

## **Interview with Nel Rand** **Author of *Mississippi Flyway***

Reader Views would like to welcome Nel Rand, author of “Mississippi Flyway.” Nel is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

**Juanita:** Thanks for taking the time to talk with us today Nel. Would you please tell us the storyline of your new book “Mississippi Flyway”?

**Nel:** Hello Juanita. Thanks for talking with me. My novel, “Mississippi Flyway,” is about the inner journey of thirty-one-year old Ellie Moon, as well as an adventurous road trip from St. Louis down to New Orleans, following the Mississippi River and bird flyway, with her estranged father, Tiny Moon, conman and gambler. All the while they are relentlessly pursued by Dover, a Kentucky sheriff who is hell-bent on revenge on Tiny for stealing the sheriff’s truck and shoe collection after a heated game of poker on Kentucky Lake.

**Juanita:** This is your first novel. What inspired you to write this particular story?

**Nel:** A number of things were in motion here. I suppose it’s true what they say about the first novel being autobiographical, often little more than a therapeutic purging of personal dynamics and family sins, and therefore to be shunned. I confess to some autobiography here. My father was a gambler, and I did grow up along the banks of the Mississippi River, and I was sexually abused by my father; however, all of the scenes and characters in the story are fiction. And I was at the same time working out some kind of coming to terms with the whole thing in a way that I could finally let go of it...turn it into something positive, if that makes sense.

I’ve been a visual artist for the last forty years and an art therapist, so I use a lot of drawing as well as writing in my workshops with people in accessing personal creativity. I don’t see the two media as separate. Usually writing is considered a linear activity while drawing a spatial one. The two seem to balance each other out. Where I’m going with this is that one day I woke up and decided I wanted to write instead of paint, and it seemed an easy transition. I took a class called “Constructing the Novel” from Meg Jensen, my mentor. I had written a short story twenty years ago that I hung onto. I knew it was more than a short story but didn’t know what to do with it at the time. It was the impetus, the urge for the novel. It was shuffled around in the story, first being in the middle, then

toward the end, and in the final draft, it became the first chapter. So I guess the answer to your question is that I felt a need to expand on the short story I wrote all those years ago.

**Juanita:** Would you tell us a little more about lead character Ellie Moon? What is she coming to terms with in “Mississippi Flyway”?

**Nel:** Ellie has lost all memory of herself as a child, (Owl in the story). Owl speaks to the reader in italics, while Ellie is unaware of her inner voice. Owl is the poet and the one who remembers everything. Ellie knows at some level that she cannot move forward with her life until she first remembers what happened to her as a child to create such darkness in her soul. She is coming to terms with a verbally abusive mother, the death of her sister, Rose, and a father who sexually abused her as a child and then abandoned the whole family. Ellie feels guilty and responsible.

**Juanita:** Why had she arrived at such a crossroads in her life?

**Nel:** Ellie moved to Oregon to get away from her mother, Louise, and then felt it her duty to return to St. Louis to take care of Louise after she was left paraplegic in a car accident. Ellie married her mother’s doctor, not out of love but something else, maybe duty or the path of least resistance, or both. She doesn’t see her own strengths. She sees herself as a victim to Louise’s verbal onslaughts. She blames herself for her father’s leaving, and she blames herself for her sister Rose’s suicide.

**Juanita:** Why did Ellie decide to go on a trip down the Mississippi with her controversial, estranged father?

**Nel:** I think Ellie felt she had nothing to lose. She desperately wanted to escape her life for a while. She was recently divorced, had lost her job as a journalist for the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, was being hounded daily by her mother to get a job. When Tiny came along she jumped at the chance to flee. On a deeper level, I think, she was being urged on by a need to heal.

**Juanita:** What type of adventures do Ellie and her father, Tiny, encounter on their trip down the “Mississippi Flyway”?

**Nel:** At each stop along the flyway Tiny introduces Ellie to one of his friends. He takes her to her “old familiar haunts.” She remembers little pieces from her childhood at each place, starting with the old night club that Tiny owned in Cairo, Illinois. His friend Vigil turned it into a car repair shop when the nightclub was closed down for illegal gambling. Tiny and Ellie trade the sheriff’s truck for a Bunny Bread truck. They move on to Paducah, Kentucky to a card game at the home of Ludine Lamar. She becomes an important figure in Ellie’s healing, giving her hope and strength to make the journey. They visit Junior who sells his daddy’s moonshine in Wycliffe, Kentucky where they end up hiding from Dover in a duck blind down by the Ohio River, then on to the swamps of Tennessee at Clarence’s moonshine still, to West Memphis and an eating contest with Little Lester, and Chicago Fats, who, by the way, is patterned after my real Dad’s best friend Minnesota Fats, portrayed by Jackie Gleason in the movie, “The Hustler.” They move on to visit Ellie’s sister Rose’s grave in Mississippi, to Ellie’s near drowning in the Mississippi River, to a Voodoo ceremony in New Orleans.

Although I had a loose plotline in place before I began writing, (I knew the places they needed to stop along the way.) I did not know what would happen at each place until it happened. I have been a fan of Joseph Campbell's for years and used to attend all of his lectures when he came to Portland. I know there are writing workshops and programs now that follow the path of the Hero. Although, in my case, it was more of an organic unfolding rather than a planned thing, now that I have the finished book in hand I can see how it loosely follows the hero's journey.

