

AN INTERVIEW WITH IVY POCHODA
Beth Bosworth for THE SAINT ANN'S REVIEW

BETH BOSWORTH: You've said elsewhere that with *Visitation Street* you didn't set out to write a mystery novel. What about that?

IVY POCHODA: After I wrote my first book, which was good but has some shortcomings in terms of plot, I was really struggling to write and I happened to have this conversation with my dad and I said, "Maybe I'll write a mystery," and he said, "You will never write a mystery, you're so bad at plot, it's not your thing." I didn't really read mysteries, either, although that's changed now. So I just set out to write about Red Hook, where I was living, and how this girl goes missing—there was this book by Yiyun Li called *The Vagrants*, about a woman being publicly executed in China and all these people circling the event, and I loved that structure. My main event was a disappearance of two girls, and then I got stuck and a friend of mine, the only person I let read it, said, "Oh, does so-and-so find out what happens to June in the end?" and I said, "I guess, why not, it'd be good." And then when my editor showed me the cover, after I sold it, she said, "Imagine this with a big old blurb from Dennis Lehane on the front," and I thought, *Why, why would he ever blurb my book, he's a mystery writer*—well, he isn't but he is—and she said, "Oh, you wrote a mystery," and I kept thinking, *I didn't write a mystery*, and now the novel keeps getting talked about as one. You know, there isn't a murder. There aren't really detectives. But for me a mystery is anything that keeps people turning the page, as in, *Does Captain Ahab find that whale?* That's pretty mysterious, you know.

TSAR: I don't want to ruin the novel for anyone who hasn't read it, but couldn't what happens be perceived as... murderous?

IP: I never set out for that to happen. The way the plot was going to unravel was, you would find out what has happened by the end, not that there would be a big culprit or a trial—I don't know anything about those things. The cops in my book are based on my experience of police in Red Hook, which is that they

were around, they went to the projects a lot. But a mystery? Strange. But great, very cool. Sells books.

TSAR: You mentioned that you've been reading some mysteries. Was that after you wrote the novel?

IP: Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* was a huge influence on this book, and it has a mystery and a river. And then *Visitation Street* started getting compared to all these mysteries, so I read a bunch that came out last year, like *The Silent Wife* by A.S.A. Harrison. I went to this mystery writer's conference that I was sent to, called Bouchercon in Albany. At first I did not want to go and then I went and met this amazing community of female writers who are not competitive in the way of MFA writers, they're just great, and I really embraced them. I read some books by Alafair Burke, who is James Lee Burke's daughter, and she's become a good friend of mine, and Laura Lippman, and Meghan Abbot who is absolutely terrific, really smart. I went to their panels and they were just talking about literature in a very advanced, very academic way, but also writing more popular books and I thought, *That's me*—maybe not the mystery part, but that approach to literature. It doesn't have to be the *Paris Review*, it doesn't have to be the *Atlantic Monthly*. I like to read books that are page-turners but are also...literary.

TSAR: There's something to be said for the so-called "debased genres?"

IP: There's something nice about genre, something to sink your teeth into. Laura Lippman wrote an article in *Publisher's Weekly* about genre and crime, it's fascinating. Genre is a dirty word that shouldn't be. Of course, someone might want to read a more serious novel—

TSAR: Your novel is pretty serious.

IP: Yeah, it is. I didn't set out to write that.

TSAR: Someone once asked the writer Mary-Beth Hughes how her sentences became so rhythmical, and she responded that the only thing she could think of was that she had once been a dancer and saw sentences in terms of movement—

I'm paraphrasing. You've played squash professionally. Any connection?

IP: Funny you should ask. It's more in terms of plotting, though I'm not a very good plotter, it's not my favorite thing. In a squash rally, you have to vary the pace but you also have to be slow and steady, it can be an attritional battle, or you may want to surprise somebody with twists and turns—you have to have a full arsenal of shots to make up a good game. But squash affects me more in terms of discipline, especially because we weren't really supported by the government or the National Squash Foundation or the U.S. Olympic committee—

TSAR: We?

IP: Us squash players. I. I had to rely on myself and sometimes it wasn't going to go well, and writing is the same way. It isn't always going to go well, and I can't be hard on myself even though I am. In terms of my actual writing style, what I think is, and I teach my writing students this, If you can't read it out loud, if you imagine reading it to your tenth-grade English class and their laughing at you, then it's bad. I prefer to work on sentences rather than story, which is good, but you need story in there too.

