

# [THE HOUSE IS ALSO BREATHING US: An Interview with Selah Saterstrom by Teresa Carmody](#)

written by Guest Contributor | May 25, 2018



I've been reading Selah Saterstrom's writing for thirteen years, beginning with her first novel, *The Pink Institution*, which I discovered in 2005, a year after it was published. I bought her second novel, *The Meat and Spirit Plan*, as soon as it was available and finished it in one night. By the time her third novel, *Slab*, was released, I was studying with Saterstrom at the University of Denver, and *Slab* was the book I treated myself with the day after I finished my comprehensive exams. Like her other books, I read *Slab* in one night.

But the one-night, or even one-time read, doesn't do justice to the complexity of Saterstrom's writing, which is why I keep returning to her novels, and now to her first collection of essays, *Ideal Suggestions: Essays in Divinatory Poetics*. These are books that invite unconventional readings, in their entirety or in pieces, and when I teach Saterstrom's writing, which I have several times, I tell students: the initial read will give you a sense of this book's body or terrain, but don't worry if there is something you can't quite apprehend. Most people approach a novel, or an essay, with a set idea of what a novel or essay looks like. Put aside such expectations, I tell my students, and focus instead on Saterstrom's sentences, on the clarity of each story pinned to this book's spine.

Afterward, we too will put the book together. And discover more unknowns.

Saterstrom's writing is like a series of bodies turned inside out, so the reader is greeted with guts instead of facial shapes, and with the metabolic process of digestion and transmutation rather than the logic of linearity. Her writing is a field and the sky, a mode of perception and a practice open to anyone who wishes to enter.

The following interview was conducted over email.

Teresa Carmody (TC): I'd like to begin with the term "divinatory poetics." The first time I encountered divination as a poetic position was in the Denver program when you mentioned "divinatory poetics" as a tutorial you've

offered several times over the years. Six weeks later, I attended your &Now panel on divinatory poetics, with former DU students Jen Denrow and Julia Cohen. I'd love to hear more about the term—where it came from and the relationship, if any, between your tutorials and these essays.

Selah Saterstrom (SS): In terms of unpacking the term a bit, in the book I write, "sometimes students, when studying card reading, wonder about meaning. If they memorize the meanings assigned to certain cards, will this help? Sure. Though this is when I say some iteration of, 'What conditions must be present in order to best position one's multiple selves in the guts of the flux, all while remaining sentient, multi-conversant [...] and able, through a variety of modes and practices, to offer visibility to some poignant patterns?' [...] To me this means participating (reading and writing) from within the membranous precincts between our multiple bodies in the larger rhizomic field of resonances, where much is sounding and is also unsounded. This is the site from which I want to consider narrative. It is what I mean when I say: divinatory poetics."

Sorry for the long quote! But, so far this is the best way I know how to initiate the term into conversation. I'm not exactly sure when I started using the term "divinatory poetics." Thinking back, I was already teaching under/within the term at least eight years ago. There was a lot of interest at Naropa and the University of Denver, so I kept offering various iterations/teachings on the subject.

Teaching – being in the alchemy of the classroom, writing with students, being in conversations with those writers – was an essential part of the book's becoming. The light of those experiences bathed the entire process of this book's elucidation. I am so grateful for all of those gatherings – classes, tutorials, workshops.

TC: In "On Other People's Stories," you write the sentence: "I am the author of these stories only in so much as I made decisions in fields of existing language." What or who do you think an author is?

SS: You know, thinking about it, when asked what it is I do, I do not say: I am an author. I say: I write.

I don't mean to suggest that the term author is bad news or anything, but I also notice my subtle, long-standing aversion to using the word. Looking into the etymological guts of author, there are repeating notions of both authority (in general) and The Father, neither of which I identify with. My body knows this. Originator, instigator, progenitor, founder – these aren't notions I associate my experience of writing with. So far, for me, something else has been going on.

The book (to be written) hovers in my field like a visitation that has no problem overstaying its welcome. There is a process of engaging with this guest. And this process, at some point, expresses as attempts-through-writing.

The attempts are mediated by a need to listen, re-frame my approach

accordingly (often meaning: letting go of my expectations, hopes, or interpretations of what I thought I was doing), and then re-entering the flux. This experience accrues and becomes/is "the writing of the book." In time the ethereal guest is transubstantiated into the page, into pages, as a book.

