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Convention: An Interview with Karen Joy Fowler

[Mackenzie Kiera \(/taxonomy/term/146\)](#)



At World Fantasy awards I had the pleasure of sitting with literature royalty and woman warrior, Karen Joy Fowler. This is our conversation about her life and writing. Hope you enjoy it.

Mackenzie Kiera: How long have you been writing?

Karen Joy Fowler: This is an easy question because I decided to be a writer on my thirtieth birthday. So, I'm sixty-seven now, that's how long I've been writing.

MK: What made you want to be a writer?

KJF: You know? Turning thirty was a crisis for me. It's embarrassing to remember how upset I was. Nevertheless, the facts remain. At the time I had two degrees; it did not appear they were going to lead me to employment opportunities. What I ever thought they were going to lead to remains mysterious to me. And I had two children. It seemed like a time for stock-taking and I looked at my life and I thought, "What do I really want?" And the thing that had been the most steadily reliable pleasure in my life was books. I've always loved to read. I decided to be a writer. Having very little sense of what that looked like or how I would go about making that happen.

MK: What were the books that had an impact on that decision?

KJF: It was a life decision, what I was reading at the time didn't have an impact.

MK: Then what are your favorites now?

KJF: Oh, I couldn't. It seems unfair to single any one of them out. I've loved them all. I was one of those children who needed to be shooed outside on a sunny day. My family went to the library once a week, the four of us, my mom, my dad, my brother, and I. And I had a basket because I wouldn't be able to carry home all the books I had chosen. And I don't believe I had any critical standards. It just all seemed wonderful.

MK: And your parents let you read whatever you wanted?

KJF: Yes. That being said, I stayed in the children's room for a long time. So the chance that I would read something I wasn't ready for didn't occur. I don't know how they would have dealt with that.

MK: What is your favorite part of writing?

KJF: The re-writing.

MK: I heard you mention at your reading that you don't like the first draft?

KJF: I really don't. What I do, because I do like re-writing so much better, is I re-write daily. So when I do the Dreadful First Draft it's kind of fallacious even to call it a first draft. I write my first sentence, and then I rewrite my first sentence. And then I rewrite that sentence. Then I write my second sentence and rewrite the both of them. It's quite slow but when I get to the end, I've already done the rewriting and there isn't really another draft to do.

MK: That must require a lot of dedication.

KJF: I like the rewriting. It keeps me happy.

MK: In one of your panels an audience member asked: "How do you keep going." As in, how do you continue to write? I believe you responded by saying that, "If you don't *want* to write, you shouldn't be writing."

KJF: You can't enjoy every moment, but keep enough happy moments to outweigh the bad. I like writing. I am happy.

MK: It's difficult to understand why writers continue to write if they don't enjoy it

KJF: I don't either. The "open a vein" writers and the "bleed" writers I think, well, go do something else. Go watch birds. Birds are very pleasurable to watch.

MK: It's good to hear "do it if it's enjoyable." Tell me, where did you grow up?

KJF: Bloomington, Indiana.

MK: And you moved to California?

KJF: Yes, when I was eleven we moved to Palo Alto.

MK: Did you enjoy your time there?

KJF: No. I liked Bloomington. Eleven years old is often the time when things seem to go wrong for girls. I've read a lot of studies about how girls before the age of eleven are filled with confidence and then something cracks. And, an eleven-year-old girl in Bloomington, Indiana was much, much younger than a girl in Palo Alto, California. I had a really hard time making that jump, nor did I really want to be more grown up. I went from a life of playing baseball to one where I was expected to sit, listen to the radio and gossip. So, no. It was very difficult. And, I should finish that thought by saying, I don't think I would be a writer if I haven't been dislocated the way I had been. So, from this vantage point, I wouldn't change a thing.

MK: What's your favorite vein to write in?

KJF: One of the things that was different between Bloomington and Palo Alto—in the library in Bloomington books were not sorted out by genre. So, when I came to California there were stickers

on the spines of the books at the library, which I found strange. There would be a cowboy boot or a spaceship according to what you were about to be reading and because I grew up without that, I never really read that way. I like books and there's not a single genre where I don't think someone is doing really interesting work. And where I don't think someone is doing really dreadful work. So, one of the questions I've been asked since I began to publish is what genre do I think I write in and I think I can honestly say, that's not something I worry about. Every story I write requires different strategies and techniques and I like figuring that out.

MK: Where can we find you? Do you Twitter? Facebook?

KJF: I have a blog but it's growing weeds. Everything on it is about six months old. I posted a lot after the election but now I think the best course of action is to just leave social media.

MK: On one of your panels you mentioned you were assaulted by a police officer during an anti-war protest.

KJF: I was. At Berkeley. It was to protest the killing of the students at Kent State and the invasion of Cambodia.

MK: You're a warrior. After the election, was it fuel for you to write or did you turn it off?

KJF: I turned it off for months.

MK: When is your favorite time to write?

KJF: Morning. I get up, walk the dog. Have breakfast.

MK: Is there anything you like to do for fun?

KJF: Love to read, love to watch TV.

MK: Anything you would like to add?

KJF: I've been working on a historical novel for about four years now. I'm struggling with it. But, truthfully, I wouldn't enjoy it if it weren't challenging.

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of six novels and three short story collections. She's written literary, contemporary, historical, and science fiction. Her most recent novel, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, won the 2013 PEN/Faulkner, the California Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Man

Booker in 2014. She lives in Santa Cruz, California where she is currently pretending to write a new book.

Mackenzie Kiera is a Contributing Editor to LA's The Last Bookstore's blog *Dwarf+Giant* and her work has appeared in the *Manifest-Station*, *The Times Standard*, *Mad River Union Newspaper*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Blumhouse* and the latest *Ink Stains* anthology. She and her husband are natives to Los Angeles but are determined to live in Humboldt County among the redwoods as long as possible. If Mackenzie isn't writing, chances are she's running with her dogs or saving the world from zombies.

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