

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

318

YEARBOOK 2010

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 318

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Contemporary
Literary Criticism
Yearbook 2010

Preface

Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook is part of the ongoing *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series. After a ten-year hiatus in which no *CLC Yearbook* volumes were published from 1998-2007, the *CLC Yearbook* volumes will again publish once annually, beginning with Volume 280, a retrospective of 2008; continuing with Volume 299, a look back at 2009; and Volume 318, a retrospective of 2010. *CLC* provides a comprehensive survey of modern literature by presenting criticism on the works of novelists, poets, playwrights, short story writers, scriptwriters, and other creative writers now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. A strong emphasis is placed on including criticism of works by established authors who frequently appear on syllabuses of high school and college literature courses.

To complement this broad coverage, the *Yearbook* focuses more specifically on a given year's literary activities and features a larger number of currently noteworthy authors than is possible in standard *CLC* volumes. *CLC Yearbook* provides students, teachers, librarians, researchers, and general readers with information and commentary on the outstanding literary works and events of a given year.

Format of the Book

CLC Volume 318: *Yearbook 2010*, which includes criticism on thirteen authors, is divided into three sections—"New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "In Memoriam" entries.

New Authors— This section introduces six writers who received significant critical recognition for their first major work(s) of fiction during 2010 or whose work was translated into English or published in the United States for the first time. Authors were selected for inclusion if their work was reviewed in several prominent literary periodicals.

Prizewinners— This section begins with a list of literary prizes and honors announced in 2010, citing the award, award criteria, the recipient, and the title of the prizewinning work. Following the listing of prizewinners is a presentation of three entries on individual award winners, representing a mixture of genres and nationalities.

In Memoriam— This section consists of critical essays, reminiscences, tributes, retrospective articles, and obituary notices on four authors who died in 2010. In addition, a brief Obituaries section follows the four "In Memoriam" entries. The brief Obituaries provide information on other deceased prominent literary figures who died during 2010.

Organization of the Book

The *CLC Yearbook* consists of criticism drawn from literary reviews, general magazines, newspapers, websites, books, and scholarly journals. *Yearbook* entries variously contain the following elements:

- An **Author Heading** in the "New Authors" section cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, and the title of the work discussed in the entry (if applicable); the "Prizewinners" and "In Memoriam" sections include the author's name and birth and death years. The author's full name, pseudonyms (if any) under which the author has published, nationality, and principal genres are listed on the first line of the author entry.
- A brief **Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the reprinted criticism in the "New Authors," sections.
- A **Biographical Information, Major Works, and Critical Reception** section contains background information that introduces the reader to the author or work that is the subject of each "Prizewinners" and "In Memoriam" entry.

- A listing of **Principal Works** is included for all entries in the “Prizewinners” and “In Memoriam” sections.
- The reprinted **Criticism** represents essays selected by editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author’s writing in general. The criticism is typically arranged chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. In the “New Authors,” “Prizewinners,” and “In Memoriam” sections all titles by the author being discussed are printed in boldface type, enabling the reader to more easily identify the author’s work.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation**, designed to help the user find the original essay or book, precedes each selected piece of reprinted criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Readings** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. **Cross references**, presented as boxed material, following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Other Features

The Yearbook also includes the following features:

An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of this volume.

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author’s name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

Citing Contemporary Literary Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literature Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*." *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (April 2005): 130-45. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 188-95. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

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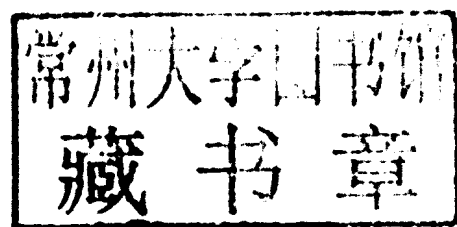
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New Authors



Maile Chapman

Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto

American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of critical response to Chapman's novel *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* (2010).

INTRODUCTION

While working toward an M.F.A. in fiction at Syracuse University, Chapman focused on the art of the short story. After graduation she began to work on her first novel, knowing only that she wanted to write a claustrophobic narrative about a Scandinavian nurse. During research for the novel, Chapman chanced upon an old photograph of a tuberculosis sanatorium in a wooded area of Finland. This building, designed by architect Alvar Aalto, inspired her to apply for a Fulbright Grant to travel to Finland and finish her novel. She was awarded the grant and soon found herself touring the public buildings of Finland and continuing her research at Abo Akademi University in Turku. Out of these experiences, *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* was born.

