

An Interview with George Dila, Fiction Writer

by Jennifer Porter



George Dila

George Dila is the author of the short story collection “Nothing More to Tell” (Mayapple Press 2011) and a short story chapbook “Working Stiffs” (One Wet Shoe Publishing 2014). He is also the author of “The Squeeze” in TTR 1.2, a short story about a married man who encounters a mysterious woman in an opera house.

TTR: *You have a really blistering craft essay over at Cleaver Magazine—Confessions of a Fiction Editor—that made me wonder what magazine you work for, so I Googled it and found that you are an associate editor at Third Wednesday. Then I went through my Sonar 3 submissions tracker software with great trepidation to see if I’d ever submitted anything to Third Wednesday. Thank God, I hadn’t! That would’ve been so embarrassing. On a serious note, how did all those “confessions” and preferences develop for you as an editor? Did you come into the role with really set opinions about what you look for in work? Or are they reactionary rules, so to speak?*

Dila: Blistering? I thought it was kind of

light-hearted, but good for you in tracking me down at Third Wednesday. I wrote a short essay for that journal’s website about what I look for in a story; what I hope to find. So I came to the job with the craft values pretty much set; values you might describe as traditional short fiction values. I confess to being a traditionalist. But only when I began receiving submissions did I understand how incompetent most of them would be. So some prejudices grew out of my experience as an editor. Developing writers want to be published right away. They are obsessed with publication. I tell anyone who asks, “Write because you love the process of writing, not to be published.” And above all, learn to be honest about your own work.

TTR: *I think I break all of your “rules” about stories and about cover letters. Is my career going to fall flat? And, why can’t I tell an editor what inspired me to write the story? Why the piece has significance to me?*

Dila: I don’t dislike cover letters. I just read them and forget them. Some editors love to hear what the motivation for a story is, why the piece has significance for the writer. Some editors specifically ask for that. A friend and mentor, Lee K. Abbott (a robust and fearless short story writer as well as the best teacher of short-form fiction on the planet) would often ask in workshop—“Is it on the page?” So that’s what I look at—what’s on the page, not what’s in the cover letter. And I predict a brilliant career for you. Send me a story.

TTR: *How has editing with these preferences so clear and distinct affected your submission process when sending your work out? Do you imagine all of the editors that read your work holding those same rules? Isn’t that kind of a scary thought, it is to me anyway, that unless a story meets all of these subjective conditions of an editor, it won’t get published?*

Dila: Every editor has their own list of

prejudices. Each has their own standards. I can't outguess them, so I try not to think about them at all. Unless, that is, they specifically say what they're looking for. If a call for submissions tells me the editor is looking for "writing that is on the cusp, unbound by convention," or "work that defies the normative notions of a genre and explores the undefined and vivid spaces between the interstices of words and meanings," I avoid that publication. They're not gonna like my stuff, for sure.

TTR: Tell me about you and the opera? Have you ever left your sunglasses clips on your glasses while finding your seat after intermission?

Dila: I am mystified by this whole incident. The reality, what really happened that day at the opera with my wife, is so entangled with the fictional part of the story that I cannot tell them apart any more. I'm sure the glasses clips is accurate. I remember stumbling down the aisle, being blocked, losing my wife. I honestly can't tell you whether the rest actually happened or not. Very spooky, the way our brains work.

TTR: How about the ear whispering by a mysterious seductive stranger? I think one of the reasons "The Squeeze" works so well is because we all wish what happens in the story would happen to us.

Dila: I can't say whether this mysterious stranger really existed. A lot of what I have written gets mixed up with reality in my head. Sometimes I remember characters I've created as real people, and I wonder how they're doing. I'm not sure you can do that "between the interstices of words and meaning."

TTR: Where is the restaurant in the basement of the former insane asylum? I'd like to go there but only if the food is good.

Dila: It's a wonderful Italian restaurant called Trotteria Stella, in the lower level of

the old State Mental Hospital in Traverse City, Michigan. The whole hospital campus (several beautiful old buildings) have been converted to condos, retail. We often go to see the Met in HD performances at the State Theatre in TC. We love the opera. But honestly, I wasn't thrilled with the Turandot.

TTR: Tell us a little bit about your two short story collections and how they came into being.

Dila: Thank God for small, independent publishers like Mayapple and One Wet Shoe Press, and a few University presses. Without them, short story collections by anyone but already best-selling authors would never make it into the world. I knew some writers who'd been published by Mayapple, and who were pleased with the relationship, so I sent them a bunch of stories. They rejected them. I was miffed. A few years later I sent them another batch. They liked them. Oh what a feeling, as they say. The only thing we fought about was the title. They won. One Wet Shoe was unique in that they would consider publishing a short story chapbook. I have so much admiration for these people. With a small indie press, a writer can actually have a relationship with a publisher, not just a business deal.

TTR: And finally, any tips for the beginning writer that you had to learn the hard way?

Dila: Why should I make it easier for beginning writers? There's no better way to learn than the hard way. But I will give this advice. First - read voraciously in your genre. I am often shocked by people trying to write stories who don't read stories, or write poems who don't read poems. Second - learn to be brutally honest about your own work. If you aren't, someone else will be. Like some pig-headed fiction editor.

George Dila has two story collections *Nothing More to Tell* (Mayapple Press

2011), and *Working Stiffs* (One Wet Shoe Press 2014). His stories and personal essays have appeared in numerous journals. A native Detroit, he now lives with his wife Judith in the Lake Michigan shore town of Ludington. His website address is: www.georgedila.com.

