

Reader Views

Book reviews, for readers, by readers.

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Interview with Janet Grace Riehl Author of *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary*

Reader Views is talking today with Janet Grace Riehl, author of the deeply personal, yet universally poignant book of poetry, "*Sightlines: A Poet's Diary*." Janet is interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of *Reader Views*.

Juanita: Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us today Janet. Please tell us how this unique book of poetry unfolded onto paper.

Janet: My sister Julia died in a car accident in August 2004. My 56th birthday gift in December 2004 was the spiritual guidance to write what became *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary*. I felt a spiritual leading to begin writing poetry when I went on a small retreat at the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate in Southwestern Illinois. I received this message: "Cleaning. During this quiet time." The whole world seemed charged with meaning. I resolved to tease out that meaning through writing these poems.

Once I started writing, the work just flowed. The actual writing of the body of work after its inception in late December took nine months. Through spiritual guidance—common sense really—I was shown not only how to begin but also how to protect the work while writing. I wrote with the door closed, so to speak, without much commentary or critiquing from others. I simply wrote from my heart.

I carved out my time in the morning. This was private time of solitude when I felt most open. I believe that creative products come through us more than from us. We have to find a place, time, and way of listening.

I'd thought that my friend and book-coach help me shape the book once I wrote the poems. But, he told me that was the next stage of my creative work and I'd intuitively know how to do it. I'd never worked beyond the individual written piece before, but he was right. I did know how to do it.

Juanita: How did your family initially deal with the shock of your sister's death?

Janet: Understand that not only had my sister been killed in the car accident, but my mother was also near death in the hospital and Julia's husband was severely injured as well. It was a chaotic time.

We soldiered on. We did what needed to be done with the business of death. Our family is pretty stoic, for the most part. Working is our favorite way of working it out. We each had our jobs to do and did them. Mine was staying with Julia's grandchildren and making art with them while others went to the hospital and handled the memorial arrangements. It was a long time before we could begin to attend to our need to mourn. My father wrote several painfully searing poems and prose pieces early on that helped him grieve. I included these in the opening of Julia's section of "Sightlines."

Juanita: What universal messages will readers of "Sightlines" relate to?

Janet: *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary* is a family memoir of six generations told in story poems. As such, it reveals the cycle of human life—caring for parents, aging, death—and the bereavement that follows as well as the ways in which that strengthens family spirit. *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary* shows how we moved through important stages of bereavement and became stronger as a family. Not all families have such deep roots, but since ours does, it makes a perfect textbook for life cycles and the importance of memory.

Juanita: Tell us of the unique differences between you and your siblings.

Janet: My parents gave birth to three radically different children: Julia, a world-class physicist and social crusader; Gary, a retired industrial arts teacher who turned out the nicest, most capable man in the world; and myself. Daddy kids me that I am a woman of the world—who traveled as the currents of creativity and culture carried me. Julia was fire. Gary is earth. I am water.

The wonderful thing about having siblings for me was the feeling that they completed me. Julia was the family genius that the world could understand. Gary has given my life a sense of normalcy, grounding, and balance.

Juanita: How did you eventually find meaning in the tragedy of your sisters passing?

Janet: Spending time with my family, witnessing their grief, caring for my mother, and writing were all important in coming to terms with Julia's death. Our family slogans were "It is what it is," and "No regrets."

Working on *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary* was the right thing to do at the right time for the right reasons. I felt different writing this work than anything I'd done in the past. I felt firmly, totally committed—without question. There were things that needed to be said and I knew I was the one to say them. I stood up for my voice and my view of what I was saying and how I wanted to say it. I stood in the truth of what I was speaking about. It's a blessed place to be. A place of grace. I wanted to use the work as an act of healing for my family, the larger human family, and myself.

Juanita: I understand that the land your parents owned had been in the family for many generations. There must have been a real sense of place associated with this. Can you elaborate more on this aspect of your family's history?

Janet: My great-grandfather, E.A. Riehl, bought 150 acres on the bluffs above the Mississippi River in the 1860s, and named it Evergreen Heights. The place became a

magnetic gathering place for horticulturalists and people of culture and ideas. E. A. Riehl was conducting important grafting experiments that the University of Illinois Agricultural Department and other leading lights placed a lot of hope on. At that time we had our own station on the rail line. The lane ending in the family homestead is named Riehl Lane. My father grew up on the place, and raised his children there. My sister Julia's daughter, Diane, is raising her family on Evergreen Heights. That makes six generations on the land. That's unusual in this time of our nation's history. Twenty-five photos from my father's family archive are featured in *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary*. These punctuate the text of the poems and give an amplified sense of time.

Juanita: Your parents were very significant in your life and this comes across clearly in your poems. Growing up and even now, what are their unique qualities that have made such an impression on your life?

Janet: Oh, gosh. Both my parents are strong, creative individuals, and I wrote praise poems for both of them at the beginning of their sections in *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary*. My father is the classic version of a gruff older man with a heart of gold. Dickens would have loved my father as a character. My mother's love was fiercely protective and filled with strategic visions for my welfare. The blessing of my mother's stroke was that it allowed more heart space between us. Once she no longer felt the need to direct my life, we could just sit together and enjoy the joke.

