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BY VIVIAN DAVIS

Mona Simpson

**Q&A WITH THE BESTSELLING NOVELIST AND
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH**



Photo: Amy Etra/Outline

Mona Simpson writes novels. Her 1987 debut, *Anywhere But Here*, follows Adele and Ann August, a mother and daughter who move from the Midwest to Los Angeles in search of a less ordinary life. The novel went on to be a national bestseller, winning the Whiting Award in 1986, catapulting the author into the literary spotlight. Simpson followed her first novel's success with a

sequel: *The Lost Father*, published in 1992. In it, Simpson's character searches for her Egyptian father, who's been absent all her life, and her quest takes her to New York City and eventually, Egypt. Four years later, Simpson returned with *A Regular Guy* (1996), another work that limns the father-daughter connection, this time between a Silicon Valley millionaire and his estranged, illegitimate

child. That same year Granta named Simpson one of America's Best Young Novelists. In 2000, Simpson published *Off Keck Road*, a novel about a small town spinster, a man who has always been in her life, and a young girl, who completes the odd triangle. This work was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award.

A fascination with places and the people who inhabit them characterizes Simpson's

oeuvre. Her novels dramatize human bonds and the geographic sensibilities that inform them: mothers and daughters in the heartland, daughters and fathers in Egypt, women and men in a small Wisconsin community. Her upcoming novel, *My Hollywood* (Knopf, Spring 2010), depicts the upstairs/downstairs ironies, enmities, and strange affections between a community of immigrant nannies and their employers in contemporary Los Angeles. Presently, Simpson has begun a story about the lives and loves of Diaspora Arabs in Europe, the Gulf, and the United States, and of their more assimilated, half-American cousins. Considering traditional and non-traditional marriages and contemporary divorce, Simpson's novel aims to look at what it means to love and to marry in the twenty-first century.

Not only a bestselling novelist, Simpson is also a Professor in the Department of English, where she teaches workshops on creative writing to swarms of eager undergraduates.

She also plays an active part in organizing the Friends of English and Hammer Museum's popular "Some Favorite Writers" series, a regular event that brings notable literary talents right into the heart of Westwood.

On a recent summer afternoon, I sat down in a Brentwood coffee shop with Simpson to talk about her work and, in particular, *The American Cousins*.

Your current project is about marriages: traditional and nontraditional. The topic is timely given our current political climate. The passage of Proposition 8 last November both intensified the debate over same-sex marriage and brought to the fore questions about what counts as "family." How does this context figure into your thinking about a novel like *The American Cousins*?

Love, courtship, and marriage have always been essential elements of the novel. Without those plots the novel as a genre may not exist. Domestic daily life is a perennial subject for fiction, though the how-to elements change with every era. People fell in love and married a hundred years ago, but we do those things in a way that reflects our culture and our

conscious and unconscious beliefs. Tolstoy didn't write about kids whose fathers were numbers on index cards in sperm banks or about blended families. I have first cousins who had arranged marriages. One of my cousins who married on his own, while in graduate school here in the States, later divorced and let his mother pick his bride the next time. At least in my family, though, the arranged marriages I witnessed felt less like the arranged marriages one encounters in *A Passage to India* or even in the work of Jhumpa Lahiri. They more closely resembled a really well run on-line dating service.

In other words, the family sought suitable grooms for my intelligent young cousin, arranged with the families to meet, and then paid an orchestrated formal visit. At the end of one of these vetting sessions, which had involved six family members flying to another part of the country where the young man attended medical school, my cousin decided the boy was too short. We will not go forward, my father said, to the father of

the medical student. And another candidate was found, researched, and presented. This happened many times.

How did you begin your research for the novel? Academics are often committed to the idea of toiling away in the archives or working out in the field, compiling textual evidence or hard data. What is your process as a fiction writer?

[Laughs] We have more fun. Usually I tend to write first and research later. There are good and bad things about that. The good thing is that you get only what you need. The problem with research in and of itself is that you're likely to unearth so many uncanny and resonant details that it's tempting to put them in, even where they don't belong. Of course, you learn less. Researching as you go along, you gain a greater depth of knowledge, but I'm usually looking for details. Statistics and trends are easy to come by, but what I want are the textures of daily life.

That's what's so engaging about your books. They're all very interested in the quotidian, the everyday things that make up

any given place. I've always been struck by the description of Westwood in *Anywhere But Here*: the apartment buildings, the car models, the menu at Hamburger Hamlet. Given that you write about Los Angeles in such detail, I have to ask if you like living here. It's one of those cities that people seem to love or hate.

