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Early Leaving
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Was *Early Leaving* inspired by actual events? If so, what were they and how did the true-life individuals inspire Kathrynne and Early?

There are actually 3 answers to that question:

#1: About seven years ago, my mother's best friend's grandson shot two fellow teenagers at point-blank range, tossed their bodies in the trunk of a car and set the car ablaze. My mother is no longer living and I've lost contact with her friend. But I can tell you, this young man is from a gentle, close-knit family. Our families knew each other for years; the young man's uncle was my ninth-grade boy friend. The news grieved me— and terrified me. I advise writing students to write about what keeps them up at night. This news kept me up at night. I did not tell this family's story. I've never met the young man who committed the murders, or his mother — and I haven't seen his father since we were kids. I invented a family and let my fictional family tell their fictional story. But my grief, my emotion

over what happened in that lovely family, helped fuel the writing of my novel.

#2: While I was working on my first novel, a sentence popped into my head. I knew it didn't fit that novel, so I stored it away in my notebook. Here's the sentence: "Everything in my house has been broken and glued back together." A friend had admired a white porcelain pitcher in my kitchen and I told her it once belonged to my mother and that if she looked closely, she could see it'd been broken many times and glued back together. "In fact," I added, "everything in my house has been broken and glued back together." I decided to invent a family for whom that sentence would be true. It became the opening of my new novel. Later it was moved to the middle of the novel. Then it was bumped to the end. Now I've deleted it altogether! It gained me entrance into the novel but, because the whole story revolved around that sentence, it no longer was needed.

#3: I believe we're only as happy as our unhappiest child. It is very easy for a mother to live for the lilt in her child's voice, the sign that tells her he is all right. Kathrynne is, of course, an over-protective mother. I must confess, she's my own worst nightmare of myself!

Kathrynne sees so many things in her life and yet is blind to so much as well. As you structured the narrative, how did you decide what Kathrynne could and could not know about herself and her nature? Do you think the portrait that you have drawn of Kathrynne is similar to our own blind spots when it comes to our flaws?

Point of view is one of the most important decisions a fiction-writer makes. Whose story is it? I knew from the beginning this story would be told from Kathrynne's perspective; I was interested in how a mother reacts when her child does something that goes against all of her values. Most of us are similar to Kathrynne Smallwood. We are "on to ourselves" in many ways — and at the same time, wildly oblivious. I may be able to see a problem you're experiencing quite clearly and be absolutely clueless when it comes to solving my own problems. I don't believe we should write novels because we think we have something important to say; we write because we have questions. Another question I wanted to explore: How can we be so aware in some areas of our life and so unmindful in others?

Kathrynne recounts the incestuous encounter with her brother dispassionately, and in fact, despite their lack of contact, considers their relationship close. Why did you include this scene in the story? What did you want to reveal about Kathrynne and Kathrynne's childhood from it?

Kathrynne has a history with aloof, unapproachable males: her father, her brother, her husband. Because she's had very little experience with male/female intimacy, perhaps it was inevitable that she would cross boundaries she should not have crossed with her son.

The type of childhood sexual exploration that occurred between Kathrynne and her brother may be more common than we think. Young people are curious about their bodies, and when there is uneven power between two children, the more powerful one will often take advantage of the less powerful. Because Kathrynne has a tendency to pretend things that happened did not happen, she could easily "wish away" that incident with her brother. Before I started writing *Early Leaving*, I created a "character inventory," a long list of questions I used to interview my characters. For example: Any childhood scars — physical or emotional? Name the most revealing thing anyone has seen you do. Tell the myth surrounding your birth. Their answers, which turned into monologues, helped me see them as real people and understand their deepest motivations. The incest scene grew out of that first question (Any childhood scars — physical or emotional?) I asked Kathrynne.

In your novels *The Slow Way Back* and *Early Leaving*, knowledge, or "knowing" seems to be fraught with danger. As a writer, do you deliberately set out to explore a question, theme, or idea in your narratives, or do they arise as the story evolves?

I personally believe it's better to know things than not know. In fact, as a wife and mother, I've put all my eggs in that basket: communication. Nothing is so bad if we're talking about it. Together, we can make our way to the other side. When we write, however, we create characters who make different decisions from the ones we make. "What if" is the question that jumpstarts fiction. What if I create a character who does not want to know what's going on under her nose? And, speaking of knowing things, you would be appalled at how little I know when I set out to write a novel! I don't outline at all; I believe writing is an act of discovery. It's not until I'm well into the revision process that I can discern what it is I've written. This is because my unconscious is making connections I'm not ready to understand on a conscious level. I love that moment, late in the process, when I discover what drew me to the material, what made me want to tell this story. It is then that themes emerge.

In addition to being a novelist, you are also a poet. While poetry obviously informs the prose in your novels, can you elaborate on your process? Why do some ideas and stories lend themselves to poetry, while others to a novel? Have you ever found inspiration for your fiction within the lines of a poem that you have written? How is the experience of writing these two forms different for you as a writer?

While I was writing my first novel, I found myself plagiarizing like crazy from my poems! In the beginning, I did it secretly, as though if someone were to find out, I might get in trouble! Now I see it as an efficient method of recycling. My task as a writer is to tell the story only I can tell. Because my subject is family—how we connect, disconnect, re-connect—I tend to use the same material in both poetry and prose. I also use details from my own life. Of course, I stretch those details, condense them, exaggerate, change them any way I please to fit the story I've invented. For example, I used the same anecdote from my childhood—buying Easter chicks and keeping them as pets even after they grew into roosters—in a poem, in a public radio commentary, and as a flashback to Kathryn's childhood in *Early Leaving*.