

Portrait of the Poet as a Novelist

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor
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Ellen Malphrus unties the moon . . .

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Lowcountry native Ellen Malphrus – published



poet, professor of English, possessor of fabulous hair – will launch her debut novel *Untying the Moon* on the afternoon of Friday, October 16, at the Heyward House in Old Town Bluffton. Joining Ellen will be her friend Pat Conroy, who, when not laboring over his own bestsellers, moonlights as editor-at-large for Story River Books. With splendid novels like Ellen's and a host of others on its list, Conroy's southern fiction imprint with USC Press is proving to be 'the little label that could,' having rapidly made a name for itself in literary circles far beyond South Carolina.

I've known Ellen Malphrus for years and had hoped we could get together for a long, wine-fueled conversation before her book launch party. Alas, life being what it sometimes is, we had to settle for an email interview instead. But even through that impersonal medium, Ellen's voice rings warm and true and absolutely Ellen . . . much as it does in her debut novel.

Margaret Evans: *Ellen, while reading Untying the Moon, I was very much aware that I was reading a novel written by a poet. The lush precision of the language was just one of many*

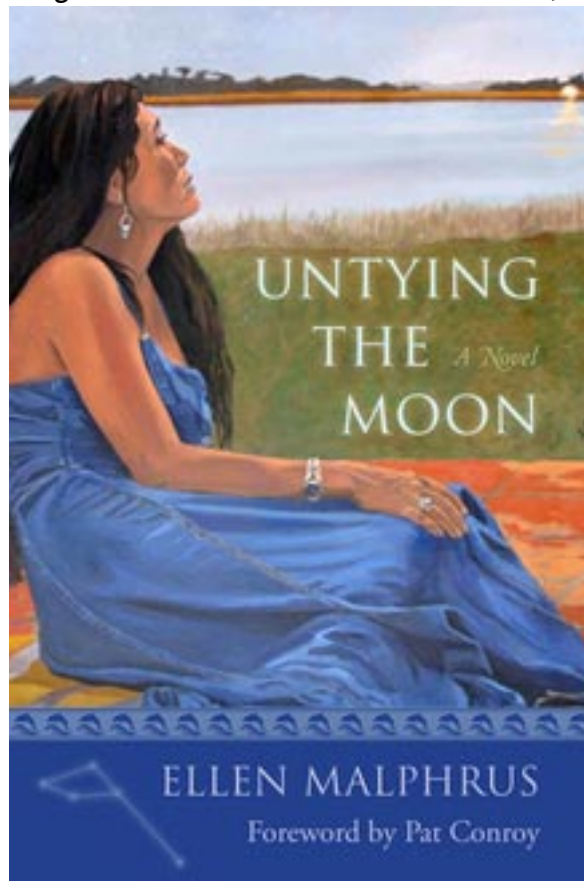
hints. What are some of the particular challenges that a poet faces when she attempts to become a novelist?

Ellen Malphrus: There's no doubt that what I know about poetry colors all that I write. I suppose *Untying the Moon*, in ways, came to be written like a poem by the time I finished it. What you hold in your hands now is pared down from a much larger manuscript – several hundred pages distilled into 184. I worked to tighten paragraphs, then I worked to tighten sentences into a story that, if I'm fortunate, will resonate with readers.

This is something that you see in a writer like Ron Rash, where you find passages of fiction that read like prose poems. There's genius in Ron's writing, yes, but he has also taken the time, done the work to strip it down to the bones.

I didn't see it as a challenge while I was working on *Untying the Moon*, but your question makes me realize something important about having written the novel this way – that while there's pleasure in a "quickie," of course, my hope is for readers to open themselves instead to a slow seduction. ("Please don't go tearing through this," I wish I could write on a little note on page one, "especially those of you who know me and can't wait to see who gets mentioned. It's not about us.")

ME: *Isn't it? The book's heroine, Bailey Martin, is a fascinating character. (And – ahem – vaguely familiar.) I'm wondering how much of this Carolina-rooted, river-loving road warrior is Ellen Malphrus?*



EM: Well . . . Bailey Martin drives a '67 Buick Skylark convertible named Blue Ruby, and I have a '69 Buick Skylark convertible named Maybelline – so there's that. She is a child of the Carolina Lowcountry, as am I, and salt water runs through her veins as it does through mine. She's deeply rooted to home, home folks and home places, but she has a gypsy spirit, if you will, a wandering bone that causes restlessness. Ditto Ellen. We diverge at the point where

Bailey's restlessness leads her down darker, edgier, more dangerous roads than those I usually travel.

ME: *According to your bio, you spend part of your time "beside the May River" in the South Carolina Lowcountry and the other part "beneath the Madison Mountains" in Western Montana. Your love of the natural world shines on every page of this novel. How important to your writing life is this river/mountains dichotomy?*

EM: It's true that I'm far more comfortable in the natural world. A.B. Guthrie has a character from the 1800's bemoan that he's hung up in St. Louis waiting for supplies before striking out for the territories. "I don't hanker for no ant hill," the guy says, and I feel the same way. While there are cities, large and small, that I love – New Orleans, San Miguel de Allende, Florence (It's Italy that is, not South Carolina), Seville, Venice, Paris, for instance – I just prefer to be outside in fresh air where I can watch and listen and simply be amongst what really matters. In Montana I don't have running water or electricity, but our tiny one room cabin sits on sixty acres and is nearly surrounded by public lands. Space is what I need, room to breathe, and I'm very fortunate that I get that both around the water here in the Lowcountry and around the mountains out west. I'm fortunate too that my husband is of the same mindset.

So, to answer your question, I think it has most to do with being in sacred, nurturing places, wherever those are. I was in New Mexico this summer and was very much alive and grounded there as well. And I certainly feel that way in the blue waters of the Caribbean. I will say about the river/mountain dichotomy that my perspective on one when I'm in the other affects how I write about each. A number of key passages in *Untying the Moon*, which is mostly set in the Carolina Lowcountry, were written while I was holed up in Montana.

ME: *Though very much grounded in modern reality and the physical world, there is something about this book that feels almost "mythic"... almost as if you're telling a very old story about archetypal figures. Am I off base?*

EM: No, you're not off base, and I appreciate your careful reading. We're talking about another layer, but one that isn't at all necessary to "getting" what happens in the book. If you choose to think in these terms, though, you can see Poseidon at work in many key scenes. Zephyros, the wind god, takes part, and Zeus with his lightning bolts, and Hades. Most important, perhaps, is Delphinus, the dolphin, Poseidon's messenger. There is also Asherah, "she who walks on the sea." And there are the African gods of Gullah folklore – and the mythic elements of Gullah folkways themselves.

ME: *So there's the mythic aspect of "Untying the Moon," and I see from the events page on your website (www.ellenmalphrus.com) that you spoke on a panel in Raleigh recently about the "literary healing" in the novel and have been asked to talk about "strong heroines at crossroads" in Nashville next week. Are there other ways for readers to engage this book?*

EM: Absolutely. For starters, in the ten weeks following the book's release I'll be at some two dozen book-related events, many of them speaking engagements, where I'll talk about aspects of the novel ranging from road trips to dolphins to PTSD to coastal conservation to wanderlust to abusive love to Gullah-Geechee folkways to marlin fishing to the function/dysfunction of families.

ME: *Sounds like that "wandering bone" will come in handy with the busy book tour ahead. Are you up for it?*

EM: Yes ma'am. I'm ready to roll.

ME: *Pat Conroy has written the foreword to your book, where he tells the story of*

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