

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINA GANT

IT STARTED
WITH MY
WANDERINGS
AS A KID IN
THE WOODS ...



THE MRR INTERVIEW

What does it mean to be a “nature writer”? Christina Gant shows us in a multitude of ways, luminously.

An Associate Professor of English at SCC, Gant teaches literature and writing at SCC. Outside of her fulltime load, she maintains a rich life as a writer and photographer. As she explains below, she adds to these efforts by making homemade crafts, which unsurprisingly maintain a similar commitment to aesthetic refinement.

CHRISTINA GANT SPEAKS

With Jayme Novara, Gant co-authored a textbook titled *Introduction to World Mythology* (Kendall Hunt Publishing) that is now in its second edition. Gant has published prolifically under the pen name Ember Grant, writing four new age books in the fields of alternative spirituality, mythology and folklore for Llewellyn Worldwide. More than 30 of her poems have been published in small literary journals and magazines and have received several awards, including the Reynolds Prize from Phi Theta Kappa and the Editor's Choice Award from the *Eliot Review*.

Gant's Instagram page (@poetofthewoods) froths virtually daily with something beautiful. She produces finely wrought photo-texts known as blackout poetry (aka erasure or redaction poetry), nature photos and photos of her other interests and ventures. Gant's photography, like her writing, is a vista into the largess of the world.

This MRR Interview was conducted on June 2, 2021.

– Michael Kuelker
SCC Professor (Emeritus) of English

POSTSCRIPT

Since the publication of *Mid Rivers Review* 2021, Gant has signed a contract for her fifth book with Llewellyn Worldwide.

MID RIVERS REVIEW is a literary journal published annually by the English department of St. Charles Community College.

SCC offers a Certificate of Specialization in creative writing. This 18-hour certificate program provides students the opportunity to hone their skills and abilities in a variety of forms of creative writing, as well as the practices of publishing writing.

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MRR: Your nature writing is exquisite. It reveals a world that is alive and tangibly before us, full of mystery, vitality and depth. How did you develop this kind of awareness?

CHRISTY GANT: I grew up at a beautiful place near Cuivre River state park. My family had 20 acres, which is what I have now, which brings me full circle. But I digress. I am an only child, and I grew up wandering around in the woods. That was my thing. It was me and my cats and dogs and whatever pets we happened to have or pets that I would find like turtles and ducks or whatever. I was just that kid, that nature kid.

I was really in love with science and the natural world. I had my field guide in my back pocket all the time, trying to identify all the trees and flowers and birds. I was just completely enamored of it. It became kind of a spiritual thing for me. That was sort of my escape. My parents fought all the time; my dad was an alcoholic. And so, literally my escape was, take a walk in the woods and go out in nature. Ever since then, I have been trying to get that back.

My parents divorced when I was 18 and we lost that beautiful home. And so now, just last year, I was able to finally realize that dream and have my own woods again. It was really important to me. I think that's how it affected my writing so much, is because it truly was an emotional and spiritual escape for me. I found a relationship and a connection there.

MRR: How much did reading about nature assist in the development of your writerly vision? Whose nature writing have you come to admire?

CG: It was probably later. When I was a kid, I mostly read fantasy things and fairy tales and fun stuff like that, which explains my love of mythology and fairy tales. When I started college, that's when I first started discovering that there was nature writing out there. I started by reading the transcendentalists, of course, Thoreau and Emerson. But then later on, I actually took a class at Washington University called American and English Nature Writing, and it was all about this whole genre that I didn't know existed. And of course, I discovered Annie Dillard and Mary Oliver and all these wonderful authors who were expressing things I longed to say and doing it so beautifully. I did draw a lot of inspiration from writers like that.

MRR: You've mentioned Annie Dillard and Mary Oliver. Who are some other writers and what are some works that have made a deep impression on you?

CG: Probably Pattiann Rogers. Not a lot of people seem to know about her. She's been writing since the 80s, and she's noted for her nature writing. I first discovered her work when I was taking the Summer Writers Institute at Washington U, and the person who was running our poetry writing workshop had us read some of her work. I was floored by the way she could pull in the factual stuff, the science, but also make it kind of magical. I was really just blown away by what she was doing. That definitely helped me, I think, to elevate my work and take it to another level. Her work is just so profound. I continue to use it in my classes to give students an example of somebody who really has the masterful touch with nature poetry.

