



I Had Not Seen It That Way at the Time: An Interview with Mary Woster Haug

Amber Jensen

In her latest book, *Out of Loneliness: Murder and Memoir*, Mary Woster Haug explores her memory of a murder in her hometown of Chamberlain, SD through research and reflection, exploring the influence of the South Dakota landscape and its frontier culture on her own and others' understanding of that murder and the lives affected by it. By reflecting on her own changing identity as a 60's teenager, daughter, and eventually young wife, Mary writes toward understanding of Bev, whose experiences of poverty and transgender identity differ so significantly from her own.

I was fortunate to have been a student of Mary's at South Dakota State University and, later, a writing group member with Mary and former South Dakota Poet Laureate Christine Stewart, so I

had read early drafts of the writing that led to both *Out of Loneliness* and her first book, *Daughters of the Grassland*. In spite of that familiarity with Mary's writing and the story represented in this book, as I read the published manuscript, my heart ached for Mary and her father, for Bev and Gina, and for the family and community members around them as I read about the complexity of their relationships and identities. It was a pleasure to interview Mary to hear her thoughts about the process of writing about those complexities and discovering connections through writing.

Amber Jensen: In *Out of Loneliness*, you describe feeling compelled to tell this particular story, and you describe the fact that the story

seemed to find you, in a sense.

Mary Woster Haug: Yes, well, in a way it kind of landed in my lap.

AJ: Since your first book, *Daughters of the Grassland*, centered more on your own story and your immediate experience, could you talk a little bit about the feeling of responsibility that came along with the feeling of *needing* to tell this story, which was, in many ways, someone else's story?

MWH: Well, I think when I first came across the picture of Beverly in 2009, I wondered if anybody had written about it already. I thought, *There must be someone who has picked this up. It's been years.* So I did a search, and I couldn't find any one that had done that story. I hadn't yet decided I wanted to do it, but I was just kind of wondering why no one had done it because it seemed like an important story.

I didn't know how important a story it was to tell until I started doing the research and started reading the letters between Beverly and Gina, and the transcripts, and so forth. But when I did, you know, I knew that there were a lot of true crime memoirs out there and I just I knew I couldn't write a mystery or detective story. It's not in me. I don't read enough of them to have any idea about that. But, the whole idea of true crime and memoir, together, interested me: how does the writer make sense of a crime that she was not directly witness to, but was very much aware of as a child. So then I thought, well, maybe what you need to do is just tell a nonfiction story and not even bring yourself into it.

I sort of wrestled with that but, again, the more I dove into the story of Bev and Gina, the more I realized, you are invading someone's privacy and Gina is still alive, although the others have all died, but Gina is still alive and I started thinking I can't open up their lives without taking a risk for

my own, I have to be willing to explore my own experience at that time and who I was at that time if I'm going to tell this story, and then it became I guess the two primary stories woven together. So, that was a very a huge sense of responsibility, because you know with one of the main characters still living and family and grandchildren. I did change the name of the girl hoping it would give her some privacy, but it's a mess of responsibility, and I wanted to tell it in a way that led people to see beyond the sort of shocking aspects into the tragedy behind the whole story. It was just a tragic, tragic story, and I had not seen it that way at the time. It wasn't until I started doing the research, so I think that's how I got myself involved.

AJ: I think that definitely comes through in the writing of the story. You mentioned in the book that you were moving beyond the story itself and into your life and finding those intersections. One of one of the things that you mentioned is the tragedy, and how you didn't see it that way, initially, as a young girl, but in in your writing you reflect a lot on your relationship with your father, and losing him, which is one of the tragedies of your own life. That's a really beautiful and heart-wrenching part of the story.

It seems to me that this idea of grief unites your story with Beverly's and Gina's. We are witness to a lot of grieving in the book — there's the grief of the Menzie family, and you mention other families who lose loved ones too young. What is the role of grief in helping us to understand other people's experience? Does that play a role in your connection to the story you are telling here?

MWH: I would say that, for years I ran from grief. You know, I've been married almost 50 years, and the first people I told about the true story of my wedding were you and Christine in our writing group. I did things that hurt my relationship with

my father, and so I had to deal with that for years after his death—that fact that I was an insensitive little 22 year old. But I had never talked about it, because it tore me apart, so I just I ran from it. I think my mother’s reaction was to run from grief, and I picked up on that.

If you look at that chapter in the book about grief, everyone tried to find a way to deal with grief. I think Mr. Menzie ran—he turned to booze—and I don’t know about Gina, but she left—she ran away. So, I started just looking at other cultures and how they deal with grief and a part of it is just talking about it, acknowledging *I suffered*. Grief connects, but not if we pretend it’s not there. Only if we’re going to be open with one another, with ourselves. I mean, “Just get on with your life.” People would say that to me. “Try and get on with your life, that’s what [your father] wants.” And I think he did, probably, I mean look at how we handled the wedding. He said, “You’ll need to be married.” But also, I’m sure he would have appreciated if I hadn’t been quite so closed down.

