

Victoria Redel

Victoria Redel's gene pool is flagrantly transnational, her DNA story lines cross many European and Middle Eastern borders, extending to several of the more esoteric sites of diasporic Jewry: her mother – a noted ballet teacher and school director, Romanian; her mother's father, Egyptian born; her mother's grandfather, a composer and a flautist, lived in Persia. Her father is Belgian and his parents Polish. Such international borders twice became a matter of life or death to the family – as, tragically, they are yet again now for so many migrants and immigrants here -- first in 1940 when her father as a boy and his parents were among the 86 Jewish passengers lacking visas on board the passenger ship *Quanza*. The US State Department initially prohibited those 86 from disembarking in the United States and were about to be returned to Europe and likely death when Eleanor Roosevelt intervened and persuaded her husband, the president, to grant them entry. Redel's mother, in turn, arrived in 1942, after having spent two years in Nazi occupied Paris.

So perhaps it's not too surprising that Redel herself crosses so many boundaries in her own distinguished literary career. A Dartmouth graduate majoring in visual arts, and determined through a series of post-college odd jobs to be a poet, she enrolled in the Columbia University MFA program in poetry. While there, she drifted into a course taught by the notorious Gordon Lish and, under his influence, decided to add fiction writing to her repertoire. As if to underline this twinned allegiance, her first book of poetry, *Already the World* (winner of the Tom and Stan Wick Poetry Award), and her first book of short stories, *Where the Road Bottoms Out*, were both published in the same year, 1995. The stories are almost all told from female points of view, whether an obsessive mother, a trio of immigrant sisters striving for assimilation, women at odds and women unhinged. The poems explore many variants of the erotics of single, married, and parental womanhood in even more focused fashion. All her writing, whether prose or poetry, clearly display Redel's fierce determination to shed persisting pieties and conventions of literary language and literary characters, and to expose often unsettling truths.

This would be the heterogeneous pattern for the ambitious publishing program that Redel has sustained: she has now published five books of fiction (two of them short story collections); three books of poetry; and is working on a book of essays. Her first novel, *Loverboy*, picks up on the theme adumbrated in some of the short stories, the obsessed mother who loves her child almost to death. *Loverboy* was a Barnes and Noble Great New

Writers Discovery Selection; the winner of the 2001 S. Mariella Gable Novel Award, the 2002 Forward Literary Fiction Prize, and was chosen as a 2001 Los Angeles Times Best Book, and was adapted for a film directed by Kevin Bacon.

Her second novel, the *Border of Truth*, retells the story of the *Quanza*, with a young character, somewhat modeled on her father, who becomes not only the center of the drama on the ship but, we discover, also of an earlier family drama bearing on his own survival in Nazi Europe. Another character, modeled perhaps on Redel herself, many years later slowly unpacks the secrets of the voyage and her father's deeper secrets. *Swoon*, her second volume of poems, hones in relentlessly on the passions, pathologies, and perspectives of women trying to come to terms with families, culture, and libido. *Swoon* was a finalist for the James Laughlin Poetry Award. Another volume of short stories, with the splendid title and title story, *Make Me Do Things*, returns in fresh, sometimes startling, ways to many of the issues involved as women and men attempt to fashion a plausible life among everyday obstacles and absurdities.

Female friendships, crises, and epiphanies occurring as matters of life and death are enacted and experienced by a group of lifelong friends, all about the age Redel is now, are the core of her just published third novel, *Before Everything*, from which she will read this evening. Redel's truths in this book are hard-won and persuasive, the fruits of her more than two decades of courageous commitment to brave, acute writing about contemporary women. Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Cunningham, has written of this book:

"Gorgeous, a heartbreaker, a non-stop dazzler, a major achievement. Thank you, Victoria Redel."

In short, we are especially delighted tonight to welcome back to the Upper Valley poet, novelist, short-story writer, essayist, Sarah Lawrence College faculty member, Victoria Redel.