MRR: On nature writing, I'd like to get your thoughts on what you think goes into good nature writing. In other words, the kind of writing that avoids the commonplace. We can say something that is true but it can also be conventional. But as writers, we aim to startle, unveil something fresh at least with a perspective or with language that delights on some level. How do you come up with your own good writing about nature?

CG: Sometimes my writing starts with just describing something, and then of course it evolves as I play with the words to try to make those connections. I love thinking about poetry and all of literature as a way to explore connections between people and the world and place and time and everything else, and so I like to try to think about what I am feeling when I am in nature, not just what I am looking at.

The other day I found a yellow lady slipper orchid in my woods that I had never seen in person before, and I was just so giddy over it I couldn't even believe it. But then I thought, how would I even write a poem about this? How could I convey the joy that it feels without, you know, sounding like, 'oh wow, this is this neat flower that I've always wanted to see'; people see it in parks all the time but I've just never seen one. It's gotta be more than just, 'I'm thrilled to see this flower.' What does it represent on a deeper level? It's more than just describing the flower or the moment. It often takes quite a bit of time. I'll jot down phrases and stuff in my journal, and I might not ever go back to those words for months or even years, but it just takes time to play with it and really

dig and figure out what I am really feeling about it and what I want to say about that moment. Sometimes I don't even know how I feel until much later.

MRR: How much prose writing do you do? And when do we start discussing Ember Grant and how that venture functions in your writerly life?

CG: I'd love to write a novel someday. I've been attempting 'the great novel' that many of us want to write for decades, but I don't know if or when I'll ever do it. I play around with it. I write beginnings, I write bits and pieces. Most of the prose I am writing is nonfiction and has been since about 2000.

My love of nature is my spirituality, being sort of a pantheist, and so that led me to this whole, I guess a little over 20 years ago, maybe 25 years ago, kind of a spiritual revelation and realizing that my love of nature is my spirituality. That sent me on this whole quest of looking into mystical things. In that kind of discovery, as a way for me to explore and learn, I started writing about those things. Alternative spiritualities. The occult, by that I mean, what's mysterious and what's unknown, things that science can't explain—all these possibilities. That led me down the path to writing about those things.

I wanted a pen name for that because I wasn't sure where I was going to go with it and how comfortable I was with what people would think. Because some people look at that and they don't think it's a very serious form of writing. So I gave myself a pen name and thought I would see how it worked.

My first piece was published in 2003, and I have been publishing something every year since then. I'm writing for Llewellyn, the oldest new age publisher in the world; they've been around for over one hundred years. They are *the* new age publishers. I submitted something to them and they published it, and ever since then, I have been in touch with the editors that work on various aspects of their company. They come to me now. 'Do you want to write this?' 'Do you want to do that?' I've been writing for them ever since.

MRR: What was that first piece for Llewellyn in 2003?

CG: It was about using the four elements. The classical four elements are earth, air, fire and water. It was about using those in a meditative aspect.

That was really fun. Because of my love of nature, I'm really grounded in science, and so I have this way of reconciling my love of science with my spirituality through this platform. That was the first thing I wrote.

Through the course of my work with this company, I have also published four books. It's been really rewarding, and I've learned a lot about the publishing world and a lot about how to work with different editors. It's been a wonderful experience.

I don't know if I'll write any more [books]. Every time I finish a book, I think, 'I don't know if I have another one in me' because it's so much work and I don't know what fresh new thing I have to say; the genre is really, really crowded and popular. But if I do think of something, I'll try it again.

MRR: Do your ventures in photography affect your writing? Does your writing affect the photography you do?

JCG: They do. When I am in the act of doing the photography, though, I am usually not thinking about poetry. I usually am switching different modes. But after I have pictures, what I've been doing lately, and what I've always wanted to do since I found photography as a hobby, is to combine them in some way. I used to think it would be nice to make a coffee table book, an art book, where I find photos that I've taken that correspond with poems. It's not usually 'this photo inspired this poem.' That's pretty rare. I do have a couple pieces that are like that, but most of the time it's a separate thing and then I look for the connections later.

Last year, I decided I wanted making more of a social media presence and I know Instagram is a big place to do that, so I started sharing stuff on Instagram. I decided I wanted to find a way to combine my poetry and my photography. But of course, I don't have that much poetry that I can post every day; I'll run out of stuff. So I started doing blackout poetry, or what they call erasure poetry. Those are really fun and they're also a way for me to keep a creative spark going because they're kind of like little puzzles. So I started making those and overlaying them with my pictures. People have been doing that online for a long time, but I hadn't been doing it myself and didn't realize how popular it was, so I started doing that. Now I've opened up this whole other world, a new art form, for my explorations. I've met a lot of cool other writers online who are doing all kinds of other wonderful ways of expressing poetry and art. Some of them are doing blackout poems or cut-up poems.