TSAR: When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

IP: I remember this so clearly. I was in sixth grade in my puppetry class and our teacher asked everyone what they wanted to do when they grew up. I said I wanted to be a writer and she asked why, and I didn't want to say why so I said it was because both my parents worked in writing or publishing. And she said that wasn't a very good reason and I told myself that I would never tell anyone that again.

TSAR: What was the real reason?

IP: The reason was that I liked it....but even later on, in college, I didn't do any writing except some playwriting. Harvard was not my favorite place for creative work—Afterward, when I was living in Amsterdam and playing squash professionally, my parents said, "Well, why don't you do something constructive?" So I started writing and I had to work really hard at it. I just didn't understand the

craft of fiction and maybe I still don't. It's hard. Who's a writer? When do you consider yourself a writer? I think about this all the time: I've written a book, I'm going to write another book, right now I'm not writing a book. So am I a writer?

TSAR: Some of the descriptions in *Visitation Street* are just beautiful. The passages about street art and how it's seen through the lights of passing trains...

IP: Thank you for saying that. I love that part. I'm struggling to write right now actually because there's so much of myself in that book, or so I start thinking, and then I think, *Wait, no*, and I remind myself that I made a certain part up. I don't know if it's real or not, that part about the graffiti art. When I was in grad school there were these moments when they wanted you to write very tight, very precise literary fiction, and then they would check your flights of fancy and stuff like the spirituality or ghosts or the graffiti's being a little livelier than it should be, and now at times since then I can let go of that experience and allow in more of the imagination—well, the imagination I had in high school.

TSAR: Was there anything you had to take out that you miss?

IP: I got really lucky. I didn't have to kill anything in the story. I had to rein myself in a bit, I started to get a little too fantastical, and then I went the other way and made it so clinical, too precise, and then in the final draft those super ghostly elements just started coming through unintentionally, which was cool.

TSAR: Your first novel also has some disappearances in it.

IP: I don't know what that's about. I mean it had water in it too, though there's less of that in the final version. I don't know why I'm obsessed with disappearance. I think it's really hard to disappear today. I think it's really impossible.

TSAR: That's for sure.

IP: When I played squash I traveled a lot all around the world, this was really before cell phones, and there was always this sense, *I'm in a train station in the middle of nowhere in Belgium and no one knows where I am and I've transferred to the wrong train and what if I never came back? Who would find me?* That kind

of notion is sort of freeing. in the original conception of the disappearances in both books, people disappeared to pursue this other life they didn't have. But to be honest I started writing something recently and I was like, *Oh my God, what is this person doing going missing? Go back home.*

TSAR: Between the writing of your first novel and the writing of your second, what did you do?

IP: I went to graduate school to learn to write. I was really struggling to sell that first novel and I love it, but no one told me to stop, no one told me it was way out there. I didn't know how to rein in my imagination, you know, those talking quilts, all this stuff that I think is really cool but might not make great action. You need to be a better writer to pull that off successfully, like Aimee Bender, who does all that really well. So when my agent couldn't sell that novel I was just devastated, and then I applied to graduate school at Bennington, which is a low residency MFA, and then I realized that I actually didn't know how to write properly or that there were things I could get better at. I just didn't know about nodding or hissing or whispering or people smiling at you....

TSAR: What do you mean?

IP You don't need all those, *Hi Beth*, or *Beth nodded*, people were always nodding in response or smiling, as in, *Good morning, she smiled*. Everyone is always nodding in that book, they hiss, they whisper. So I went to Bennington and you have to read one hundred books in two years, and it was just great. I hadn't really read literature in college. I studied Ancient Greek—well, I did Greek and English, but you know, we didn't read a lot of literature, somehow I got through Harvard missing that. Bennington was a great experience. I learned to write and I learned about being a little tougher on your prose.

TSAR: What did you read at Bennington that has stayed with you?

