



Author

Gayle Brandeis

BIO

Gayle Brandeis is the author of the novel, *THE BOOK OF DEAD BIRDS*, which won Barbara Kingsolver's Bellwether Prize for Fiction in Support of a Literature of Social Change, and *FRUITFLESH: Seeds of Inspiration for Women Who Write*. She lives in Riverside, California, with her husband and two children.

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INTERVIEW

January 26, 2007

Gayle Brandeis is the acclaimed and award-winning author of several novels, essays, and volumes of poetry, such as *THE BOOK OF DEAD BIRDS* and *FRUITFLESH*. The idea for her latest work of fiction, *SELF STORAGE*, arose from both a personal loss and a conversation with a stranger on an airplane. In this interview with Bookreporter.com's Alexis Burling, Brandeis describes how she stumbled upon the unusual plot and elaborates on its themes of self discovery and cultural difference. She also discusses how the work of Walt Whitman has impacted both her writing and her personal life, touches upon how people define themselves through their physical appearances and addresses the controversial topic of the war in the Middle East.



Bookreporter.com: Where did the idea for *SELF STORAGE* come from?

Gayle Brandeis: I was on my book tour for *THE BOOK OF DEAD*

BIRDS when my mother-in-law's husband Jack was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. I took an early flight home so I could be with the family and spend some time with Jack before the next leg of my tour. On the flight, I was very emotional and didn't really feel like talking, but the woman next to me did --- it turned out that her brother had recently died of brain cancer, so she understood why I was so teary. As our conversation evolved, she told me that she went to self storage auctions and sold her winnings at yard sales to supplement her income. I had never heard of self storage auctions before and was intrigued by the world she described. I could feel myself filing the information away for future reference.

Jack died a few days later, and self storage auctions became the furthest thing from my brain for several months. Then, that fall, I decided to participate in National Novel Writing Month for the second time. When I sat down to the blank page on November 1st, I suddenly remembered my conversation on the airplane and decided to explore the world of self storage auctions. I had no idea where the story was going to go at first, but I knew I was going to dedicate it to Jack.

BRC: Walt Whitman (both the man and his words) plays a crucial role in SELF STORAGE. Did you craft the novel using "Song for Myself"/LEAVES OF GRASS and Whitman's inspiration as a base and build upward from there, or did you write the story first and fill in Whitman's verse when appropriate? Or, was it a mixture of both?

GB: When I wrote the first draft of the novel, Walt Whitman played a much smaller role in the book. Flan was on more of a general quest to study the Self, and I had her reading all sorts of Self-related works --- Jung, the Upanishads, etc. Whitman was just one of many Self readings in this pieced-together independent study. When I looked over that draft, I realized it was a mess. The whole Self theme felt forced. I found myself honing in on Whitman and thinking "Someone should write a novel structured around 'Song of Myself' someday." It took a while before I realized that I could do that, that SELF STORAGE could be that novel.

In the next draft, SELF STORAGE became a sort of one-sided dialogue with Whitman, in which Flan directly addresses him throughout the book. This, too, proved to feel a little too forced. With some outside help and a lot of thrashing around on the page, I finally found a balance between Whitman and Flan that felt right.

BRC: Was LEAVES OF GRASS important to you growing up? When did you first read it? How did your relationship with it change as you grew older and developed your own sense of self? And as a writer? Do you have a favorite verse or section in LEAVES OF GRASS? If so, might you tell us which one(s) and explain its/their significance to you?

GB: I first read sections of LEAVES OF GRASS my junior year of high school. We had been studying transcendentalism in my humanities class, and while Whitman is not strictly considered a transcendentalist, my teacher thought he should be part of the unit. I'm so grateful for that --- reading him was definitely a transcendental experience! He pretty much blew the top of my head right off. He still does --- and I find that my relationship with his work only sharpens and becomes more intimate over time. I continue to be in awe of his celebratory, inclusive, effusive, wide-open sensibility.

My very favorite section of LEAVES OF GRASS --- which I don't even mention once in SELF STORAGE --- is "I Sing the Body Electric." Such a passionate ode to our physical selves! It fills me with an electric sort of joy every time I read it. I adore "Song of Myself," too. A certain line near the beginning --- "I loafe and invite my soul" --- always relaxes me and prepares me to loaf leisurely through the poem. I love fruitful loafing like that. Virginia Woolfe once said something along the lines of "It takes a heap of loafing to write a book." I agree --- to read a book, too!

BRC: Julia's empty, decorated box with the "Yes" card inside it, found in Julia's locker, is quite symbolic throughout the story. Might you care to elaborate on its significance in relation to Whitman's verse "You must dazzle yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life."?