AJ: Sure, but like you said, that is a very common. A lot of us do run from grief, and finding that way into Bev and Myron and Gina’s story and seeing the tragedy and the grief, something we all experience, does create a sense of connection, I think, for your readers, too.

MWH: Well, I looked at my aunts, too—one whose son died when his horse tossed him, and then the other aunt whose daughter died of complications of measles. They shut down in many ways, too, and I realized my aunt just could not express grief, because she had to hold herself together, and that helped me to see that what I had interpreted as cold was survival.

AJ: And when you examine those stories, you come to that new understanding, so like you said,

it is important to acknowledge the grief. I think that relates to your description in the memoir of *how not knowing is fearing*. When we don’t allow ourselves to acknowledge something, or if we don’t know how to talk about something, then we essentially shut that down as well, right? But in the memoir, you explore that relationship between fear and misunderstanding. You turn it around and approach the story with curiosity, which is hard because it requires acknowledging what you didn’t know, or those things that, as you said, you interpreted one way in the past that you see differently now.

MWH: I think again back to our writing group and my first memoir. You and Christine pushed and pushed and pushed for me to be more open, and I think that experience in the writing group made it easier for me to move into this even deeper look at myself because I discovered, *Okay I’ll still wake up in the morning. I’ll still be able to do things and all my life is not going to change if I’m honest about what I did and who I am*. So I would attribute it to you guys just pushing me when the work was too shallow to go deeper, go deeper.

AJ: Writing is exploration, then? You don’t know where it’s going to lead you.

MWH: That’s the whole thing about writing, especially memoir. You don’t know where it’s going to take you, you have to just trust and follow it and not be afraid of it, and sometimes that’s hard. But I read a review on Amazon and one reader said that a white, straight, seventy year old woman could have really written an offensive book. But she didn’t because she exposed *herself* along with the others. That was always in the back of my mind: I don’t know what it’s like to be poor. I don’t know what it’s like to not be comfortable with who I am sexually or with my gender. I kept thinking, *Do I have a right? What do I know about this?* But you just

keep pushing, keep writing and exploring and opening up.

AJ: You wrote as an exploration, to discover and learn through the process.

MWH: I hope that's how I came across, because I'm still learning. I mean it's a coming of age story, and I was 60 when I first really started to dig deep into gender and sexuality issues beyond civil liberties like a constitutional right to marry to *How does it feel to live that experience? How would I have felt? And what what's really going on in our society?* That's a very different process.

AJ: That credibility comes through, as your reviewer says. That curiosity and that willingness to explore and learn--not only about your own experience, but your family, the people around you, the culture, and even the South Dakota landscape that shapes that experience. It is evident that you are very aware of how place is part of who we are, and the landscape becomes a character in the book. Your first book was more about your relationship with your mother and the role of women and our relationships as women, which you related to the experience of women on the prairie. In *Out of Loneliness*, though, different aspects come out because of the nature of the story. What did you learn about South Dakota landscape, culture, and the people that you associate with it through writing this book?

MWH: I wanted to complicate landscape, and so I think I really looked at how, although I found it comforting—it's the place, even now, where I feel most at home—but with a murder like this, I had to start thinking about that the heartland and the hard aspects of the landscape which, if you're a rancher or a farmer, you're dealing with the fact that Mother Nature isn't as sweet as we'd like to think. There are hard decisions to be made.

I think this would have been a very different story if this murder had occurred in New York rather than in Brule County, South Dakota, when we were still living on the edge of the frontier. I mean the cowboy myths still dominated our thinking. I think it was Teresa Jordan who spoke with this old rancher who said, "I kill my own snakes and bury my own dead." That's the rugged individual, which was so prevalent when we were growing up. I would say that that made people think, "I have to solve this for myself. Nobody's going to help me with this." People who haven't grown up in places like this, I think, might not understand that my father had to shoot his own steer, because, 20 miles in the country with no cell phones, a vet might not get there for 48 hours. So, you do what you have to do. There's that kind of, *a man does what a man has to do* attitude, and yet the flip side of that isn't so good, so it's complicated. The landscape in this book is complicated. It's both nurturing and beautiful and it's dangerous and can harden us if we're not careful.