They shared a strong bond as a couple, parents, and stewards of an extended family and the land. My mother died on May Day this year—such a perfect date for her because she loved flowers and birds so much.

Juanita: How different was the grieving process for your various family members?

Janet: My belief, based on observing our family, is that although grief is primal and universal, each person's experience and expression of grief is as individual as a fingerprint. The quality and kind of each family member's loss is slightly different. For my father, for instance, he was outwardly stoic, but inwardly devastated. He had lost his oldest daughter. I cannot begin to imagine what that is for him.

What should also be made clear is that Julia's death was not just a loss to our family. As a world-class physicist and social activist, a worldwide community felt her death. This sense of wider loss helped in some ways, but made the feeling of her loss deeper—and tragic.

Perhaps grief is one of the most intimate of emotions. We now talk freely about sex in our culture, but openly grieving and speaking of grief is something American culture does not know how to support.

Juanita: Janet, I have read that you were a born writer. Where did you go to school, and what has been your writing/teaching history?

Janet: I graduated from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville with a Masters Degree in English. I've worked in both formal and non-formal education. Peace Corps gave me the opportunity to teach England as a Second Language and Literature. I've also taught in community colleges, designed curriculum, and run my own consulting company, Clear Communication.

For twenty years I supported myself through educational, business, and promotional writing. In 1990 the visual arts emerged for me along with performance and creative writing. I started publish my poems, short stories, and personal essays in national literary magazines in 2000 and now have enough credits to be registered in Poets and Writers. One of my pieces has been anthologized in *Stories to Live By: Wisdom to Help Us Make the Most of Every Day* (Solas Imprints, 2005) and another is forthcoming in the Left Coast Writers Anthology *Hot Flashes* this fall.

Juanita: What advice do you have for aspiring writers and poets?

Janet: It's a risk to decide to put your work out there. That's the work of making art: finding the courage and faith to take that risk. Creating and sharing any body of work brings its own enormous gifts.

One of these gifts is opening up a wisdom channel within yourself. After you create your work, it's vital to study and reflect on your own work—charting the themes—to learn more about what is really there. What is your wisdom-self revealing to you?

Most importantly, I want writers to know that the dream of publishing a book—or any dream, really—is only as good as you are. Whatever weaknesses you had before, you will still have. Publishing a book will change your life, but you will have to be strong to allow those changes to course through you. Our lives are bigger than our books.

Juanita: Who has been the biggest influence on your writing career?

Janet: The biggest influence on me as a writer was my father, Erwin Thompson. He is the greatest example of a working writer who showed me that writing was as necessary and natural as breathing, eating and sleeping. When I was growing up, he'd come home from work, peel off his muddy overalls, and settle down for a cozy evening of reading his latest installment on his novel by the fire. I write about his influence and how he made us early collaborators in my poem, "Scribbler."

As I mentioned earlier, several of his pieces are published in *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary*—including a letter Pop wrote to his mother when he was a boy. This became the poem "String Bridles."

When my father first read *Sightlines*, he sat in mother's armchair and read the entire book, with a tear escaping here and a chuckle escaping there. I felt at that moment that all my hard work had been repaid.

Juanita: Janet, you worked for years with the Peace Corps and the British World Friends. Can you tell us what drew you to this type of volunteer work and the difference these experiences made in your life?

Janet: I believe that Africa chose me and pulled me to her. Life circumstances sent me into Peace Corps and over to Africa. I had no idea what I was getting into nor any true sense of what awaited me. My motivation was pretty abstract and idealized. I was only 23. My grandparents had been Methodist Missionaries in Korea; their experience was part of family lore and probably part of my genetic memory, too.

Once I was teaching, and working on literary and community development projects in Africa, I did choose that continent and that work whole-heartedly. My heart could bloom wildly there and the people working with me watered it. I found my laugh in Africa, learned to play violin by ear, and fell deeply in love with the earth.

Juanita: Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today Janet. Please let your readers know how they can get more information about you and your endeavors?

Janet: To learn more about *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary*, readers can go to my website www.sightlinesbook.com to read selected poems, talks, reviews, background information, and view photos. The product page for *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary* on Amazon is developing into a miniature website, too, with photos, my blog, and reviews. Readers might like to know that when they indicate reviews are helpful, it helps the ranking of books on Amazon.

Juanita: What do you want readers to take away after reading your collection of poems?

Janet: Juanita, I've been overcome by the response of readers to *Sightlines: A Poet's Diary*. Their response is beyond anything I could have dreamed of. Readers have said that it has helped them with their own bereavement. Another woman told me that my affirmation and transmutation of memory has changed her life. Here's what she says in her letter:

"The most important thing I take away with me after reading your book is how rich you are in memories. Knowing that . . . makes me equally rich—not through your memories, but my own. My memories are different . . . but they're mine and they're an important part of what makes me who I am. You, your memories, your book opened that door for me . . . This has been one of the most positive elements of my adult life, and I will always remember it as making clear to me that each day is 'radiant with new meaning' and new memories."

I could wish nothing more than that. I hope that other readers can make the same type of imaginative transfer to their own experiences. Isn't that what the reader's view is all about?