Set during the 1920s, the novel takes place within the walls of Suvanto, a convalescent women's hospital in the Finnish wilderness. A former dance instructor, Julia Dey, arrives at Suvanto for ambiguous reasons—in fact, many of the hospital's residents seem to suffer as much from imaginary ills as genuine ailments. Dey resists the rigid, controlled environment and frequently acts out against the staff. One such staff member, Sunny Taylor, provides the focal point of the novel. Recently arrived from America, she is a patient, competent, yet deeply melancholy woman. As the head nurse of the top floor, Taylor is tasked with looking after the needs of the hospital's wealthiest patients, referred to as "up-patients." Meanwhile, Suvanto's primary doctor, Peter Weber, has been engaging in experimental surgical techniques involving cesarean sections and hysterectomies, and Dey quickly catches his eye as a prospective candidate for his dubious research. A sense of pervasive dread and anxiety slowly swells during the course of the deliberately paced narrative until the final section culminates with a surreal, grotesque turn of events

that challenges the text's remaining sense of realism. This conclusion is derived from Euripides's *The Bacchae*, the ancient Greek tragedy that Chapman used as a rough template for her novel.

Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto met with largely positive reviews, although some critics found the references to *The Bacchae* to be distracting and poorly integrated. A reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews*, for example, claimed that "Chapman's attempt to shoehorn the material into the framework of *The Bacchae* . . . skews what promised to be a quieter but more compelling drama." Other critics have felt that the finale presents the inevitable outcome of the internal struggles that run throughout the book. According to Jody Handerson of the *Literary Review*, "As the novel . . . draw[s] to a close, the perceived balance between order and confusion can no longer be maintained and the story spins into darkness, culminating with death." Aside from its divisive ending, *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* has impressed critics with its unique style, Gothic mood, and innovative structure. Novelist Lucy Ellmann, in her review for the *Guardian*, called Chapman's novel "a gem . . . weird, vivid and acrobatic, its intricacies are sophisticated, its stance beguiling and complex." Commentators have also taken note of the book's feminist subtext, suggesting that the author does not limit herself to pat readings. As Katharine Noel of the *New York Times Book Review* proclaimed, "It would be easy here to create a simple moral equation, one in which virtuous women are at the mercy of a sexist system, but Chapman is after something more nuanced." Moreover, *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* has been lauded for breathing new life into time-worn ideas. Writing for *Aesthetica*, Rachel Hazelwood asserted that the novel "takes a range of common themes such as ageing, loneliness and escapism and creates a remarkably original piece of storytelling that stays with the reader long after finishing the last page."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto (novel) 2010

CRITICISM

Publishers Weekly (review date 4 January 2010)

SOURCE: Review of *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*, by Maile Chapman. *Publishers Weekly* 257, no. 1 (4 January 2010): 27.

[In the following review, the critic claims that Chapman's novel accomplishes its goals well enough to make for an enjoyable read.]

A novelist in search of an appropriate setting for a bleak novel in the 19th-century tradition, where tuberculosis kills thousands and women are routinely deprived their societal voice, would be hard-pressed to find a more fitting venue than the Finnish convalescence ward where Chapman has set her anxious debut [*Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*]. Ex-dancer Julia is a reluctant tenant of the Suvanto Sairaal, attended to by an American nurse named Sunny Taylor with whom she shares an uneasy connection. The two women weather a succession of historical set pieces involving the consequences of imperfectly understood obstetrics, Finland's changing relationship with Russia, and madness. If the patients and doctors like Pearl Weber; her surgeon husband, the stitch-happy Peter; and the defiant Mary Minder are a microcosm for Chapman, they're little more than guinea pigs for Peter's increasingly sinister experiments. The haunted atmosphere, though, is routinely undercut by injections of elementary Finnish, periods of moody dead air, and an unnecessarily extended dénouement. It's much tamer than the gothics it emulates, but its proto-feminist subtext and Ingmar Bergman aura are brilliantly communicated, making for a promising, if not always satisfying, first novel.

Kirkus Reviews (review date 15 January 2010)

SOURCE: Review of *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*, by Maile Chapman. *Kirkus Reviews* (15 January 2010): 56.

[In the following review, the commentator recommends Chapman's novel but argues that the allusion to Euripides's *The Bacchae* feels forced.]

A misogynistic gynecologist disrupts the seemingly anodyne routine of a Finnish female sanatorium, unleashing sinister forces, in Chapman's debut [*Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*], a strained reinvention of a Greek tragedy.