The next step is for the work to become metabolized and charged by the unique internal alchemy of its reader and then...what? Energy is released. Stories shift, move, and transform; they work through bodies, their multiple intelligences, and nervous systems.

I feel like I'm participating in something that has been going on a long time (and will continue to go on after me) rather than being an originator, even if the outcome/book is unique. We think we are the ones breathing in the world. We don't often say, "The house is breathing us with difficulty today." We might say, "I am breathing with difficulty in this house." But it feels to me like a more reciprocal situation. The house, and everything, is also breathing us. It is, I'd say, a more vibrant situation.

TC: After reading your response here, I opened your book (randomly I thought) to a page in the essay, "On the Rosary as a Structural Paradigm for a Mirage." There I read: "To be without repulsive duplicates, Lord, to afford each breathing duplicate, dangling, I kissed the word, upon my word, I hung the cage." This feels in parallel to what you're saying, that there is another breath we can attune to. That we, too, are being breathed. What was your experience of breath while writing these essays? And how do you see the relationship between syntax and breath?

SS: I feel syntax as a very bodied-event. It's goes through (and refracts from) the nervous system and is also pushed from the innards, up and out. In my mind, when I turn over the phrase "the body expresses," I see a tangle of language leaving a mouth (lately, these tangles resemble Cecilia Vicuña's red threads). The breath and syntax – what a dance, and with so many moves!

I don't know wholly know what my experience of breath was while writing these essays. They were written over many years. But what I feel drawn to say is: my experience of breath was like a lover's. Meaning: every sort of breath, including how breath drags through loss and other revelations.

TC: I noticed that each of the essays in *Ideal Suggestions* is dedicated to someone (or someones) and that each of them also includes an introduction. Both paratextual choices feel integral to the book: the dedications signal that the writing emerged in conversation with others, while the introductions open this conversational space by inviting new readers into your writing process. Tell me more about the "in-conversation" quality of these essays. Or their relational aspects, if you will.

SS: Well, back to: the more vibrant situation. I wanted to slip into the nightgown that hangs on the line between divination and writing until that line was obliterated by lights. Writing as an act of divination; divination as a mode of writing. The paratextual choices are invitations into this text-process. This is how reading often works for me (cards and books) and I

wanted that to be a transparent aspect of how this book worked.

In terms of the dedications, the origin of some of the essays date back sixteen years, and it did feel important to tuck valentines throughout this book to honor the ways writing has felt site-specific in terms of bodies I've known, loved, traveled with, wept with, celebrated with and so on. It was a way of saying: I love you. A way of saying: you changed the way I make marks on a page and I love you.

TC: There's also a lot of humor, such as in "On Writing for the Movies," where familiar films are made strange and films I've never seen become strangely familiar through your exacting descriptions. So the sexism in *Revenge of the Nerds*, for example, becomes socially absurd, which is a kind of transmutation. Or here is another line from an earlier essay: "telling the story of a ghost then admitting you are the suffer-fucked ghost." Can you talk about the relationship between suffering and humor in the book?

SS: Lamentation and celebration are linked for me (the internal imprint of the Mardi Gras). The ritual importance of the carnival probably best lays out the relationship between humor and suffering as I have experienced it.

I took a rather deadpan approach to writing the film version of *Revenge of the Nerds* (writing from memory and photos). I was surprised when I felt like the writing did this unexpected thing of revealing sexism in a blatant way. Sometimes in a terrifying way.

The straightforward approach – guided by the dissonance that shoots through memory – turned the humor of the trope inside out. It reminded me of when I was a kid and my cousin Metah and I would listen to "Another One Bites the Dust" backwards on her Sesame Street record player, over and over again. I've always loved that weirdness when the narrative is rattled and all the bees come out.

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Selah Saterstrom is the author of the novels *Slab*, *The Meat and Spirit Plan*, and *The Pink Institution*. Her collection of essays, *Ideal Suggestions: Essays in Divinatory Poetics*, won the 2015 Essay Book Award. She teaches and lectures across the United States, and is on faculty in Creative Writing at the University of Denver.

Teresa Carmody's is the author of *Maison Femme: a fiction and Requiem*. Recently published projects include the chapbook "Hide and See" (No Press) and *DeLand* (Container), a view-master book in collaboration with fiber artist Madison Creech. Carmody is the Editor Emeritus of Les Figes Press and director of Stetson University's MFA of the Americas.