Some of them are exploring their art, like painting, with poetry. So many cool things going on that I didn't realize. That has been an eye-opener and it's been inspiring.

MRR: MRR: What was the first-ever piece of writing of yours that was published?

CG: I don't know if you count high school.

MRR: Oh yes.

CG: We had a literary journal in our high school that I'm sure it didn't go past the campus, but I did get some poems in there. That was probably the first time.

The first time I remember having something out there in the world in print, it was in the early 90s, a little magazine called Pen and Ink magazine. They're not around anymore, but they're the first place I submitted old school, in the mail with a cover letter, and they wrote back and accepted it and published it.

MRR: What is literally the last piece of writing that you have worked on?

CG: Today, I have been working on a piece about rainbows. It's Pride month. I've taken some rainbow photos over the years and I thought wouldn't it be nice if I could write something about not just nature and color but people. I don't think you can overstate the importance of recognizing those beautiful differences and I thought maybe I could put together something simple for Instagram in honor of Pride month that would feature a rainbow picture and some kind of short poem about color. That's literally what I was working on five minutes before this interview. It's hard not to make it be cliché. How do you write about a rainbow without it being corny? It's hard. [Christy laughs.] We'll see if I can do it.

MRR: Is it bad juju to talk about your novel or other writerly aspirations?

CG: I don't think it is. Yes, I do want to write a novel someday. It's about time. It takes so long time to put together something that big and it seems like something else always gets in the way. But I would like to write some kind of

fantasy novel someday. I used to think I wanted to write epic fantasy. You know, I'm a huge Tolkien geek. I thought maybe there's something there I can do. I think I've changed my mind and I'm leaning more toward urban fantasy. That's a really popular genre. That's what I have been experimenting with and playing with for the last few years.

Poetry is more important to me than that, though. I'd really rather get a book of poems before I try to tackle a novel. So I think that's where I'm going to put most of my energy in the near future, trying to get a book of poetry published.

MRR: Do you have a strict regimen with your writing, or do you carve out writing time when you can amidst your other responsibilities?

CG: This is one aspect where I don't practice what I preach. I always tell my students, 'Set aside a time every day when you're going to write,' and I don't do that. I tried. That's just not how I work. I think I could if I wanted to. If I really tried, I could say, okay, at this time every day I'm going to write. Instead, what I do is work it in whenever it fits or if I'm inspired. But I do try to write something every day.

That's why I started doing the blackout poetry. Even though I'm not writing from scratch every day, I'm at least looking at texts and playing with words a little bit each day. That's art in itself. But sometimes playing with words in that way inspires me to come up with something else. So I do try to do something creative every day, and if I'm not writing, I'm taking pictures, or making jewelry or stained glass, something crafty, something artistic every day.

MRR: Let's go back to your interest in science. Not everyone who is a 'nature writer' necessarily loves the science of it, but you do. How did that develop beyond the fact that you were situated on those lovely 18 acres in your childhood? And how did this exposure to science inform your writerly self?

CG: It started with my wanderings as a kid in the woods, but then when I was in school, science classes were my favorites. Right up until middle school, I absolutely loved it. I thought I had a career in science like maybe forestry, or maybe a wildlife biologist. That's the direction I thought I was going in until about maybe early high school. And I don't know exactly what flipped the

switch, how literature won out, but I know I was doing a lot of writing. I started writing as a kid. Around 8th grade, that switch got flipped and I realized that despite the knack I seemed to have for science and my love for it, literature and writing and exploring the feelings and all of that was taking the lead. I had a teacher in the 8th grade mention something to me about possibly a career in writing, and that may have had something to do with it. Also the fact that once I hit the upper levels of science with some of the harder equation-based math, I am not saying I couldn't do it, but I didn't like it. I liked observing nature and enjoying nature, and I liked learning about it, but I didn't want to do that kind of work. That was kind of taking away from my enjoyment of it. Maybe that's what flipped the switch.

I think my observations do make a difference because I am curious about the way things work, and I do research sometimes when I am writing a poem. I wrote a poem recently about the sound of crickets, and I had to do some research to find out, okay, how do they make that sound and what does that mean and what are they doing? I want to know what that is before I start writing about it because it has a purpose and a function. Research is still part of my creative process. It does play a role.



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