IP: You know, I did a panel somewhere for my first book, and they asked me what book influenced me and I said the most obscure thing, I must have come across as a total ass: Haruki Murikama's lesser known work, *Sputnik Sweetheart*, which is a crappy book. Actually Haruki Murikama really did influ-

ence me because I like that he can play on both sides of the fence, really realistic and surreal at the same time. A book I was influenced by that I didn't actually like that much was *Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann. I do like the structure and the sort of panorama of it. I liked Jennifer Egan's *Visit to the Goon Squad* also in terms of structure. I had never really read Dickens—

TSAR: I thought there was a kind of Dickensian sweep in the social breadth of *Visitation Street*.

IP: One of my teachers David Gates told me to read Dickens and since he just happened to be teaching a class at the New School on Dickens, I audited it. We read all the social novels in three months. It was intense. We happened to read *Our Mutual Friend* and that was really influential. *Fortress of Solitude* was hugely influential, Jonathan Lethem's novel.

TSAR: What about magic realism?

IP: You know, I don't love magic realism even though I wrote my first book about it. Again, it's so much harder to do well than people think, you have to invent a universe. I find Garcia Marquez a little much, though I think he's great. I loved *Fortress of Solitude* because there's just that tiny, tiny hint. I wrote my first book and then I read *Fortress* and thought, *Oh my God, how did he write this book about my neighborhood?* He grew up a block away from me. He did these little things that I copied in *Visitation Street*, where he would change one detail in the neighborhood. I've actually asked him why, for instance, he changed Amity Street to Congress Street—he just flipped the two streets, and I'm sure he didn't get it wrong. That just allowed him to make it his own book. So I did that a lot. I like books that have a little suggestion of something that's not quite, you know, real, in them, but not too much. People always say that *Visitation Street* does have all these people hearing ghosts and I say, "Well, maybe, but maybe it's just a grief reaction." I like that sort of balance. I just read this book called *Help for the Haunted* by John Searles, it's a mystery about a teenage girl whose family gets murdered and whose parents are spiritualists. He did that tension really well: Are the parents really spiritualists? Are these dolls talking? It's a very enjoyable book.

TSAR: Did you write more than one draft of the novel?

IP: I remembering thinking, *This is going so well* and I look back now and say,, *God that was really hard*. I wrote eight chapters and they were just absolutely terrible. The one problem with the Bennington Writing Program is that it's not geared to having you write novels. It's geared to having you write short stories because you have twenty pages due a month and you switch around to different teachers, so no one has seen the big picture. That draft of the bool was about this woman in Red Hook and then she comes back on the Queen Mary and gets pregnant and I knew nothing about it all and I put that draft aside and thought, *I am not going to do this, I'm going to write short stories*. This was while I was reading Dickens.

TSAR: When did you realize that the novel was working?

IP: During my third semester at Bennington, I started over from scratch. I changed the race of the two girls because having the girls be African American was hard for me, although then I put in all these other African American characters. The reason the book is from multiple perspectives is that I never knew what I was doing, so I would have one character and switch to another and switch to another but after I put it away for eight months, I started to see that it was going to work. I saw that not every character had to interact with every other character, they could have their own individual stories and somehow just pass each other. I had to realize that the missing girl was going to be the catalyst for everything and not just some prologue tacked on. When I realized that everything was going to have something to do with that in its own way, then I was able to write the novel.

TSAR: The event that sets everything going, as you were saying, involves two teenage girls, and the novel seems to draw on a kind of power that teenagers have. Did you think about the teenage state of being?

IP: That book is about me growing up in Cobble Hill and going to middle school and high school in Brooklyn Heights. It's about Red Hook visually and socially but the experience of those girls is very much my own experience. I mean, not that I did those things. But those two girls represent two sides of my personality. I've been in relationships with my friends where they were just moving ahead

of me at this alarming rate, like in eighth grade with boys and drinking and smoking cigarettes while I still wanted to hang back and dress up and do plays or prank-call people or wear costumes. And then I have been in other relationships, like with my oldest friend, where she wasn't as willing to—you know, I got a boyfriend and she wanted no part of that and I was pulling in the other direction, running a million miles an hour toward adulthood and she still wanted to have sleepovers. So I thought about how that power struggle between teenage girls can be really difficult, and I wrote about both sides of that experience. A lot of people seem to respond to that. I think being a teenage girl is really hard—and I'm also fascinated by teenagers. They do have this sort of power.

TSAR: There's an almost dangerous quality to these girls.

