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# newVoices

by Amy Cox Williams

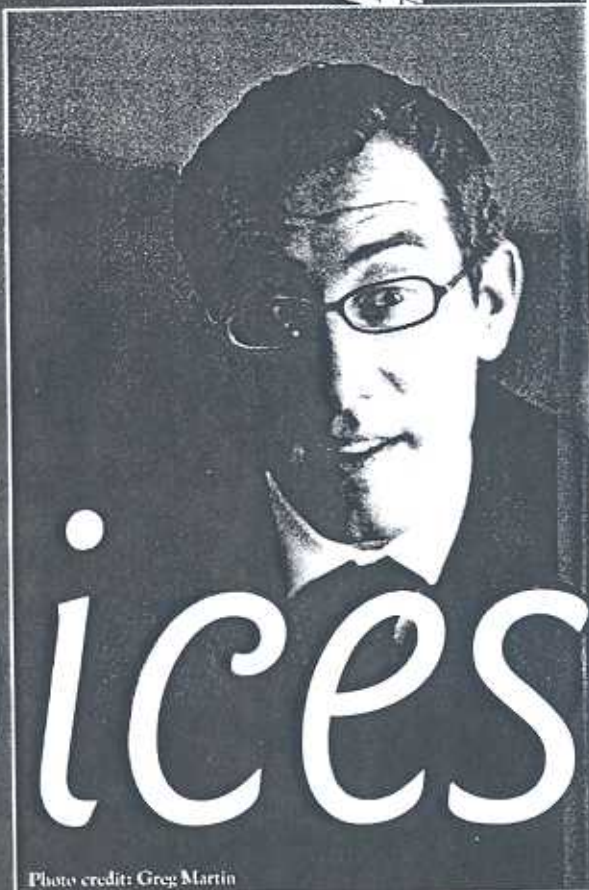


Photo credit: Greg Martin

In the following interview, Rudolph Delson, who quit his job at a law firm on the eve of his 30th birthday to write his first novel, *Maynard & Jennica*, discusses that same book, explains why he isn't a lawyer anymore, admits it was exciting to appear in *New York Post's* Page Six gossip column, and shouts (or rather types) "Woooo! Woooo! Woooo!" Here we go

**What happened to the law career?  
Was writing always an ambition of yours?**

I never thought of the law as my career. More, it was my backup plan in the event of literary failure. It still is, I suppose.

By about the age of 24, I knew that if I was going to sell a book I would need to move to New York City. But I didn't have the money to make the move until I won a scholarship from N.Y.U. Law. So that was that—I went to law school.

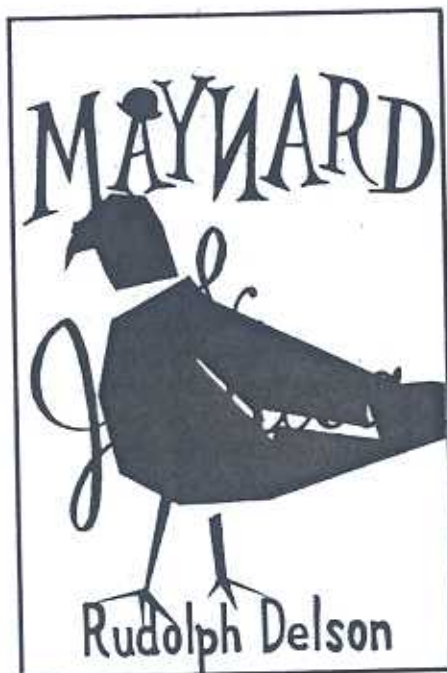
I arrived in New York in 1999 with the manuscript of one book on my laptop, a collection of my letters written in Berlin, and I was working on another book, a comedy about vegetables. I was certain that I would sell one or the other of those two books, instantly and lucratively, and that I would never have to even take the bar exam. Ha!

In the end I completed law school and worked as an attorney for about three years, in San Francisco and Manhattan. By early 2005, I had saved up enough money that I could quit my job and survive for a year while I wrote *Maynard & Jennica*. It was frightening, quitting the job without any certainty that I'd be able to sell the book before my money ran out. A bit like deciding that instead of entering your prize-winning stallion in any more races, you're going to kill him and live off his meat.

