

Q&A with Darnell Arnoult, Author of *Sufficient Grace* and Other Works

by Wesley Parsons

Born and raised in Henry County Virginia, Darnell Arnoult received a BA in American Studies from the University of North Carolina, an MA in English and creative writing from North Carolina State University, and an MFA from the University of Memphis. Darnell has worked at the center for documentary studies at Duke University. She is the author of "What Travels with Us: Poems" (LSU Press) and Sufficient Grace (Free Press). Many of her short works have appeared in a variety of journals. Darnell currently teaches creative writing at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, TN where she is the writer in residence.



Why was *Sufficient Grace* your first novel? Did you have other book ideas competing with this one?

Back in my mid 30s I didn't think I had the attention span to write a novel. I was interested in short stories. Then I had this story about a woman leaving her husband that wouldn't stay short. I thought she was leaving him because he was having an affair with his secretary, but he wouldn't do it. Everytime I tried to write those scenes, they never worked. So I went back to Gracie (who had a different name then) and I asked her why she was leaving, and she said, "Because the voices are telling me to." Well, when she said that, I knew what I was dealing with because of my mother's illness. So I just kept writing. Later, I went to the annual Shirley Caesar Gospel Crusade, which use to be in Durham, NC, where I lived at the time. And when I went home, Toot and Mattie stepped into the pages of my novel and wouldn't go away.

How long did it take you to write *Sufficient Grace*?

From its inception, about 15 years or more. But from an earnest push of day-to-day writing, it took about one year to write the first draft, a year of revision, and then in that third year, I got an agent, revised again from some of her suggestions, got a publishing contract, revised based on my editor's comments, and the novel was sent to the presses. So about three years of focused writing.

What was the hardest part of writing *Sufficient Grace*? How did you overcome that?

It was cutting the prologue and epilogue, and I didn't overcome it, I succumbed to it.

Was the publishing aspect difficult? Were you ever turned down?

I was turned down by the first two agents. The

second agent gave me some good feedback and thought about taking it, but in the end, decided not to. The third agent loved the book, and was the perfect agent to work with. That is unusual to find an agent so quickly. That kind of story sets up unrealistic expectations for aspiring writers. I know writers who have sent their manuscript out to 50 or more agents before getting a positive response. The book has to find its right people.

When my agent put the manuscript out there to 20 editors, three were interested.

Characters in *Sufficient Grace* learn that they like new things because of direct or indirect motivation from another. Do you believe there is a way to consciously tap into these hidden treasures, or is it something that life brings about on its own?

Part of what I wanted to look at in the novel was the way circumstances, both good and bad, welcome and unwelcome, may change our paths for the better. And I wanted to examine the way artistic vision develops from the intersection of the physical and emotional crossroads we face. When we are forced to shift direction, something new is born. That is true for almost everyone in the book. Bad things eventually lead to good things and hangs leads to opportunity, if you are open to seeing it.

The information and terminology you incorporated about cooking sounds professional. How did your knowledge of the subject come about? Did you have to research heavily or did you obtain the knowledge through some other means?

I'm a mediocre cook at best and don't know much about wine or fancy cooking. I subscribed to the Food Network and read lots of magazine articles about food ways and fancy cuisine.

How, and to what degree, did your mother's diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia influence your book?

Sufficient Grace isn't about my mother in a conscious way. Gracie has some of her symptoms, and there are a handful of events in the novel or references to things that really happened, but Sufficient Grace isn't a thinly veiled story about my mother. It is, I'm sure, on a psychological level, quite autobiographical. But none of the characters are based on real people except for Violet in the psych ward, who is my mother during a psychotic break, and Clarence, who walked into my husband's doctor's waiting room one day like a gift from heaven. Otherwise, the characters are all made up, but they are dealing with emotional and psychological conflicts that come with the illness.

You briefly discussed your relationship with your characters. Some authors "create" a character while it seems that your characters interact with you and create a story. Can you tell me a little about this relational interaction?

Faulkner said fiction comes from experience, observation, and imagination. That doesn't mean your characters or stories have to be based on something you lived through or witnessed. We all have this compost pile of images and words. Everything we've ever seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched creates that compost heap. The way we access it is through applied characterization. You begin with a character drawn in broad strokes and put them in a situation, then write down what they say and do. Eventually, as you put them in more and more situations with other characters, one of those characters is going to tell you a better story than the one you started with. And the main character may not be who you first think either. You trust your characters and they give you something that feels new, even though it's built up from your compost heap. If you are surprised, then your reader will be surprised too.

Do you recall how your interest in writing originated?

