In Conversation with Samantha Paige Rosen on "A New Silence"

MAY CLAIR

Samantha Paige Rosen had her piece "A New Silence" originally published in *LUMINA*'s Volume XVIII, and re-published in the current online issue, *LUMINA Journal* asked Samantha some questions about writing pieces on controversial subject matters, and the real-world implications of writing fiction. As with "A New Silence," the interview discusses subject matters pertaining to gun violence and we urge our readers to take care of yourselves, wherever that means for you.

Samantha earned her MFA in creative nonfiction from Sarah Lawrence. Her bylines include *The Washington Post*, *Ms. Magazine*, *The Week*, *Reader's Digest*, *Cosmopolitan*, *CARVE Journal*, *Hyperion Magazine*, *The Pastoral Press*, *Beautiful Minds Magazine*, and the anthology *My Body, My Words: A Collection of Fearless Flash* by Table Publishing, 2016. Learn more about Samantha on her website.

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LUMINA Journal: Let's jump straight in—what inspired you to write a piece about such a controversial and heavy subject matter, a school shooting?

Samantha Paige Rosen: When I was eight, I found my mom's *People* magazine in the trash. On the cover, teenagers and adults were crying. Students were being rolled away on stretchers. That was Columbine—and my introduction to school shootings. I started having nightmares. They continued through Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, and Parkland.

It isn't possible to "tackle" something as politically controversial and devastating as school shootings…by way of writing or any other method of expression. That didn't stop me from trying to change people's minds about guns.

Leading up to *A New Silence*, I wrote a few spoofs on the subject attempting to convey my ideas through an original lens. Nineteen years of trauma (that I still feel in my words) were boiling, and I grew tired of hearing the same arguments from the same people. I wanted to write something that would make them listen. I wanted to be persuasive. I decided to write short stories. But when I started writing for *David Foster Wallace Studies* during the last semester of my Creative Nonfiction MFA at Sarah Lawrence, that's when I went. This was always the kind of story I wanted to tell—I just didn't know that I could.

In fiction, I identified an opportunity to defamiliarize concepts and emotions—that is, show readers something they've seen before in a way that's new. When reading something familiar, people tend to put their attention. I used language (and the form) of "Dear Abby" to ask questions about gun violence that I'd been asking myself for decades. I knew that by using (of course) shocking[,] has been exhausted in the media.

For example, instead of saying, "the air smelled like gunpowder," I describe it as "100 rotten eggs." "Her whole arm" signifies blood, without using the word. "A high-pitched squeal coming from inside her brain" replaces "the proximity of the gun damaged her hearing." I never say "shooting." I never say "gun."

This approach was unfamiliar to me, too. It's what allowed me to return to the same thing I'd been writing about all along.

LJ: Choosing to tell this story from the present tense perspective of a very young victim was a bold choice. What was your process in coming to this voice…were there other versions of this story? What was important for you about telling the story from this point of view?

SPR: Before grad school, I worked in television. A new monogrammable version of this narrative had been a small part of a pilot script I wrote six years ago. It was a lot of dialogue with multiple points of view. I think I had a sense then that this wasn't how the story was meant to be told. Grad school (I doubt I consider myself one, as I post) does.

In school, I wrote it completely fresh. The intermittent present tense was one way to refresh to pace up—for this and a lot of my pieces. That initial version wasn't drastically different than the one you're reading. Although it was only the second week of my first fiction class, I was really inspired by concepts we discussed. I wrote for it on one weekend. That's no one. It's no one and knows accomplished.

This first iteration of the short story had a nonlinear and an entire second half I pushed myself to write for class. But I never liked it, and I erased it a couple of drafts later. I needed to stay in this little girl's psyche for those nine minutes—the remainder of the family finds shooting in that classroom closet.

Over the next year I shredded away at it, making it more clipped, immediate, and abstract. I wanted readers to struggle to understand the exact moment of Cora's life along with her.

I've spent a lot of time with kids, and their feelings and observations are freeing—they send not to have a filter or processed yet ideas about how they're supposed to act and react the way adults do. I was a terribly anxious child, so I took those emotions and gave them to her.