**I know authors hate this type of question, and I would bet you've been asked, "Are you Maynard?" but that's not my question—though you may still hate mine . . . I want to know: are you Jennica?**  
Well, no! And, yes!

I hope I don't share an unseemly amount in common with Jennica biographically. Like me, she's from San Jose, California; she was born in the 1970s; she moved to New York in the 1990s, after college; she's Jewish.

But Jennica has a very specific spirit—a spirit of romanticism and confidence and loneliness and cheerfulness. For example, at one point Jennica presents the readers with a spreadsheet calculating what percentage of her adult life she's been in love; and, yes, I once made just such a spreadsheet for myself. So writing the Jennica sections of the book required me to really indulge those sides of myself—the romantic side, the



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lonely side. (It also involved indulging in the cadences of California vernacular, which was, like . . . so fun, so fun.)

But in those respects Jennica is no different than any of the other characters in the novel. Ana Kaganova, the Russian-German-Israel-American con artist, is the embodiment of a conniving spirit. Maynard Gogarty embodies a certain comic, artistic, misanthropic spirit. Nadine Hanamoto, Jennica's best friend, embodies a sarcastic spirit. So when I wrote those characters' sections, I had to indulge those sides of myself.

*Les Bovaries, ce sont moi*, or something like that.

***Maynard & Jennica* recounts a not-so-typical love story by 35 characters—all with their own opinions. How did you keep track of 35 voices throughout the writing process?**

Vigor! (He answers with a smile.)

The truth is, once the narrators started multiplying, I started to have a grand time writing the book, and it didn't take much effort to keep track of them all. It helped sometimes to draw flow charts, and to make angry notes to myself along the lines of: "Maynard must never say, 'Of course,' he must only say, 'Naturally.'" It helped sometimes to write the book out of order, one character at a time. I would spend a couple of weeks writing some of Jennica's monologues, and then a couple of weeks writing some of Nadine's

monologues, and then a couple of weeks writing their parents' and their brother's sections, and so on. Only after I had written fifty pages or so would I go back and collate them, fitting all the narrators together.

There are other methods of keeping voices and plots straight, of course, but, um . . . those are trade secrets.

**Your novel is also a romance with New York—the city could rightly be the 36th character. What do you think it is about the city that lures writers under its spell and attracts readers who've never even set foot there?**

It is curious how Manhattan has kept the cultural capital that it acquired last century, isn't it?

It's a myth, of course, that New York is a uniquely dazzling place. But the myth is self-perpetuating: As long as people outside New York expect New York to be special, New Yorkers can get away with all kinds of lies about their hometown's magical properties. Half of *Maynard & Jennica* takes place outside of the city—in California and Hawaii and Massachusetts and Germany and Israel—and the characters all ponder, in their different ways, whether the supposed illustriousness of life in this city outweighs the indignities of surviving here.

Anyway, here is my current theory about New York's merits (a theory that I will sell to anyone who wants to buy it): I theorize that the automobile is the enemy of culture and of human joy, because every hour spent driving is an hour not spent with other people, enjoying life. New York is one of very few American cities where you can get by without a car, forever. And while someone might be able to prove me wrong with algebraic formulae and PowerPoint slides, it does feel to me like New Yorkers spend more time pursuing culture, and spend more time in public, than do Americans living in other cities. And what could make a better setting for a book, than a city peopled with gregarious lovers of art and books?

Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I am just jealous of drivers, because I can't afford to insure a car in Brooklyn.

As for why American writers like to write about New York, I fear that it's the

boring consequence of two boring facts: (a) writers disproportionately set their stories in those places where they themselves have lived; and (b) writers disproportionately have lived in New York, because it's where the publishers are.

**I promised I would ask: What are your two favorite parts in the book? [I can add a spoiler alert if necessary.]**

At one point, Maynard buys Jennica a Maine Coon kitten, and they have an argument about what to name the poor creature. Jennica wants the cat to have a name like Coleridge or Amadeus or Thoreau or Wharton. Maynard thinks this is preposterous. And then, later, Maynard and Jennica argue about September Eleventh. Maynard thinks that much of the American response is schmaltz, and Jennica genuinely grieves. Together those two scenes are the foci around which Maynard and Jennica's love affair orbits in an ellipsis, their most hilarious and happiest moment, and their most miserable and angriest.