IP: Yes. And they're in an isolated community. There's this sort of frontier town quality to Red Hook where kids unwatched can really get into trouble, and I wanted to talk about that. There's this moment where girls are really susceptible to the danger of this expectation that teenage girls will be social animals, that that's enough of an existence for them. The whole book is about people who've let go. I wanted to capture that sense that your whole life can turn on this tiny decision you're conscious of making. When Val starts to pursue her music teacher, she doesn't know what she's doing but it could ruin her life.

TSAR: And comes close to it, right?

IP: It's funny, I remember sitting with my friend Tiffany at Bennington and she asked me, "What do you want to write about?" and I said I wanted to write about myself as a teenager and the friendships I had, the moments where I might have just taken one step too far—and I was not a bad kid at all, but I did go to the bar and see my teachers there and I wanted to write about it. I wanted to capture that very difficult tightrope that girls seem to be walking. There's a lot of social pressure to be available to everybody, always answer the phone, always go to the party.

TSAR: Mystery novelists sometimes divert the readers, draw their attention elsewhere while layering in the truth. Did you think about that at all?

IP: I didn't know what was going to happen so it's all diversion. I wrote my way into a solution. Actually I was never interested in what happened to June—I always knew and it was never very interesting to me, although how it happens is interesting. I also think it's asking a lot of mature readers to follow teenagers all the time and I wanted to present a panorama of this community. I was writing about the community, not about these girls or what happened to June, so the whole thing was a total diversion, a total magic trick—there you go!

TSAR: You mentioned that it was difficult to finish the novel when the two characters that inaugurated it were African-American. But, reading the novel, I thought you manage to enter different environments—

IP: After I changed that, I still had Cree, who was African-American, and Ben, and Gloria, Celia, and Lily, the grandmother. Maybe it was just that had those girls been African-American and gone missing in Red Hook there wouldn't have been, frankly, as much of a community response—I switched their identity for reasons that made me feel uncomfortable but it actually helped the plot, because I was able to bring the two sides of the neighborhood together. Also I didn't want to write about two African American families grieving. That was the part I couldn't do, I felt that I couldn't go into those two family histories as much

TSAR: How did you manage to get into the persona of the shopkeeper, say—

IP: I don't know. I lived across from that store and was always fascinated by that guy, who's Lebanese and whose name is apparently Cliff. I didn't know that, which proves the point of my book, which is that nobody knows this guy's name. I'd gone there every day and he had this message board up and I always thought that this man wanted more out of Red Hook than Red Hook was going to give him. Red Hook is intolerant of outsiders to a certain degree, to a major degree, and I imagined what it would be like to work there every day and not be part of the new gentrifying part of the community or part of the old stock, you know, the fishermen and longshoremen. But again, this is the weird thing, I think that I know all these people and that the novel is based on them but then I realize that I make it up, you know—a lot of the characters are physically or situationally based on people that I see all the time, but not temperamentally.

TSAR: What about the music teacher, Jonathan? He's a fascinating character.

IP: There was this man who lived across the street from me. I lived across from the bar and he came into the bar one day and insulted everybody. He's a drunk and also really smart. I could see into his window, and I always sort of imagined what he was getting up to. And I had long-suffering music teachers in high school....and I kind of imagined how frustrating it was, trying to make students listen to jazz at the end of the day, and I grafted my experience of being a horrible student and ruining class onto this really drunk, pretty smart guy who washed ashore in Red Hook. I think I know him but maybe I don't. Every single character is a part of me. When I was living in Red Hook things weren't going so well for me in terms of health, I was staying up late, drinking too much, and there's that moment where you could give up and say, *Forget it, I'm going to live to be in this bar and be in this neighborhood and that's enough*, and I could see that happening to myself if I didn't do anything. And so I wrote about my own anxiety about giving up on life—No, that sounds very depressing!—about not pushing myself harder. Jonathan is someone who has just given up, he whole thing turns on a dime for him. And that's what he's worried is going to happen to Val.

That's an important thing about teenage girls, I've worked with a lot of teenagers in the Urban Education Squash Program—

TSAR: What's that?

IP: StreetSquash, Uptown Harlem. With girls especially there's that moment—girls can think it's more important to be social, to be around boys, and expect less of themselves than boys do, at least in my experience. And Val is looking like she's going to mess up and Jonathan is really concerned about that.