Suvanto, a hospital nestled in the wilds of Finland, is a house divided. The first floor serves mostly local Finnish women, and has, by the 1920s, become the ideal laboratory for Dr. Peter Weber's new surgical procedures for everything from Caesareans to hysterectomies, which he champions as a cure-all. The upper floor houses wealthier women who present a gamut of nebulous symptoms. There's nothing really wrong with these "up-patients" except boredom, the dull, insensitive men in their lives and the encroachments of old age. Chief brat among the "ups" is Julia, practitioner and teacher of an oxymoronic dance form called "nordic tango." (Her husband and she were barfly ballroom instructors.) The dissipated, world-weary Julia has been bundled into a cab and sent to Suvanto, presumably by her husband, who never apologized for giving her syphilis. The new arrival exasperates her well-meaning American nurse Sunny. Julia's biting sarcasm soon has her fellow up-patients in her thrall: Her only match is Pearl, the Queen Bee, pampered, bejeweled wife of Dr. William Weber, Peter's brother, who winters at Suvanto in order to take a rest cure from her marriage. Julia has supplanted Pearl's chief courtier of last year, Mrs. Minder, whom Julia now mercilessly baits. William, hoping to restore Pearl's joie de vivre, takes her on a train trip, and Peter accelerates obstetrics activity on the first floor, while searching for hysterectomy candidates (Julia tops the list) on the second. Sunny dreads Peter's inroads: owing to her largely unelucidated past, she has a particular horror of pregnancy and infants. Chapman's attempt to shoehorn the material into the framework of *The Bacchae*, Euripides' ancient tragedy about hoards of ravening females, skews what promised to be a quieter but more compelling drama.

An affecting though overreaching first novel.

ForeWord Review (review date March/April 2010)

SOURCE: Review of *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*, by Maile Chapman. *ForeWord Review* (March/April 2010): <http://www.forewordreviews.com/reviews/your-presence-is-requested-at-suvanto/>

[In the following review, the critic deems Chapman's novel a tense and finely wrought example of historical fiction.]

Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby becomes a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." In Maile Chapman's

debut thriller, *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*, we are given characters whose loathsome qualities serve to thinly mask their own personal abysses. Set in the isolated countryside of 1920s' Finland, the tone is as detached and frigid as the landscape, forcing readers to brace themselves against the chilling and foreboding narrative.

Sunny Taylor, an American nurse who moves to Finland after the death of her mother, takes a position at Suvanto Convalescent Hospital. Sunny is the head nurse of the "up ward," a ward for patients who are there for mental as well as physical ailments, some finding the confines of the hospital easier to deal with than the routine of daily life. She is comforted by the demands of the patients and adheres to self-imposed strict guidelines in order to perform her duties with efficiency. But Sunny's composure is challenged when the aging, frail Julia Dey becomes her patient. Julia is a former ballroom dance instructor with her good days behind her and this has left her unamenable and manipulative. Sunny is the only person who learns to cope with Julia and help her deal with her shameful secret. Joined by the emotionally fragile Mary Minder and Pearl Weber, and the truly ailing Laimi Lehti, these women form a tragic group of social misfits.

Chapman's taut prose enhances the subtle and disturbing tone and, in turn, makes the appearance of any newcomer seem ominous. The mutual comfort between patients and Sunny is threatened by the arrival of Dr. Peter Weber, an American doctor who has come to Finland to work on a new, controversial childbirth procedure. He informs Sunny that he wants the up patients discharged as soon as possible so that he can use the rooms for pregnant patients. The women of the up ward react negatively to him and Sunny, even with her austere front, harbors a tacit resentment. A sudden death shakes the foundation of the up ward and ultimately leads to a macabre ending that questions the reality of the story that Chapman has so skillfully presented.

Maile Chapman has written a literary thriller that will please even the most discerning of intellects. Fans of historical fiction, suspense, and craftsmanship will not be let down by the plot, style, or pacing of this eerie Scandinavian thriller.

Jody Handerson (review date spring 2010)

SOURCE: Handerson, Jody. Review of *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto*, by Maile Chapman. *Literary Review* 53, no. 3 (spring 2010): 230-32.

[In the following review, Handerson praises the antagonistic relationship between Julia Dey and Sunny

Taylor and highlights the novel's depiction of isolation, order, and chaos.]

I have always been a slightly stubborn person. Depending on whether you are talking with family members who are fond of me, or those less enamored, I might be wonderfully persistent or downright obstinate. I don't really like being told what to do. So when the opportunity arose to write this review, I had a mixed reaction. Having recently completed several years of graduate school, with lots of mandatory reading, the nascent optimist in me thought "Wow! A legitimate writing gig!" and the obdurate grump responded "Humph, another reading assignment . . . I'll do it, but I won't enjoy it."