**Juanita:** What is the significance of the "Mississippi Flyway"? And how is it representative of Ellie's experience?

**Nel:** The Flyway is the migratory path of birds that fly from Alaska down to the Gulf of Mexico, following the Mississippi River that starts in Minnesota and ends in Louisiana. Ellie and Tiny are like the birds, each flying away from something and toward something, like all of us, perhaps, in never ending cycles of seasons, death and rebirth. The flyway is a metaphor. In fact, as I was writing the book I sometimes got so lost in the words that I saw everything as metaphor.

**Juanita:** How does recalling dark memories from the past help Ellie move on into the future?

**Nel:** Well, I think the dark things in our lives have more force, if left in the realm of the unconscious. They control us rather than us controlling them. One needs to know if they are wounded and where. It's a matter of naming the hurt. If we are aware of our complexes and what has created them, we can move toward healing and forgiveness, of both ourselves and, perhaps, others.

**Juanita:** What does Ellie learn from her father by spending this adventure with him?

**Nel:** Ellie learned that people can change their lives, that there is no one set of rules to live by. For three weeks she was in Tiny's hedonistic world of gambling and rambling, and she liked it. Ellie had all but drowned in her mother's rigid code of ethics and intolerance. Tiny's "live and let live" style and his colorful friends opened her up to a new outlook on life, to choices she could not see before the trip. He truly lived in the moment, perhaps at the expense of those close to him, but Ellie understood that kind of ego-centricity. As a writer she naturally leaned in the direction of fulfilling her creative needs first, but was made to feel guilty about her feelings by her mother, and her upbringing in the catholic school with the nuns.

**Juanita:** Nel, I understand you live in Oregon. How did you come up with the storyline and why did you decide to set "Mississippi Flyway" in the south?

**Nel:** As I mentioned before I felt an urge to expand on the short story I had written. The short story was based on a kernel of truth from my childhood. It was imperative for me to first write what I knew, based on the underlying spiritual metaphors that are a unique part of me, and that is all tied up with landscape. I was born in St. Louis and the Mississippi River was a constant presence in my life from the time I was born until I became an adult. This story could not have happened anywhere else. The setting is as important as any other character in the book. I didn't know that I was writing southern literature, until reviewers told me. I was just making up characters and having them talk

like the people I knew and grew up with. The day I hauled out the old short story and reread it, I had a dream that night and woke with the question running through my mind “Do you want me to put an APB out on him boss?” I got up (this was at 3am) and by 7am I had the whole storyline written. I called my sister who is always ready for a good road trip and told her that I needed to fly to St. Louis, rent a car and follow the river and flyway down to New Orleans. She said “count me in” and we left the next week.

**Juanita:** Who is your reading audience? Who would enjoy reading “Mississippi Flyway”?

**Nel:** “Mississippi Flyway” was written for an adult audience. I think anyone who likes reading character driven stories that also take them on an adventure to places they are not familiar with or places they have been, and meet quirky characters along the way would like the story. I think people who were sexually abused as children understand how the experience can eat away at their self esteem, and leave them feeling powerless over their lives until they come to some understanding and healing. Through my fiction I am offering hope for the possibility of healing. I do think anyone who likes a good story well told will enjoy “Mississippi Flyway”.

**Juanita:** How long did you work on “Mississippi Flyway”? Do you have any plans to write another book?

**Nel:** I finished the first draft in eight months. It took five years of rewrites before I could turn it loose.

I am currently working on another novel titled, “The Burning Jacket”. I’m in new territory here. It isn’t in the least autobiography. The novel begins in 1998 and brings us up to date. The settings are southern Oregon and Anaheim, California. It is a story about three generation of women in the Winter’s family: Grandma Tooley, who roams and lives as a squatter in the woods of Oregon, her daughter, Molly, who is half owner of a bakery in Anaheim, a visual artist, and mother to ten-year-old Raynie when the story opens. She loves reptiles and longs to save endangered species. The story is told from three alternating points of view. My three protagonists attempt to not only survive their personal entanglements, but manage to live meaningful, courageous lives, with fits of spontaneous joy, in a world that often seems insane. The fascination for me is how do they do this? What underlying deep strength moves them forward?

**Juanita:** Nel, what do you ultimately want readers to understand by reading your book “Mississippi Flyway”?

**Nel:** I’m saying that regardless of how crippled we are emotionally, there is a part of us inside that wants to heal. Through fiction I offer hope. It is possible. It takes courage and honesty, but by facing the darkness we can move toward emotional wellness.

**Juanita:** I understand you’ve been doing some appearances lately. How has that been and how can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

**Nel:** It is a challenge for me to both work on my new novel and deal with promotion and publicity. I don't really like marketing. I'd much rather be sitting at a computer in my hideaway in the woods drinking coffee and writing or reading, but as a debut novelist I have the responsibility to get my book the publicity it deserves. I do enjoy the speaking engagements and I love reading to people. I'm in the process of creating a blog, and updating my website. If people want to contact me they can reach me at my website at [www.nelrand.com](http://www.nelrand.com). Be patient. I will update it! My e-mail is [nelrand@earthlink.net](mailto:nelrand@earthlink.net). I love it when people share with me their thoughts about the book. And I always answer my e-mails. Just be sure to put "Mississippi Flyway" in the subject line so it doesn't go into spam.

Juanita, thanks for giving me the opportunity to talk with you and the readers.