(Nabokov talks about "the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which a book is plotted." Those two scenes are two of mine.)

**For readers who may not read Page Six in the *New York Post* or who haven't visited your Web site, tell us about your debut (I'm making an assumption here) in the gossip pages as a bold print name.**

Oh dear. Scott Rudin Productions optioned the film rights to *Maynard & Jennica*, and the *New York Post* thought that made my name boldface-worthy. Obviously it was exciting to appear there—but honestly, the best part about being on *Page Six* was finding out which of my friends read the gossip columns every day. It wasn't who I would have suspected. Some very high-brow types are devoted to following the weekly travails of Paris Hilton, apparently. And they were the ones who saw the blurb in the *Post*.

What else can I say? I'm eager to see how the book is adapted for the screen, and what they do with all the different voices and personalities. A screenwriter named Elizabeth Meriwether is working on the screenplay this summer, and I'm

hoping she'll let me have a peek.

**On your site, you have a request for questions for the Q&A portion of your virtual reading. Have you received any? If so, will you share—and answer—one or two of your favorites here?**

I get all sorts of e-mails to my Web site. An investment banker in Manhattan wrote in to tell me: "Hey, I heard about your book, and my name is Jennica, too!" I wrote back and told her that I hoped she liked the book, because how awful

**"Some very high-brow types are devoted to following the weekly travails of Paris Hilton, apparently. And they were the ones who saw the blurb in the *Post*."**

would it be to have the name Zooey and hate J.D. Salinger, or Zelig and hate Woody Allen? A bookseller in Edinburgh wrote in to tell me that she loved the galley of *Maynard & Jennica* so much that she had built, out of clay, a diorama of the scene where Maynard and Jennica meet. She must have spent days on it, recreating the interior of a train car on the Lexington line, down to the last detail. (I'm not kidding. See [http://h515n5.blogspot.com/2007/06/blog-post\\_638.html](http://h515n5.blogspot.com/2007/06/blog-post_638.html).)

Still, no one has submitted any questions for the virtual Q & A. Ingram readers? Care to step up? It's [www.maynardandjennica.com](http://www.maynardandjennica.com).

**What are you working on now?**

People always think I'm kidding when I tell them, but it's the truth: I'm writing a novel about a troll. It's very dark. The best part, for me, is that the troll lives under a bridge in San Jose, California. To fictionalize my hometown, a town whose own residents don't believe they live anywhere literary—it's a compelling project. I hope I do it well.

**I read a *Village Voice* piece from awhile back about you and your letters from Berlin, which you sent to people for a subscription fee. Anyway, in the *Voice* profile, you mention publishing them. Any chance?**

Never! It was heartbreaking to me, at age 24, when I couldn't find a publisher for my personal letters. I couldn't understand

it, I thought I was infinitely clever. But now, at age 32, I am relieved utterly to have been spared the indignity of authoring such a self-indulgent book. That said, I have often hoped that a certain poem that appeared in one of my Berlin letters would find its way into print. It consists of a single, slant-rhymed couplet:

If they would publish this in *Norton*,  
my friends would know that I'm  
important.

How's that for a 24-year-old mentality?

**What book is on your nightstand right now?**

I'm reading Anne Carson's translation of four plays by Euripides, *Grief Lessons*. I am a devoted fan of Carson, and Euripides is such a merciless overseer of his characters' fates. (It's all very instructive as I try to write my troll book.) Before that I was reading the galleys of *Exit Ghost*, the new book by Philip Roth, whose comedies I admire.

But all that is literally *on my nightstand* is an alarm clock, a lamp, and a thin film of pollen from the ailanthus tree outside. I usually keep a stack of *New York Review of Books* there, but I did the recycling last night.

**Anything else you'd like booksellers and librarians to know about yourself or *Maynard & Jennica* (or anything you don't want them to know but they probably should) before we wrap this up?**

I'm just flattered to be able to talk about it at all. Because, really, what can the author ever say about a comedy? Except, like: *Woooo! Woooo! Woooo!* And who wants to hear that? 🗨