I grew up in a storytelling family. I was not that good at composition in school, but when I was a senior in high school, a teacher gave us an assignment to write fiction. It was the first time anyone asked me to do that. I was good at it, and I loved doing it, and it stuck.

Is there anything you find particularly challenging in your writing?

Aside from spelling and using a comma and putting the butt in the chair, the hardest thing about writing is getting comfortable with not knowing what's ahead until it shows itself. Writing is a mystical, magical experience. And magic and mysticism can bring pleasant surprises, and it can also be frightful and scare you to death.

What workshop processes have you found to be the most successful? How has your process evolved throughout your teaching career?

I believe that prompts and free writes and writing out of order are all important parts of the process of writing. I'm not big on workshoping my work or my student's work too soon, and so we spend a lot of time reading works that instruct the writer. In the beginning I write out of order, I write in all kinds of POVs and past and present tense, and I let my characters live on the page until they take on a body with a consciousness and intuition. Then they tell me a better story than what I started with. This is how I work and it's how I teach my students to work.

Writing is an act of faith. You must have faith in yourself, faith in your characters, faith in your process. The more I teach, the more I come up with new ways to help my characters to come alive and say and do things that are story worthy. I always have a notebook and I'm always ready to write down the stories the universe plops in front of me. So I always have seeds and compost to work with.

In regard to teaching and workshoping, I think it's important for students to read good contemporary writing in the first half of the semester and work on their own stories without group critique. But we do a lot of in-class writing that we read aloud and everyone comments on it. In that way, we learn what good writing sounds like, and the group begins to learn how to critique a piece. So many people spend time on writing but not on learning to critique writing. And clumsy critique can be damaging to a writer who might have a lot of talent but may be a little latent on the execution of that talent. In the beginning, it's more important to learn to hear a story before you say what works and doesn't work about it. And for the writer, reading aloud can point out lots of places that need revision. It's like developing an ear for music. Once you appreciate the sound of music, you are more likely to want to make better and better music.

"Ed doesn't like eating alone. And he doesn't like looking at giant pictures of Jesus while he eats. They're bound to give him heartburn. What's that woman thinking, drawing Jesus over the sideboard?"

Sufficient Grace

Do you have a specific writing schedule that seems to work for you?

I usually work early in the morning or late at night. But sometimes I have a chance to work all day, and then I alternate between writing and reading all day long. On an ideal day, I get up, write a brain drain sort of journal entry to get all the worries and whining and gratitude and miscellaneous thoughts out of the way. Then I take a stab at writing a scene or story or a poem. Then I read a really good chapter or short story someone else wrote, such as Eudora Welty or Larry Brown or Cormac McCarthy or Jill McCorkle, or I read a few good poems by one of my favorite poets, such as Mary Oliver, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Robert Morgan, or Wendell Berry. Sometimes I read these things aloud. Then I go back to write or revise my own work. I'm constantly switching between fiction and poetry and sometimes nonfiction. I have a lot of projects going at once. I'm like a gnat in that way. Eventually one project takes the stage and I work on it pretty much exclusively until it's done. Then I may let it sit a while as I work on something else. Later I'll come back to it. I'll do that again and again. Once I start revising, I play with a piece almost anywhere, anytime. It's just a matter of worrying the piece until it suits me.

What is your favorite genre to read? To write? Do these influence your writing?

I love fiction, both long and short, and I love reading contemporary poetry. It is critical to read and write daily if possible. I laugh when people say they don't like to read while they are writing something for fear the other writers work will influence them. If they are reading really good writers like Hemmingway, Faulkner, McCarthy, Hood, McCorkle, Smith, and so on, they should be so lucky as to write like them just because their reading them.

Who are your top 3 authors? How have they inspired or influenced you as a person/writer?

It is so hard to limit the answer to three and I can't, so I'll say 11, but there are so many more.

1) Eudora Welty. I read her as a young college student and understood that revelatory stories could be written about ordinary people with ordinary lives, and that the sound of a story and what you can see in the story are as important as what the story said. And that thing she says about parting a curtain to show the character at a moment when they reveal themselves, is one of the most important elements of a writer's mission. It is not a fiction writer's mission to judge their characters, only to part that curtain.

"Then the sun's rays hit the back of clouds riding over the edge of the earth and she begins to discern shapes of the alphabet. When true daylight rises up from behind the earth and over the tree line, it shines bright on the page, and the words, they bloom like flowers."

Sufficient Grace

2) Lee Smith. When I read Lee Smith's novel *Black Mountain Breakdown*, I understood that my life, my memory, my family, my history was ripe with story material and that the people in her stories were not only familiar, they were my people.

