

Living

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ZZ PACKER
Writer

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INVISIBLE SERVANT

US short-story writer ZZ Packer gives The News an inside view on what it takes to be a writer: deadlines, mind reading and a lot of hard work

BY LYDIA CAREY
The News

SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE, Guanajuato – “(Southerners) do not so much tell as retell, they do not create so much as cajole, and they do not offer resolutions so much as revelations,” writes author ZZ Packer, keynote speaker at last weekend’s San Miguel Writers’ Conference, in the introduction to the 2008 edition of “New Stories from the South.”

ZZ Packer’s literary career began when her short story “Drinking Coffee Elsewhere” was published in The New Yorker in 2000.

Since then she has written for Harper’s, The New York Times Magazine and San Miguel’s Real de Minas Hotel.

She has received both the Commonwealth First Fiction Award and an Alex Award. She is currently working on her first novel, about freed blacks during reconstruction after the U.S. Civil War.

Packer, who was born in Chicago but grew up mainly in Georgia and

Kentucky, sat down with The News to talk about writing and storytelling at San Miguel’s Real de Minas Hotel.

The News: Did growing up in the south affect you as a writer?
ZZ Packer: It’s definitely relevant to the writing, because the South is full of storytellers, it’s just kind of what you do. Not only does the south have a strong oral tradition,

but southerners are like “well, we lost the war,” so there is this constant need to explain or defend, trying to make up the story of what happened and how it happened. That is very much endemic to Southern culture, even if you are on the side that won your freedom. The oral storytelling tradition in the South is more pronounced, because people cannot be direct. The passive is lauded. For me



People attend the 8th annual San Miguel de Allende Writers’ Conference.

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Who are you reading right now?
I’m reading Dorrit Cohn’s “Transparent minds,” Liza Zunshine’s “Why We Read Fiction,” I’m into the theory of evolutionary narrative right now. In terms of fiction, I just kind of read whatever comes around, like Juan Villoro. I was amazed that I hadn’t read any of his stuff, but America is very xenophobic, even in the publishing industry. ... As Americans, we are horribly provincial.

Earlier you were describing the separation between the biographical person and the person who writes the fiction. What are the main differences between those two personae?
The autobiographical “me” is the one things happen to, but the persona that is required to write can’t be bound only by the things that happen to her and not think about what she imagines is happening, or could have happened. The persona has to be able to be an author; you can’t really be an author if you’re just yourself. You have to be able to see the character in the way that your limited experience would not impede her.

Do you think the fictional persona is more of the dreamer?
I guess so. I spend most of my day daydreaming anyways. The autobiographical self says I can’t write this word, I can’t write about someone who faked a pregnancy test because it would be embarrassing, you have to stop protecting your ego. So maybe ego is a better word for it, you have to abandon a certain kind of ego to write. You have to have erred and failed and hurt or it will be impossible for you to write about people who have.

So you are working on your first novel. Is the editing process different than when you are

writing short stories?

A short story has more riding on every word and so it has to be its own contained universe. In some ways I think I am making the novel more difficult that it has to be. A novel has so much room for error. For me, I see a lot of my chapters as short stories in and of themselves. It’s probably more coherent when I just write it out, instead of in fragments, but what most interests me is moments, that’s how we remember, not in absolute chronicles. It’s fun but a lot of work.

What do you think other peoples’ concept is of the life of a writer?

People always tell me that they want to be writers, but usually people want to “be a writer,” they don’t necessarily want to write. They have an idea of what a writer’s life is like. The fantasy comes from the idea that they could get accolades, recognition, but most writing is servitude. There is some imaginary person out there and you have to think: Will they understand this? Will they laugh at this? Will this character change their minds? Half the time it’s being a mind reader and the other half it’s like you’re someone sweeping the floor, sweeping everything up, making it pretty. Servitude means a certain amount of invisibility. In order to be that good servant you have to be invisible.

Are you saying you’re a literary maid?

