



Jane McCafferty

Thank You for the Music
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The stories in *Thank You for the Music* are deeply rooted in place, many of them western Pennsylvania in particular, which is where you live. How important is place to you when writing, i.e. would your stories change significantly if you lived in Hawaii?

I consciously chose to set many of these stories in Pittsburgh where I've now lived for about 18 years. I was trying to use language and story to give me a deeper sense of connection to the city. I was trying to feel more at home here, and figured one way to do that was to let the city breathe through my fiction. Place is enormously important to me as a writer; I see my characters in specific landscapes that shape them. I think any one of my characters transported from Pittsburgh to sunny California might have a substantial identity crisis. So yes, I'm sure if I moved someplace else my stories would change.

I've lived in Philadelphia, and spent some time in San Francisco, and both of those cities show up in this collection. I don't think I've ever set a story in a city where I haven't spent significant time before.

Many of your characters struggle to make sense of the confusing world around them. Are they a reflection of how you see the world? Is writing the way you make sense of the world?

Do I see the world as confusing? Utterly. But I doubt I know anyone who doesn't see the world as confusing. And so packed with contradiction. You can never really define things for more than a moment, since all is change, like the Buddha said. Writing is a way to slow things down, to try to make a little sense out of chaos and pain and the transitory nature of our lives. I like to give away my emotions to characters who are unlike me, but who are still struggling with the basic difficulties of being human.

It is unusual for a "literary" author to reference or, as some of your stories do, even rely on pop music or pop culture as a point of departure. Have you been criticized for this? When you first started writing, were you afraid to do this?

I think there's so much great popular music out there a person would need many lives to even begin to enjoy it all. And it's been this way for a long time. I'm not sure how unusual it is for a "literary" author to represent some of the treasure of pop music in her work, but I do know that Nick Hornsby's book *High Fidelity* rang absolutely true for me in its relationship to music. I spent most of my twenties listening to music, making tapes for friends, really more of a closet d.j. than a writer. Great random pop songs can still move me to tears, can make my day, can set me writing a story, can clarify my emotions and memories. People who only listen to classical music probably find this attachment to pop songs curious or even limiting, but I find many so called three minute pop songs to be great works of art.

Reading "Dear Mister Springsteen" evokes many of the same emotions that listening to "The Rising" does — loss, hope, renewal, tenuous wonder, gratefulness. Has Bruce Springsteen read "Dear Mister Springsteen," and if so, what did he say? What would you want him to say?

I wish someone would give "Dear Mister Springsteen" to Springsteen someday. If anyone out there knows him, send it to him for me. My hope is that he'd read it as a passionate thank you letter. He's been such an influence for me, not just as a writer, but as a human being. The story was inspired by listening to "The Rising" over and over again, and feeling transported, spiritually, by its cumulative affect.

What is the relationship between music and writing for you? Is the title story "Thank You for All the Music" based on a real mix tape someone made for you?

Yes, the short story writer and novelist Nancy Zafris once made me a mix-tape, and I wrote that story in response, though many of the songs mentioned in the story are not on the tape. And really I was writing not just in response to Nancy's tape, but to all the tapes people have made me over the years. I invented a character who lives in relative isolation so she feels the gift of this music perhaps even more keenly than I do.

My best friend from first grade still makes me tapes. My husband made me a tape every year for my birthday when we were married. The poet Jim Schley also makes me tapes a few times a year, as do a few old friends. Now they're doing mix C.D's. What an act of love it is for someone to string together all those songs. It's very time consuming and takes a lot of thought. So this story is implicitly dedicated to all the people who've sent me music in this way.

Your stories are filled with despair and loneliness alongside hope and love — you create worlds of great intensity, sometimes to a hallucinogenic point. September 11th, the ultimate reality check for many Americans yet surreal as well, also comes up several times in this collection. Would you talk about the role reality and fantasy play in your writing?

I've only recently worked a bit with fantasy in my stories. My sense is that ordinary "reality" is quite fantastic in and of itself. The more closely you look at a given thing, the stranger it can seem. I like to use writing as a way to keep waking up to the so call ordinary.

That said, the last story I wrote in this collection is "Brother To Brother" and the rat in the story gets pretty fantastic. I'll probably do more of that kind of thing in future stories, if the character seems to warrant it.