About a week later, Maile Chapman's debut novel *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* arrived from the publisher. I took a quick look, flipped through a few pages, then stuck it back in the mailer and tossed it onto the coffee table, just to show it who's boss. A few days later I settled in to read.

Okay, Henry James plus Stephen King plus Sylvia Plath; the perfect cup of tea for us adamant pessimists. Chapman's novel is dark, enigmatic, often morbid (have I mentioned I love morbid?) and at the same time evocative of the measured and careful pace in early nineteenth century novels. Set within a private hospital in Finland, the ambiance is pastoral, although the material distance traveled by the characters is minimal. Chapman creates a measured tempo by focusing on the passage of seasons, noting the particular name (in Finnish), character, and significance of each month. Her descriptions of the natural setting are so vivid and suggestive, the landscape almost becomes antagonistic:

This is the grayest season, in which a thaw may open fissures and rough places in the world, in which loneliness grows stronger, in which rumors are carried in the air as a whiff of damp, at first unnoticed, but persistent. Wet, shifting sounds are heard and then the world outside the building noticeably drips from countless sources; it is dispiriting, this false spring in the sound of water moving in what had been a reliably muffled world.

Bleak.

* * *

The story offers a seasonally gentle beginning in August, with the arrival of Julia Dey, a former dance instructor who will take her place among the top floor "up-patients," women who have come to Suvanto with varied and ambiguous complaints, largely minor and often non-medical. From the beginning,

she is my favorite; dark-haired, sly, and belligerent with an often cruel wit. Julia is given to caustic commentary and rude practical jokes, precisely the sort of person I find myself drawn to at a deadly dull cocktail party. She is described: "Julia's smile is really no more than a slightly open mouth over a slightly pendulous lip, and two expectantly filthy eyes."

She is the perfect counterpoint to Chapman's alternate protagonist, Sunny Taylor, the Head of Nursing for the up-patients. Sunny is as chill as the bleak northern winter, dressed in blue and white, cool, straightforward, and studied. She views her position at Suvanto as a barrier between herself and the unpredictable and often painful life outside the hospital. Two women, dark and light, yin and yang, naughty and nice; the conflict is predictably delicious.

* * *

Throughout the story, Chapman toys with images of isolation: the quiet of a snow-covered landscape; the murmur of voices in Finnish, a language that Sunny does not speak; and the emotional distance she struggles to maintain from the patients and staff. This sense of distance lends a voyeuristic quality to the narrative, putting a sly and increasing distance between the reader and the story. Chapman describes a snowy bicycle ride, where Sunny stops to watch as Julia—herself watched by another patient—observes a man butchering a pig.

In cross section the body is surprisingly vivid, all pink and red and laced with white ribbons and pale chambers like a valentine or a split pomegranate. The head is full of tightly packed stuff, pearly, fresh, the jawbone lean, white, and very long. Buried in the sliced red meat of the cheek is a pattern of something pale—teeth?

Beauty and revulsion, knitting together the idea of something unexpected and deadly within the everyday. And before we realize it, we have tiptoed away from our expectations and into the surreal. Stability is slipping.

Into this stew of emotional Sturm und Drang, Chapman drops another key ingredient. Dr. Peter Weber arrives at Suvanto to treat women with difficult pregnancies and promote hysterectomies for those with delicately referred to "female problems." It seems the up-patients will be phased out, replaced with obstetric cases, and Suvanto will no longer be the refuge of bored women, discontented with their husbands and everyday lives. Dr. Weber is precisely the sort of man I love to hate, officious and im-

minently sure of himself. As soon as he walks onto the page, I am making small sounds of disgust and a mug ring from my hot tea on that page. The struggle is imminent. When Julia agrees to submit to a hysterectomy, I have that sense of pending disaster and I begin to read at a breakneck pace, not quite sure if I want to get to the end because I want to know what happens, or I just want the thing to be over.

As the novel and the winter months draw to a close, the perceived balance between order and confusion can no longer be maintained and the story spins into darkness, culminating with death. Chapman gives unsettlingly little sentimentality to the passing of her characters.

One danger of constant observation is that all the world, even tragedy, comes to seem anecdotal. There are too many people floating in and floating out of the rooms and corridors. A reluctance to say what has happened. Except that Dr. Peter has met with an accident . . . unfortunately.

Yet, there is something equally disturbing and compelling about the author's depiction of these events, it's as if she were turning to me, one finger crooked, saying: Come along with me, I haven't yet finished with you! And indeed, the final events in *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* are every bit as unexpected as any moderately morbid, mystery-loving reader might want, and Chapman's adept and intimate hand with language leaves us breathless and present even to the final word.