GB: I think that quote really does speak to living out our own Yes. As Flan notes, we often have a lot of Yeah in our lives --- contentment, but not always much true passion or aliveness. If we ask ourselves what makes us say Yes in our lives, it forces us to acknowledge how we've dulled ourselves to the dazzle of the world, to the dazzle of ourselves. It reminds us to take our light out from under our own bushels, to wake up and dance in the light that always surrounds us, even when we forget it's there.

BRC: At Flan's mother's funeral, onlookers are aghast at what she looks like in the dress she will be buried in that is not hers --- the dress that screams "This. Is. Not. Me." as though it is steeped on someone else's personality. Conversely, throughout the novel, Flan continuously wonders what Sodaba looks like under her burqa and often fights the urge to rip it off her body in order to get at her essence. What are your thoughts about how clothes, and how one wears them, define a person? How about in other cultures where this type of "expression" isn't condoned?

GB: Like Flan, I have gone through different phases of trying to define myself with clothes. In high school, for a while, I wore all white --- I think I was trying to be angelic. Then I went through a bit of a Prince kick, with lots of lace and brocade and purple; definitely not angelic. In college, I was more of a hippie chick and

wore a lot of Indian prints and gauze. Now I don't use my clothes to define me, although I do enjoy wearing clothes that speak to me because I find them charming and/or comfortable (comfort is the key.) And I suppose I like to use myself as a billboard at times for causes that are important to me (you'll often find me in a CODEPINK: Women for Peace shirt.)

My daughter is 13 and has already gone through different phases --- goth, etc. Even though she and I talk often about the superficiality of the fashion world and the beauty myth, she definitely defines herself through her clothes (her current fashion identity seems to be "the layered look" and lots of stripes). She gets very offended if I suggest an item in a store that she deems isn't "her." I suppose I still do the same with my mom, who often buys me "professional-looking" clothes for my book tours, even though we both know I'm going to end up wearing my own clothes. Those business jackets are definitely not "me." My own clothes aren't "me" either, but I feel comfortable, feel like myself, inside of them.

I am not a proponent of school uniforms, but I do see why some parents like the fact that it creates a level playing field, at least clothing-wise. Kids can't be discriminated against or unduly revered for the clothes they're wearing if everyone is wearing the same thing. I've heard some women who wear burqas say something similar --- it frees them from having to worry about defining themselves through their clothes (although some women who wear burqas define themselves through very showy shoes!) And of course more women find the burqa oppressive than liberating. I bristle when I think about women being told what to wear, when women's personal freedoms of expression and movement are so hampered. Especially when I hear quotes like the recent one from a fundamentalist Imam who said a woman without a veil is like a plate of uncovered meat! If it is the woman's own choice to follow spiritual dictates and cover herself accordingly, I respect that completely, but when it is enforced under the threat of punishment, that's an entirely different story. I think everyone should have the freedom to wear --- or not wear --- what they want to without fear, but unfortunately that is not the case in certain parts of the world.

BRC: Along the same lines, the characters in SELF STORAGE place immense importance on the value inherent in stuff, yet also willingly (and sometimes, unwillingly) lose it or give it away. The ultimate Queen of Stuff, Flan makes a career out of buying and selling other people's unclaimed items in storage lockers, yet she chooses to give her booty away (to neighbors in need) and leaves most of her and her family's personal belongings so that they can start over. This is quite poignant, indeed. How do you reconcile this contrast?

GB: Flan knows how meaningful objects can be, how they can hold our history, our past, how they are physical representations

of memories and that can make them so hard to let go of. I think she understands, though, that those objects don't ultimately define us, that they actually can hold us down, and if we let go of our things, we can set ourselves free.

BRC: Flan gets into a screaming match with a woman from the community who wants Sodaba and her Muslim family banished, an exchange that is incredibly charged and steeped in meaning, both with regard to the story and to the world today. Flan is basically confronted with the world's fear, misunderstanding, ignorance and racism, all in one interaction. Isn't it interesting that a community supposedly known for its open-mindedness (a college community in California) can still contain such hatred, fear and bigotry. Why did you write this scene?

GB: I actually toned down the scene quite a bit --- it was even more charged in earlier drafts! I wrote the scene because I have had similar exchanges in the last few years, although the context was a bit different. People were so scared after September 11th and this fear manifested itself in many ways, especially intolerance. For a while, I participated in a weekly peace vigil right near the entrance to the UCR campus, and we would get screamed at, spit at; one week someone even threw nails at us from their car! Many of the people berating us were UCR students. I found it so disturbing that a college campus, which should be a bastion of intelligence, could house so much irrational aggression and closed-mindedness.