TSAR: The novel seems to touch on to what extent a person can be redeemed.

IP: It took me so long talking about this book to realize that the book is sort of my own redemption for these years—it sounds dramatic but it wasn't that dramatic. I feel like I made something. I moved to Red Hook, I met all these people in this bar, they became my friends, and when I started to write, the initial idea was, *These people are your friends when the lights are out in the bar and the alcohol*

is flowing, but in the morning, are they your friends or not? Did we really know each other when we weren't having fun or was it all about telling jokes and staying up? I was trying to write about the misunderstanding of social relationships. And then I realized that the book, for me, was my way of trying to make something beautiful or literary or worthwhile out of all the time that I squandered in the bar....I wanted every character to be redeemed but not in some overwhelming come-to-Jesus moment, although Jonathan definitely comes out better than he goes in.

TSAR: For sure.

IP: As for Val, she's had a traumatic experience, so we'll see.

TSAR: There's a party scene in your novel that's set in Brooklyn Heights.

IP: I wanted Val to have a bit of the outside-looking-in-experience. There's a kind of entitled carelessness to being a private school student, everyone was so reckless with their life, whether it was drinking or doing drugs or doing stupid stuff. You think that you're invincible, and Val knows that's not true by the time she goes to the party because she's seen bad things happen. I thought that Brooklyn Heights was a really good comparison or juxtaposition with Red Hook. The kids call the drug dealer and there's this sort of invitation of this outside world that they're both afraid of and enthralled by.

TSAR: What changes have you seen in Red Hook?

IP: I was just there two nights ago. The nature of the neighborhood hasn't changed, it still feels the same at night, but there's a ton of people during the day and it feels discovered in a way that it didn't. We felt so special when we were out there, we felt so committed to life in this isolated community, which is interesting because everyone in my book is stuck, either by circumstances like Cree because he's born in the project and can't figure a way out, or like Val because she's a teenager, or Jonathan—I visualize him moving from the Upper East Side to Brooklyn Heights and down into Red Hook. There was this sense when I lived out there that we were all stuck on this spit of land and that's pretty much gone

now. There's a lot of money coming in now, a lot of people who can afford to not work and have cars, but it still feel special. After Hurricane Sandy there was a definite communal aura. Red Hook will never fully gentrify. There is a very close-knit community of people devoted to RED HOOK who are still there and will never leave.

TSAR: You speak of students. Where do you teach?

IP: I teach a creative writing workshop in my house in L.A., which is really fun although every once in a while there's someone you might not have wished to invite into your house on a weekly basis. It's a really cool program, it's like Sackett Street Writers here but it's called Writing Workshop L.A.

TSAR: Do you struggle to find the balance between teaching and writing?

IP: I've been warned against teaching in these low residency programs because that would be very time-consuming. I get very involved in my students' work and I have to stop and think, *No wait, I have to work on myself*, I can't get all stressed out about their character development and their narrative infrastructure. But teaching has helped me to become a better speaker about writing. It's helped me to realize the things I don't know, the books I haven't read because my students are always coming at me with, "Have you read this book?" and I have to say, "No, I haven't read that, what are you talking about?"

TSAR: Do you ever get away?

IP: I just went to the desert in Twenty Nine Palms for five or six weeks—It's by Joshua Tree in California—I rented a house there. I'd like to go away once a month for a weekend. My husband is also a writer, so it's a little hard if the two of us are writing at home. We live in an open loft and I'm easily distracted but I still work at home. If I went somewhere I'd be so stressed out about the time I lost in transit...my husband and I have different writing schedules, he likes to procrastinate and then when he gets going, he's really good, whereas I have to start at nine o'clock because if I haven't started by eleven, the day is ruined.

TSAR: What are you working on now?

IP: I feel a lot of pressure to write a mystery, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. The only person who hasn't put that pressure on me is my agent. I do love the mystery community. I'm trying to figure out a way to use something mysterious again to examine a social response. I live near Skid Row and teach a writing workshop near Skid Row, and I'd like to use some of that experience in a book. That sounds a little craven, you know, "I'd like to use my experience as a volunteer on Skid Row to write a novel," but it'll be fun. So that's what I'm working on now.