AJ: You explore that complexity in your father's character and each of the characters in the book

MWH: You know, I would say, it relates to war as well, and other things that harden an individual and lead to those difficult choices. I remember Chuck Woodard saying, "You have to teach these young men and women, you might have to take a life but that shouldn't make you not value life." That's like the complication that people have with farmers. They think, because we can put down a cow or raise a calf to be slaughtered, we don't care about the cattle, but they do care about raising livestock right. They have to figure out how to be both things, not *either* or. It's more complicated.

AJ: I remind myself and my students of that all the time: writing is about the complexity. Finding

genuine answers only comes from examining the complexity.

MWH: Exactly, we try to simplify, but really the answers are complicated.

AJ: Right – we’re going to miss something if we simplify too much.

MWH: Exactly. I think that’s it. But it’s hard.

AJ: And I think that this this book is very timely given the conversations that are happening in our world and in our state right now. Sharing your story in this way and being willing to examine the landscape and the culture and the people and the experiences that led you to maybe see issues one way at one point in your life and contrasting that with the way that your research and thoughtful reflection have lead to your current understanding – that is a very valuable example of learning and open-mindedness.

MWH: Well, it’s interesting because when I started thinking about this story 10 years ago, I thought, you know, this is old news. I thought, LGBTQ+ people have their rights, the Supreme Court has allowed them to get married and to adopt children, and so on and so forth. Well, it’s not old news. Unfortunately, this book is very timely, because States across the country are looking at these issues, some of them not very nicely, so we’re very much in need of compassion. I guess that if an old woman can make such a radical change in her life, hopefully it could be an inspiration for others. I’m still reinventing myself, right?

AJ: I think we can keep reinventing ourselves. We can do that with so many issues, personally, culturally, politically, and socially. So, in your research process, you explored complexity, and that is very evident, both in your author’s notes,

your bibliography, and the way you tell the story of your research and learning in the memoir itself. As readers, we have a clear sense of the care that you took with telling the story and how important that research was. You also began each chapter with some quotes. Can you talk a little bit about why you chose to include those epigraphs and how they function differently from the quotes and information that you decided to weave into the storytelling or what made you choose that form?

MWH: I use them to set up the chapter, so that readers have a sense of what the chapter is going to be about, but in some cases they were important quotes that I just couldn’t figure out how to work that into the text. I really wanted those quotes because they define where I was going with that chapter. For instance, one chapter begins with a very long passage from Bev’s last letter. I didn’t want to break that up because that’s where I would think people would just be heartbroken when they see what’s going on with Bev in that jail cell. So, sometimes it was just a matter of wanting *their* words exactly as I found them, not edited.

AJ: Your writing process for this book, obviously, was different in terms of research, but did you approach this writing differently, since it was so much more outside of your story, and did that influence your writing process or your understanding of yourself as a writer?

MWH: The research, yes, was so different from the first book, but I think one of the things I learned is that I’m pretty persistent. I didn’t realize about that about myself because normally, you know, I if I don’t have a technology problem solved in two minutes, I’m done, but in writing you can’t work with a two-minute deadline. Was it Dorothy Parker who said the art of writing is keeping your ass in the chair?

The other thing I learned is, I have a high

tolerance for failure. If something doesn't work, I don't let it destroy me, I just say okay, put it aside and come back. Just because it didn't work doesn't mean that's not good. I don't even like the word *failure*, I think *experimentation* is a better word. So, I have a high tolerance for following things and if they don't work out then go back and start over. I think I'm also very open for criticism which, in my first book, I was a little more prickly about that. Now I've learned to really want it, because it makes the book better, and I learned that from the writing process with you and Christine.

In terms of writing process, I would get up every day and read and write for maybe five hours, but, you know, I don't have to work around children and jobs, so I could really devote five hours nonstop. And then, you know, I spent time in Chamberlain, sitting in the cafe writing, and there's something about being in the place or just being in a different place that is stimulating to the creative mind, and just being in Chamberlain a lot really helped me spark memories. I would suddenly see something and think, *Oh my God, I forgot this*. I'm also interested in false memories and how many of my memories are really true. I've asked myself that question, and I did that quite often in the book: this is what I recall, but was it really that way? I tried to be honest about the fact that I don't have perfect memory of this.

AJ: So, what are you working on now? What's next?

MWH: You know, I think I'd like to go back to writing personal narrative for literary journals for a little while. Just something shorter, because I can't envision a book right now, but sometimes writing shorter pieces for literary journals leads to a book, even if that's not what you intend, when you write that first essay. So, I'm thinking about something like that, and I'm interested in

women's relationships—like in the chapter of the memoir about menstruation—and the potential of childbearing—whether you do or not—as one link that women share. They may share many other things, but that is the one link women all share. There is something there about women and connections among women in friendship. I hope it goes somewhere—I may be calling you for help.

AJ: I hope so, Mary. Thank you!