BRC: A member of Sodaba's family says, "Sodaba hurts one American girl and people call for her death. Meanwhile, your army bombs whole villages, hundreds of children dead this week alone, and no one blinks an eye." This is incredibly poignant. In a way, your "fictional" story brings up many issues that are prevalent in today's war-torn world. Please elaborate.

GB: Looking at the war in Iraq, it saddens me deeply how little attention is given to the numbers of Iraqi casualties. And when the media does share a number, it just seems like a bloodless statistic --- it's as if these Iraqis, these fellow human beings on our shared planet, are nameless and faceless to the media, to the administration, to the public at large. It has been estimated that over 600,000 Iraqis have died as a result of this war. 600,000! But somehow we don't let ourselves see the tragedy of this in our culture --- we villainize all people from Iraq, we let ourselves believe that their deaths somehow have less meaning than American deaths, and that just breaks my heart.

BRC: Were you ever worried that some readers might be offended by some of the content in the book, given that its subject matter is still so heated today?

GB: I know that passions still do run high around the subject of

September 11, and it did occur to me that some people might be upset by some of the content of the story, but I can't let fear of offending someone censor me as I write. I almost stopped writing THE BOOK OF DEAD BIRDS for that very reason, but finally realized that I needed to be true to the story that wanted to come through me and then let the chips fall where they may. In my daily life, I go out of my way to avoid offending people, but somehow in my work, I let myself be brave and not worry about what other people think. And hopefully if people are offended, it can lead to some good open dialogue. That's something that's been sadly missing in our culture lately --- we've been so polarized, it's been hard to find common ground between left and right, red and blue. But maybe through telling stories, both fictional and our own, we can create a space for real exchange to happen. And I do see it starting to happen more now.

BRC: Do you prefer to read a specific genre of books? Might you have a few favorite books to recommend to your readers?

GB: I try to read as widely and broadly as possible, although I am sometimes a bit of a reading snob and tend to lean towards the literary side of the shelf. I love writers who are clearly in love with language and play with words in fresh ways.

Some of my favorite books of all time include the poetry books AMERICAN PRIMITIVE by Mary Oliver and THE DEAD AND THE LIVING by Sharon Olds. Both of those books taught me to write about my own experience with honesty and clarity. Rilke (especially SONNETS TO ORPHEUS) and Rumi showed me that you can combine the spiritual and the sensual in poetry. A favorite nonfiction book is A NATURAL HISTORY OF THE SENSES by Diane Ackerman, which is a gorgeous exploration and celebration of the sensory world. All-time favorite novels include THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE by Audrey Niffenegger, ANIMAL DREAMS by Barbara Kingsolver, all the Weetzie Bat books by Francesca Lia Block, LOLITA by Vladimir Nabokov, SULA by Toni Morrison, IN THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE by Diane Schoemperlen.

Recent favorites that I've been pushing on people include THE GIRLS by Lori Lansens, FUN HOME by Alison Bechdel, I'M NOT JULIA ROBERTS by Laura Ruby, EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME by Sefi Atta, MIRACLE FRUIT (poems) by Aimee Nezhukumatathil, FROM THE BONES OUT (poems) by Marisa de los Santos.

And those are just the ones that spring to mind first! If you ask me tomorrow, I'll probably have a fresh new list of amazing books to share with you.

BRC: You also write short stories and poetry (DICTIONARY POEMS contains numerous poems about words you find in the dictionary...what a great project!). Do you prefer one genre over the others?

GB: I think I always prefer whatever I'm working on at the moment. When I am writing poetry, I prefer writing poetry. When I'm in the midst of working on a novel, that feels like my home as a writer. Same with short stories. Poetry was my first love, though, and is definitely still at the heart of my writing life.

BRC: On your website, you also write a blog. How do you balance blog writing with other projects?

GB: I blog when I'm moved to, so it's not too hard to balance it with other projects. If I don't have time, I don't blog. I do find that I feel guilty about not blogging at times, though, or about not taking full advantage of the blog form. I'd love to write long, funny, insightful blogs every day like the blogs I most enjoy reading, but somehow that doesn't seem to be how I operate. My blogs feel more like little hiccups. But I'm glad I have a blog to play with --- I love the immediacy of it.

BRC: What are you working on now and when can readers expect to see it?

GB: I just finished the first draft of a novel tentatively titled MY LIFE WITH THE LINCOLNS. It's about a 12-year-old girl in 1966 who thinks that her family is the Lincoln family reincarnated, and that it's her job to save them from their fate. Ballantine is planning to bring it out Summer 2008. I have a few other irons in the fire and look forward to seeing which one calls me most loudly when I'm done with this project. It's a constant process of surprise!

Thank you for such wonderful, challenging questions!

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