in the dark or in denial.

Q. Your collection *Calamity and Other Stories* was your first major publication. How was the short story form different from writing your novels?

A. My stories are quite short, about 18 pages on average, so I was accustomed to packing a lot into a sentence and often used a somewhat clipped way of presenting and summarizing information. The most difficult thing for me to learn when I began writing *Russian Winter* was how to unpack sentences and slow things down. The beauty of a novel is that you can take your time building scenes and storylines. I needed to learn to pause, to breathe, to allow the reader to sink deeper into the narrative. A novel is like a bath; the reader wants to relax into it and let the water move around her. I had to learn how to do that, one sentence and paragraph at a time.

Q. Though *Sight Reading* takes place almost exclusively in Boston, your first novel *Russian Winter* traverses both Boston and Moscow. You currently live in Boston, but what is your connection to Russia? How do you evoke place when writing?

A. I had never been to Russia when I wrote *Russian Winter*, but I had been to Communist Hungary—where my father grew up—to visit my family. Because of my up-close encounters with that world, I had the confidence to write about Stalinist Moscow. That said, it took years of research to be able to write with authority. I read books and articles, watched documentaries, interviewed people. I was reassured by how many of the images I came across in my research reminded me of Soviet-era Budapest. Through my research, I filled notebook after notebook with particulars of time and place: the food, the music, the clothing, the jewelry, the social nuances, etc. It was those little details that helped me evoke the setting and imagine the inner landscape of my book. Every scene that I wrote was built on those specifics.

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