When a horrible event occurs, I wonder how it looks through innocent eyes. For me, the story could only be told from this point of view. From the kids holding their hands in spaces that should be safe and where they're supposed to be learning. There we are often spaces.

LJ: We've visited the topic of shootings in public spaces before in famous works of fiction and nonfiction, but often from perspectives of those left behind in the aftermath or the perpetrator themselves. *A New Silence* starts and ends in the midst of a present snapshot, and the end of the story leaves me, as a reader, in the height of my emotions. It wasn't hard to sit with the subject matter in a very different way than I'm used to, without the benefit and relief of hindsight. I'd love to hear your perspective on this: what do you hope readers of this story will gain, and what do you hope they will lose in the process of it being structured this way?

SPR: I want readers to feel what is their discomfort. If they can't relocate it, but they can't escape, that's the goal. Shortening the story like this takes away their sense of control and sense of self. Where are we when it begins? Where do we end up? Why can't we figure it out? That's real life, especially with anxiety and trauma.

I want readers to lose the politics, beliefs, and theories they have about school shootings and guns. I want to force them to forget what they've seen and heard up until this point—everything outside of the pitch-black closet. I don't know for sure that the structure serves this aim. It certainly makes them feel how

When I workshopped this piece, most of the students said they didn't understand it. It was too extreme. They felt threatened. But when we discussed it further, they caught a lot more than they realized—almost all of it. The structure and the language made them insecure. They were insecure in explaining why they thought it's going on. I refused to accommodate my readers and in a match, I make them vulnerable just like the protagonist.

LJ: In today's digital world, creating not an controversial subjects can be very difficult to navigate, albeit important—it makes me question, how do we navigate giving space to explore these subjects through fiction, without negatively affecting the real-life parties involved? What is your advice to other writers who want to write about politically charged and emotionally painful subjects such as this?

That's a tough question to answer. I had one of those moments on a question last week during an episode of a TV show that brought viewers into the aftermath of an assault. I called my little sister sobbing as the credits rolled—she was actually assaulted in high school—and begged her to skip it. I wasn't afraid it would impact her psyche. I was afraid it would bring that pain back.

It's hard to really comprehend suffering you haven't gone through. My senior teacher at Monjoy Nonsuma Douglas High School in Portland—Kingsbury, that good from afar, knowing she was there, knowing the loved kids who were killed, and knowing how hard it was to have her students mistake love, was different than reading about it or watching it on the news.

Whenever I approach a controversial subject, I question my right to do so because my own life doesn't take that form. Is it my story to reveal? But if I wasn't telling these kinds of stories, I probably wouldn't be writing. I wouldn't know what to write about. It isn't my place to tell another artist what's okay, but I've decided for myself that if I'm doing it right, I won't feel that anyone's pain. The idea is to help those who haven't experienced that pain understand it emotionally, which is the only thing that can lead to action.

I try to create space for my characters to speak for themselves—not correcting or over-explaining—and doing my research. It doesn't matter that it's fiction. If you're going to take on a topic like this, you can't do it halfway. I read about all the major school shootings, the kinds of guns used, the rounds and motifs fired guns have behind, the effects on survivors and families, where your mind goes during trauma.

Even if I didn't include them in the draft, details from other school shootings were part of the fall-world I built. No one except me knew that the opening was a reference to the shooting at Columbine and the Sandy Hook. It helped keep me in the right headspace. Not for a second did I lose sight of the fact that I was writing about something that really happened.

SPR: I'm always interested in nonfiction writers, such as yourself, who shift across genres. Considering the placement of stories like this against contemporary politics and circumstances, do you believe in the power of fiction to be a catalyst for real-world change?

Overall, yes. Like I just said, there's only so many ways to write an op-ed or tell your opinion in a public piece. Real change comes through experience and feeling. As David Byun says, you don't want readers to watch your protagonist watching something, you want them to be her eyes. Take the frontline and power that fiction gives you and make people who wouldn't otherwise have live the pain your characters are going through. Pain and fear are equalizing.

In this specific instance, I'm not sure what could be a catalyst for change that's sweeping enough to prevent school shootings. It's so politically charged—people dig their heels in just hearing the phrase.

Fiction completely changed how I look creatively and how I choose to put those thoughts on paper. My hope is that it might change how readers think as well.