3) Cormac McCarthy taught me that language is everything. That words and sentences and

paragraphs are not just the vehicle for a story, they are the story.

4) Mary Hood taught me how object, gesture, and dialogue are the things the reader needs to take the story in and make it theirs, and that the smallest details are the most telling.

5) Kathryn Stripling Byer taught me the connection between voice and core emotional truth.

6) Harry Crews who taught me a hawk kills little furry things and that's because he's a hawk and he can't be a hawk without it, and a hawk deserves a story as much or more than the little furry things.

7) Larry Brown taught me the way you learn to write is to apprentice yourself to other good writers and you don't know how long your apprenticeship is going to be.

8) Hemmingway taught me you can be an asshole in real life but a genius as an artist, so it's important to separate an artist's personality from their work. The work may be valuable, even if the artist isn't someone you'd want to be in the same room with.

9) Faulkner, who taught me that you can write a long sentence without any clutter, and a short sentence can have plenty of clutter, and that you get a story by following your characters around and writing down what they say and do.

10) Joyce Carol Oats (and Harry Crews) taught me not to look away.

11) George Singleton taught me not to let anyone else's opinion get between me and my writing.

Do you have anyone you would consider a mentor? How did your mentor relationship start, and what influence has it had on you as a writer?

My long-time mentors have been Lee Smith and Kathryn Stripling Byer. I took a class with Lee Smith at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1981 after another writing teacher had suggested I withdraw from his class. Unlike the first writing teacher, Lee recognized my voice and narrative desire and gave

me a lot of encouragement and taught me a lot about writing. We had a lot in common and became good friends after the class was over. Lee introduced me to Kay when I was just beginning to write poetry. Lee also introduced me to Dr. Lucinda MacKethan, who had taught me a great deal about writing and teaching. Iris Tillman Hill, the former Executive Director of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and former editor-in-chief of several university presses taught me a great deal about writing and editing. They all contributed to me finding my power as a woman and a writer, and taught me so much about teaching writing and mentoring aspiring writers.

More recently, Cary Holladay, one of my teachers in the University of Memphis MFA program, and George Singleton, a workshop leader at the Hindman Settlement School, have been strong influences on my writing and teaching.

I've apprenticed myself to writers on the page as well, and so in that way they are mentors even though I don't know them.

What are you working on currently?

I can't quote it in these pages, but I can tell you that one poetry collection is made up of poems in the voice of Mary Todd Lincoln, the second one is about the joys and surprises of middle age. One of the novels is set in West TN during WWII and is about mostly women characters living in a boarding house. The novel I'm most focused on right now is set in a trailer park and related amusement park in a small town in the southern Appalachian mountains.

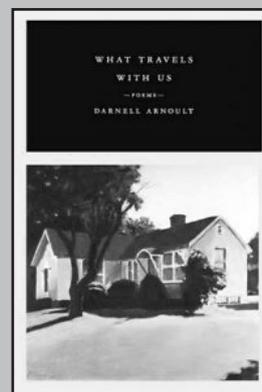
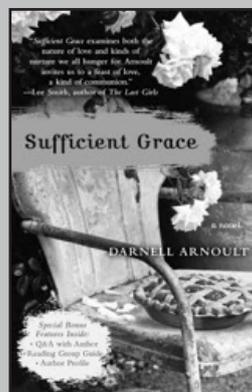
What do you plan on writing in the future?

I have ADD and I'm pretty sure I'm dyslexic. I work on several projects at once. I have two poetry collections in progress, and have pieces of three novels, several short stories, and a memoir. I am far enough along on one novel and one collection of poems that I'm focusing on them right now and trying to leave the other pieces on the back burner. But sometimes a short story or some piece of one of the other longer projects will pop in my head, and I either write it or make notes on it, then go back to one of the two "lead" projects.

You gave me some wonderful advice when I took your first fiction class: "Never let anyone tell you that you can't succeed at whatever you set out to accomplish." Would you expound on that advice for the readers?

Be ready every day to learn to be a better writer (or plumber for that matter), and learn to have confidence in your own vision for yourself and your work. Always set a new goal to strive for, a goal you've learned about from reading good work, if

you're a writer. Strive, as Zig Ziglar says, to be a meaningful specific, not a wondering generality, and strive to use the meaningful specific in your work. No one knows what you are capable of except you, and it's important for you to always reach a little farther than what you know you can do, then when you do that, reach a little farther still.



Visit Darnell Arnoult at her website

www.darnellarnoult.com

Sufficient Grace and "What Travels with Us: Poems" are available on www.amazon.com