

A N Interview with Bonnie Jo Campbell

Where did you get the idea for the novel Q Road?

Oh, I've been living *Q Road* my whole life, whenever I've tended my mother's huge garden or overheard my uncle Jim talking about falling grain prices. Whenever I've watched farmers spreading manure in fields and when I've read local history, including the details of the Potawatomi exodus of 1840. Recently, though, an incident occurred at one of the big old farms that helped me find the story to play against the backdrop. I don't want to give away the plot, but it began with the idea of a boy who loves a farmer but nonetheless does something really awful to him. When that wasn't quite enough, I added a teenage girl--a teenage girl always livens things up.

In a sense this is the story of a piece of land, isn't it?

Well, first it's a story about the intersecting desires of three people, but as I wrote I realized that the love of the folks in the story was all bound up with their love for the piece of land beneath them, and I realized these were not relationships that could be picked up and moved to any other place.

There's an interesting love triangle at the heart of this book.

Yeah, I learned from Carson McCullers' *Ballad of the Sad Café* that the triangle is the perfect shape for troubled love. But where McCullers sees that configuration as doomed, I see the potential for a triangle of love to be very stable, the way a three-legged table can be very stable.

What writers, in addition to Carson McCullers, have influenced you?

Carson McCullers is fabulous. I like to think maybe Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner, too, and probably Steinbeck. In *Cannery Row* Steinbeck's got that chapter from the point of view of a ground hog. Maybe

that's why in I couldn't resist writing one chapter of *Q Road* from the point of view of a stray cat.

But probably my biggest story-telling influences were my mother and my grandfather. My mother relishes outrageous behavior and has always told grandly comic or tragic stories, while my grandfather has always told quietly humorous stories in which people prevailed only when they behaved like civilized ladies and gentlemen. The two of them would tell about the same incident, bending the facts to accommodate their different views of the world.

Which kind of storyteller are you?

Oh, I guess I'm in the middle. I love outrageous characters and slapstick comedy, but it can become tiresome, and needs to be balanced by something quieter and more serious--and that way there's something for everyone. *Kirkus Reviews* said of *Q Road*: "Blunt and bleak, but the vivid, varied cast and palpable sense of connection to the soil give it a stern grandeur," but *Mostly Fiction* has reviewed it in their humorous fiction category. Go figure.

You grew up on a farm. How much of Q Road reflects your personal experience?

We had animals for milk, eggs, and meat. My mother has about fifty acres, while the farm in the book is close to nine hundred acres of corn and soybeans--a whole different scale of operation. But everyone in and around small towns is aware of the way the local farmers are going out of business and selling to developers, who chop up the farms into itty bitty pieces of real estate.

Both Q Road and your story collection [Women & Other Animals] have a lot of strong self-reliant women--some are almost freakishly so.

Everybody says characters are wild, but I think of them as pretty normal. Kids grow up tough in the country, and self-reliant if they have to be that way. Maybe I turn the heat up a bit to make the clashes between characters a bit more volatile, to make their lives a bit more urgent. For the most part I see my characters as folks who are coping in extreme situations with what resources they have--emotional, physical, and spiritual.

Most all of my characters are inspired by real people, but they usually end up being concoctions of various folks along with a lot that's just made up. Plus a little of myself, I suppose. I can easily see myself as all of the women in *Q Road*: the gun-toting teenager, the neglectful barfly mother, the hard-edged grandmother, even the crazy woman who fantasizes about alien landings.

I've heard that a brewery is making a beer to come out along with your book.

Yeah, isn't that excellent? Kraftbrau, a Kalamazoo brewery, is making a special beer for my book release party. The book is *Q Road*: a novel, so the beer is Q Brew: a novel beer. The label looks like the cover of my book, and I can't wait to photograph my pals holding my book in one hand and my beer in the other. Steve the brewer and I decided that the beer should be slightly stronger than the average beer, with some extra hop character. It won't be bitter or heavy, he promises, but the flavor will be complex. Just like the book!