



The Beaufort native will appear in the Pat Conroy Literary Festival on November 7

With six acclaimed novels already to her credit, Beaufort native Valerie Sayers has recently released a first collection of stories, *The Age of Infidelity*, which span from the Due East in the 1960s (the familiar southern setting of much of her fiction) into speculative visions of the future. Once a high school psychology student of famed writer Pat Conroy, Valerie was inducted into the South Carolina Academy of Authors, the Palmetto State's literary hall of fame, in 2018 (just as Conroy had been honored thirty years prior). She will return to Beaufort, albeit virtually, as a workshop instructor and presenting author in the 5

th annual Pat Conroy Literary Festival, this November 7. (Learn more about the festival in the full-page ad in this issue or at <https://conta.cc/3izeBPh>.)

Valerie discussed all of that—plus some vital lessons she has learned from her students and teachers—in this recent email interview.

Jonathan Haupt: *The Age of Infidelity* is newly published by Slant Books. How did these 11 stories, written over time, come together as a collection?

Valerie Sayers: They evolved over many years—almost twenty. Each one came upon me suddenly, and I wrote the first drafts quickly (then fussed with them for months to come). I was perfectly happy to publish them individually. It wasn't until I saw the infidelity thread that I thought I might put these eleven together as a collection; as I pieced them side by side, and thought about stories I'd published a long time before, it tickled me to think about how variously and persistently that theme played out in my work.

JH: What are we talking about when we talk about infidelity in the context of these stories?

VS: Sexual or marital infidelity is an explicit concern in some of them, including the title story, but some of the other variations interest me more: in that title story, for example, the narrator also has to choose whether to be faithful to a suffering mother apparently beyond reach. In other stories, characters have to choose whether to be faithful in the religious sense, or in the political sense. At the end of "Should I Be Afraid?," the protagonist has to decide whether he can be faithful to a weaker person when his own life is on the line. The futurist stories are all interested in whether human beings can be faithful stewards to the natural world.

JH: Several of the stories wander deeply in speculative, specifically into futurist fiction. What other writers do you read or teach in this genre? And what sparked your interest in writing these tales?

VS: In the last couple of decades, I've become fascinated by how many of the literary writers I admire were trying their hands at futurist work. Margaret Atwood, with her *MadAddam* Trilogy, is probably the best-known example, but I was also intrigued by what Colson Whitehead, Zadie Smith, and Chang-rae Lee were doing. I decided to teach a course called "Writing the Future," which led me to consider more literary writers--Karen Russell, Jennifer Egan, Junot Díaz--who were moving back and forth between contemporary and future settings, as well as to some classic science fiction I had always avoided like the, well, plague. Recently, I was entranced with Gish Jen's futurist baseball novel, *The Resisters*.

JH: The writer Jill McCorkle said once on a visit to Beaufort that, "writing a short story has as much in common with writing a novel as writing a novel has in common with baking a cake." More recently, George Singleton compared writing a novel to cooking a

five-course dinner, whereas a short story is like focusing all of your attention on making a really good side dish. Food metaphor or otherwise, how would you compare writing short form and long form fiction, as a writer who excels at both?

VS: Thanks for the lovely compliment. The food metaphor's never occurred to me—and I have to say, I don't think a good story is a side dish, I think it's perfectly capable of holding center stage (as long as we're cooking, might as well mix that metaphor). Writing stories and writing novels, though, are absolutely different experiences and, as Jill McCorkle says, nothing like cooking. The ideas for both stories and novels come to me suddenly, or so it seems. The scope of the idea (or the image, or the snatch of dialogue, or the narrative voice) determines which form I'll tackle, and I usually know that right away too. For a novel, the themes have to be big and complex, capable of holding my curiosity for years. For stories, I often feel a pressing immediacy: I have to get the whole of this down right away. But often, characters or themes from one story crop up in another, and then I have to wonder whether I'm actually circling a novel.

JH: From past conversations, I recall that you once accidentally signed up for a poetry class and that you still turn out a poem once a year or so. What did that class—and continuing to practice the craft of poetry—add to your prose writing style or process?

VS: Good memory! Actually, everyone in the class but the professor had signed up for fiction writing. The registrar had listed the course title wrong. We all stuck with it, though, and the professor, Bob Nettleton, was delightful. He'd been an engineer but changed careers because he was smitten with language. I'd written poetry since I was a kid, but he really gave me permission to take pleasure in it, to laugh at it, to roll around in language and not worry about getting dirty.

JH: Several stories in *The Age of Infidelity* take us back to Due East, the fictional southern small