I've felt everything towards Los Angeles: I've loved it. I've hated it. It's home to me. I have living history here. I run into people I went to high school with almost daily. I trust my intuitive rapport with the place and our misunderstood culture. I loved living in New York but I would never write with authority about that city. I'm not a New Yorker. I'm an Angelino, for better and worse.

Within Los Angeles, you also seem to have found a home in the intellectual community at UCLA. How do your colleagues and students shape your creative experiences?

From my colleagues I find out about books I need to read and realms of thought I hadn't even considered. I was on a Hardy binge this summer, for example, and I'm sure almost everyone in the English department could talk

to me about Hardy in a way I'd find totally fascinating and even intimidating. But you know how it is with books. If you read it five years ago, it's not palpably alive in your mind. What's so great about teaching is that you read something you're excited about or troubled by and you give it to fifteen students and you discuss it that week. You've all just read the same thing and they care about the forms and risks of contemporary fiction just as you care about them. Students bring their experiences and their curiosity to the classroom.

Are there unique challenges you face when teaching at UCLA? I know you've held appointments at other universities.

The quarter system has been a bit challenging for me. Teaching writing depends on trust, for the students to work together and expose their raw efforts. It seems that just when the class becomes comfortable and raucous and the students start taking risks in their work, the tenth week comes around.

In addition to teaching, you're also curator of the Friends of English and Hammer

Museum’s Some Favorite Writers series. In the past, you’ve hosted readings by Amy Hempel, David Foster Wallace, Michael Cunningham, Wole Soyinka, and well, this list goes on. How did you become involved?

I became involved when I came here because there was a tremendous poetry series, which had been running from decades, but there wasn’t really an active fiction series connected with the English department. The Hammer has a wonderful atmosphere for us. It’s a vibrant, urban, discursive place.

It does seem a bit tricky to juggle a public persona and a private self, to always be thinking of your answers to these kinds of questions in terms of public relations. As an author how do you feel about readings and publicity tours? Are they events you look forward to?

I just received an email from a good friend whose novel is on the bestseller list right now, with the subject heading “I’m never going on a book tour again.” We all say that. Every time. And then we go again, if we’re lucky enough to be asked. It’s taxing and draining because

it’s so unlike what we normally do; you walk into a morning radio show and the host turns to you and says, “what’s so interesting about your book?” That can be a dumbfounding question. If you could summarize what you’re going to do in a book in two good lines, you’d be a copywriter. It wouldn’t take you 300 pages to intimate and suggest that ineluctable experience you’re trying to give that feels new to you and recognizable and yet so far unnamed. If you could do it in two pity lines, God knows you wouldn’t spend years writing those 300 pages. Book tours are a job of acting, really.

Interesting that you should describe it that way. Do you find your work to be different on page as opposed to stage? How does your relationship to the text change during a reading?

It’s really an act of translation. One of my favorite novels is Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*. It’s a deep, beautiful book, maybe one of the ten best of the last century, but the first time I heard her read it, I didn’t like it. There are definitely passages that are great on the page, and others that are great

orally. There is overlap, but it’s not complete. Internality is one of the last major territories for the novelist and in readings, sometimes those internal swings are more difficult for the audience to follow. An audience wants to participate in some way. People want to laugh, to express some emotion. We need permission to voice our response. Writers are not in the business of doing that every five minutes when we’re working on the page. It’s a different medium.

David Sedaris was in town, and I was struck with his unusual way of working. He says what he does is that he prints out the reading with huge margins and takes notes during the actual reading, such as “Audience laughs here,” or, “No laugh there.” Then he goes to the hotel that night after the reading and revises, based on audience reaction. He’s really a performance artist, a monologist. He shapes his work to glean the maximum ideal response from an audience.

That might not be exactly the same endeavor as trying to write for a private reader.

This all brings me to my last question for you, which has to do with what other projects you have slated. What else are you working on or would you like to work on?

I have two books I want to write; one is *The American Cousins*, a novel, and the other is a straight-out memoir, or short biography of my father's life. He's the youngest son of a large, prominent Syrian family. He was the first person in his generation to break away completely. He came to America in 1956 and he hasn't been back since.

Mona Simpson is a best-selling novelist and Professor in the Department of English at UCLA. In 2008-2009, she was awarded a CSW Faculty Research Seed Grant for her project, The American Cousins. This fall the "Some Favorite Writers" series at the Hammer Museum is scheduled to host an evening with Mark Sarvas on October 20 and one with Yiyun Li on November 18.

Vivian Davis is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and a contributing writer for CSW Update. She is currently completing a dissertation on comedy and tragedy in the long eighteenth century.