Okay, I have to admit that despite my inclination to toss the book across the room at the fate of my favorite character, and pausing only to make several trips to the mirror to practice my own "filthy eyes," I did give myself over, unabashedly, to the sheer enjoyment of Chapman's broody mystery.

Maile Chapman and Scott Dickensheets (interview date 7 April 2010)

SOURCE: Chapman, Maile, and Scott Dickensheets. "Maile Chapman Proved She Could Write a (Pretty Good) Novel After All." *Las Vegas Weekly* (7 April 2010): <http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/news/2010/apr07/maile-chapman-proved-she-could-write-pretty-goodn/>

[In the following interview, Chapman explains the origins of *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* and the long process of composing the novel. She also discusses her early awareness of her aspirations as a writer.]

Your book really doesn't reward speed-reading, I told first-time novelist Maile Chapman when we met for lunch at Gordon Biersch recently. I meant that as a compliment, and she took it as one. *Your Presence Is Requested at Suvanto* is set in a Finnish women's hospital early in the 20th century, where there are strange goings-on, and the deep, wrap-around quality of the prose will frustrate the skim-minded reader. But it pays off for the reader who prefers to sink into a very specific literary sensibility.

Chapman is a Schaeffer Fellow at UNLV.

[Dickensheets]: *How did you arrive at the voice and style of this book?*

[Chapman]: It took me a long time to write it, and I think that might have something to do with the density of it. It took nine years. I started it in 2000. Because it took so long, I worked and reworked so many parts, layer after layer after layer. I wondered if anyone would be willing to read it, because I know it moves slowly in that way.

I based it on *The Bacchae*, a play by Euripides—I studied Greek drama. The one thing that I kind of didn't love about it was that you always knew what was going to happen. So even though I took on *The Bacchae* as a kind of structure . . . I don't know if you're familiar with the play?

Not too much. I'm proof that you can get through 12 years of public school and six years of college and avoid Greek drama.

In this case, this is not a well-known play. It's a play in which there's an ecstatic women's religion, a mystery religion, and women leave the city and go off into the forest and do things, and no one is sure what it is they do. But they're unwholesome things, violent things, and no men are allowed to witness their rituals. They become intoxicated and wear animal skins and they kill animals by tearing them apart with their hands.

So men aren't supposed to witness or interfere with this. And when they do, that's where the tension comes from. So that was sort of the structure: a group of women, doing their thing, don't want to be interfered with; it may or may not be a good thing that they're doing, living in this hospital ward. Then an "interloper," quote-unquote, a surgeon who comes to help a family member, wants to know what they're doing. Is it a good thing or not?

Because I already knew where it was going, I wanted to make it as interesting a trajectory as possible, because the end was already decided.

How did you come to set it in that time and place?

I went to get a master's at Syracuse. I did a lot of research, and some of the books I was looking at were architectural books, architectural history. There was a picture of a hospital that I kept coming back to. It was built in 1930 and it looked like it had been built in 1973. There were pictures of the inside. The idea was that it had been built around the perspective of the patient in a pre-antibiotic kind of world. If you're laying on your back, the heating panel would be up here [gesturing toward ceiling] instead of over there [gesturing to one side]. The lights were all indirect.

And I thought, *That's so cool*. It was so progressive-seeming. Alvar Aalto was the architect. I just kept coming back to it, because it was so neat and clean.

I was also going through a phase with the movie *The Shining*, which I really liked. This idea of a kind of snowy atmosphere, clean and organized—not creepy, not your typical gothic setting.

And medicine; I write a lot about medicine. And the classical architecture thing—did it or didn't it affect what went on inside the building? And because the building was Finnish, I applied for grants to go to Finland, and I got one. That was in 2001-2002.

That there are points in the book where the narrative directly addresses the reader, in the voice of the story rather than in the mouth of a character. What influenced those kinds of creative decisions?

It was the idea of a Greek chorus that sort of guides you through the story, and the idea of a group of people who are in one environment and they're not going to be leaving that environment, and everything's going to take place in a slightly claustrophobic setting—that seemed to go along with the idea of a chorus.

Were you someone who always wanted to write?

Yeah. From really early on. I never had a game plan other than writing, but I didn't really think of that as a career. And then I realized, *People can go to grad school for this. And so I did.*

But I've been a short-story writer, always a short-story writer. I did not feel up to writing a novel. I thought it was beyond me. So I set myself the task: *When I'm 30, I'll start working on a novel.* And it was when I turned 30 that I started working on this.

What's it like to be a novelist in a time like this, where—