Yes, you are as a writer. When I’m teaching and I tell my students “that isn’t the best way to say that,” they ask me, “well, what is the best way?” And I say “I don’t know, that’s your job to figure out.” Sometimes it takes a room full of students 10 or 15 minutes to improve one line ... that’s how much work it takes, but to people that part of the hard work is unfathomable. The first day I was here at the conference I had to work all day on something for a deadline, but that is really what you do as a writer. Generally, it doesn’t really involve nice lunches and stuff.



Charlie’s Digs

The game of the name

A basic right we all enjoy is the right to a name. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a name implies inclusion in a civil registry and the right to a nationality.

Cultures have different ways of giving names to children. Those with a Spanish tradition, such as Mexico, tend to use given names followed by a first and second surname (“primer apellido” and “segundo apellido”). Foreigners in Mexico, especially those arriving from the North, find it odd that parents do not have the same surnames as their children.

Mexican parents are free to choose their children’s given names but the registration process for surnames is strict. Newborns receive their father’s first surname as the first “apellido” and their mother’s first surname as the second “apellido.” Hence, the surnames of parents are different from their children on government-issued documents.

In Mexico, a baby born in a hospital goes home with a birth certificate that records gender, weight, length and parents’ full names, as well as the place, date and time of birth – and a footprint. Parents or legal guardians have to register the baby’s given names at their municipal civil registry office within a certain time.

If that period is exceeded, witnesses must accompany the parents or guardians and baby to the civil registry. Indigenous people frequently prefer to register their children’s birth in what they consider “their” municipality, even if their child is born in a distant location.

In the Spanish system, the first surname is the one used for putting names in alphabetical order. Next, the second surname is alphabetized. Given names are alphabetized last. The frequent “security” question asked by U.S. banks, “What is your mother’s maiden name?” would be senseless in Mexico. It’s printed in the phone book.

Latin Americans from Spanish-speaking countries who move to the U.S. will frequently hyphenate their surnames so as to keep both their “apellidos,” yet not be alphabetized under their mother’s maiden name.

Names can get quite long, especially with multiple given names. A given name is dropped, rather than one’s second surname, when names are shortened. If an initial is used it usually stands for the second surname, not a middle name.

Under current civil registry rules, a Mexican woman keeps her birth name for life. Though she may choose to take on her spouse’s surname, frequently with the possessive “de” between her first surname and her spouse’s, she keeps the name with which she was registered at birth on her government-issued documents. Hence, in order to cash a check, she will need to have her name written as it appears on her identification document.

Mexican spouses who are active in politics or business will sometimes go to great lengths to use their legal names, keeping their marriage out of the picture as much as possible in order to lessen talk of nepotism.

On a similar note, when noted politicians forgo a second surname and write their name with a middle initial, it is frequently a sign that their second surname is non-Spanish or non-indigenous.



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Among Mesoamerican surnames, Maya names are more common in Mexico than those from any other indigenous language. Nahuatl is a source of given names, even among those who do not consider themselves indigenous.

Because the United States cycles through trendy names that are popular for a few years, a name is often a giveaway for a person’s age. Latin America doesn’t seem to go through those cycles. There are names, however, that are popular in some countries and not in others. A man named Jairo is likely from Colombia or Venezuela; Rodrigo, from Central America or Colombia. Xochitl, Xicotencatl, Netzahualcoyotl and Cuahtemoc – names of Nahuatl origin – usually hail from Mexico.

A new phenomenon regarding names has evolved with the Internet. One would think that readers who comment about a newspaper or magazine article online would want to be recognized for their statement.

Yet they rarely use their names, much less their email addresses.

In some organizations, only first names are used in an effort to keep members out of the limelight. One such organization is the loosely organized Occupy Wall Street. Even so, some people can be identified. A Harper’s magazine article quoted from the speakers log at Manhattan’s Zucotti Park, mentioning “Charlie from Cuernavaca,” who delivered a greeting along with pericón flower crosses from Cuernavaca for Liberty Park. I received several inquiries asking if I am that Charlie.

An archaic definition of surname is a name title or epithet added to a person’s name, especially one indicating a location. It worked for me.

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