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## Alice Mattison

**The Wedding of the Two-Headed Woman**  
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**How did your personal experiences as a resident of New Haven inform Daisy's perceptions of the city?**

I came to New Haven more than thirty years ago, and my husband and I raised our three sons here: they were educated in New Haven's vibrant, multi-ethnic public schools, played in New Haven's beautiful wooded parks, and grew up surrounded by the city's lively cultural and intellectual life. Yet someone once asked me "Why on earth would you live in New Haven?" It's a safe city, as cities go, and though it's had the usual urban problems, it was never scarier than any other city. Nonetheless, people thought it was — perhaps because, as Daisy says, the presence of Yale made crime here national news. Years ago an article about crime and drugs that appeared in *The New Yorker* discussed my sons' fine high school — two blocks from my house — making it sound like a benighted place. The article made me so angry that when, years later, its author came to speak in the writing program where I teach, I couldn't bring myself to attend his talk. At that time I was making notes for this novel, and the feelings evoked by the visit of this journalist were so strong, I knew they had to enter the book. Pekko's love for New Haven, and his need to defend it, are mine; Pekko speaks for me on this topic.

**Daisy Andalusia is a woman of many dimensions and contradictions. How did the character of Daisy develop? How did she become "a person who works on messes?"**

I'm quite certain that everybody has many dimensions and contradictions, and that's why Daisy does — though I'll admit I was especially interested in inner contradiction when I created her. I wanted her to be noticeable: exasperating, surprising, bold. For a long time, as I was coming to understand what the story would be, I didn't know how she'd earn money, and the notebook I kept includes various speculations. I'd been curious about clutter and about a person who might organize it. I once saw a car like the one that Daisy sees in the novel: it was filled with clutter to the bottom of the windows, except for the driver's seat (which was walled off from the passenger seat by a painting in a frame). When I realized that Daisy works on clutter, I was excited because she'd have keys to people's houses, and I knew that would matter in the novel.

**You frequently quote Connecticut poet Wallace Stevens in the book. What significance does his work have for you? How did its inclusion in the novel emerge for you during the process of writing?**

I've read Stevens — a well-known early twentieth-century poet who lived in Hartford — for many years, always finding him difficult and exciting. As far as I know he wrote about New Haven in only one long poem, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and like Daisy I was fascinated to come across it. There and in other poems, Stevens made me think about what it would be like not to have a set of preconceptions and worked-out categories about life: what it would be like to see things freshly, as if for the first time.

And in some poems Stevens seems to be talking about what it would be like not to imagine, not to have mental images that we apply to reality. When I wrote about Gordon Skeetling, who insists he doesn't have a visual imagination, I was starting with this idea and taking it in a different direction — this has nothing to do with Stevens — because I began to wonder whether an ethical person could lack an imagination or whether lack of an imagination would invariably make someone unfeeling. I don't know if there are people who actually don't imagine. Gordon, who doesn't have visual images, doesn't seem to be able to appreciate someone else's pain. After September 11 he insists he doesn't imagine the death of someone he knew who was killed, and at the end of the book, when he takes decisive action, he follows abstract rules instead of imagining the person his action will affect.

**Daisy is a very sexual woman. We don't often see this kind of sexuality in female characters. Can you talk about this element in Daisy's character in opposition to traditional sexual roles for women in American fiction?**

I first wrote about Daisy in a story called "The Hitchhiker," in my collection of intersecting stories, **Men Giving Money, Women Yelling**. That story is about Charlotte LoPresti, and in it her friend Daisy, a college teacher, tells her she's slept with a student. When I wrote that story I suspected Daisy was lying, and there was more to it than that — more sex. She was always a sexual person, in other words. Finally I gave her the chance to tell her own story in that book — it's called "Selfishness," — and sure enough she identified herself immediately through her sexuality.

It seems to me that American fiction has always included sexual women who lead active, thoughtful lives apart from sex, going back at least as far as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. People think of Henry James's characters as sexless but of course they are not, though I'll concede that the women who definitely sleep with men in the course of his novels are often the Europeans — Kate Croy in *The Wings of the Dove*; Madame de Vionnet in *The Ambassadors*. Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* is extremely sexual but maybe she's a poor example because she comes to a bad end. In more recent fiction Grace Paley's very serious women are also very sexual (as well as very funny). There's also the work of Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, Eugene O'Neill, etc. I couldn't begin to list the dozens of writers who create sexual women characters nowadays, but I would note that many of those writers are women.

**Daisy Andalusia was a character in your collection of short stories, Men Giving Money, Women Yelling. Are there any other characters from previous works that you have returned to?**

I've written two collections of connected stories, "Men Giving Money, Women Yelling" and the forthcoming "In Case We're Separated," and in both I returned to characters over and over again, sometimes without having realized in advance that I'd want to. Even my first books of stories, mostly unconnected, contain a few that look again at characters I'd written about before ... But "**The Wedding of the Two-Headed Woman**" is the only novel in which I've done that. Daisy was fun to write — I think that's why I wrote about her again.

**Do you have a preference between writing short fiction and writing novels? Do your novels begin within stories, or have they**

**always from conception been intended as works of greater length?**

Whichever form I've written has felt necessary at the time — I don't know which I prefer. I seem to feel the need to write one or the other, without knowing just why. Each time I've written a novel, I've known from the time I began thinking of it that it would be a novel. I once thought I'd write a novel and turned the idea into a short story, but I've never gone the other way.