

## Mary Fobbs-Guillory, Librarian & Liberator

An Interview with L. M. Quraishi  
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*Write hard and clear about what hurts. Don't avoid it; it has all the energy.  
Don't worry—no one ever died of it. You might cry or laugh, but not die.*  
— Ernest Hemingway

We met in a lobby worthy of the stereotypical anguished author, complete with a library of brown, cloth-covered books, a billiards table and a bar. Mary Fobbs-Guillory—with the consummate generosity of a librarian—brought me the Hemingway quote above, sharing how it resonated with her on the topic of pain and writing. A graduate of Hamline's MFA Program in Writing for Children and Young Adults who focuses her middle grade work in the fantasy genre because of the distance it provides, she says:

I didn't go into writing to write about my trauma. I just write what I know, write the world as I've experienced it, and it's seeped in trauma—beautiful things too—but...if I'm ... going to tell the story of the world, [trauma is] just going to be there.

She tells of the time she penned a contemporary realistic short story, "Getting By," without realizing she was writing about herself and her family. "I felt like I betrayed myself...[and got] scared about what I was going to write next." Her MFAC advisor Sherri Smith suggested that she start with journaling, entering the story from a different place, always monitoring how she was doing and returning to the page to find a safe way in. And this led Fobbs-Guillory to realize that when she sits down "to tell the truth about the world and how to get through it...it kinda gives me a bird's-eye view....There's something liberating in being able to see it."

This reminded me of my own recent experience with a “linchpin” piece—a time when my writing caught up to me. I wrote a poem about an abusive childhood incident that triggered a new vulnerability in me. Previously, all my writing about the event had been factual—I even kept journals at the time that recorded what my abuser did and how I felt about it. But for some reason this new poem touched me in ways all my reporting never did. Allowing myself to be moved by my own art offered revelations and also shifted me into incredible disequilibrium as I was pushed out of the safe place I had created and maintained for so long. Strategies I’d used for decades to protect myself from the pain of those events no longer worked, and I was forced to “find a new way to function,” as Fobbs-Guillory described it.

As difficult as this evolution was, it fit with the research I was doing on trauma and posttraumatic growth. The traumatic responses our brains develop are protective; they enable us to survive difficult events, but they also can damage us if they persist beyond the conditions in which they were created. Without even realizing it, I had employed craft strategies in my poem “One Girl/Ten Girls” that served to finally metabolize my pain. Third person narration allowed me to describe myself from a distance and with the perspective of time, as each stanza followed a girl’s experience of being in her own body. She journeys the world, meeting other girls whose bodies have also been appropriated for others’ use. Inhabiting many consecutive versions of herself—and simultaneously representing the many girls victimized by the people close to them—the main character evolves into the storyteller, writing “a story / so the next girl / can keep / herself, / and still / be loved.” Something about the way I showed up for myself as a tender and empathetic witness healed a hurt that I had long forbidden myself to even notice.

When I asked Fobbs-Guillory how people can go through difficult things in their lives yet come out expanded, she talked about social referencing: “How our adults show up for us in those

moments determines how well we do with processing those things or not.” She herself repressed the certain childhood memories because of the way her mother panicked when she demanded that Mary tell her what happened. “And I remember thinking: it’s really important that you say nothing happened. You have to comfort her right now and tell her nothing happened, and then it will be like nothing happened.” *Caprice*, a middle grade novel by MFAC faculty member Coe Booth, describes this exact impulse that children have, to protect those they love from pain. When explaining why she never told her mom about her abuse, Booth’s eponymous main character writes “i knew / it was her brother / and she loved him / i knew / when i told her / she would believe me” (141). It’s not only adults who want to protect the children they love; children are just as likely to sacrifice themselves to protect the adults they love. Children have the power to tell or not to tell and this choice may be the only agency they have in certain situations. In the face of trauma, children need to hold all autonomy they can.

I’m reminded of the picture book *Smoky Night*, written by Eve Bunting and illustrated David Diaz, released two years after the Los Angeles uprising in response to the acquittal of the police officers responsible for beating Rodney King. The focus of the book remains firmly on acts of care as it explains the ongoing rage and violence of the resulting uprising. Even when main character Daniel witnesses looting, smoke, fire, destruction, screaming and a mannequin that looks like a dead man, his emotional gaze stays fixed on his concern for his own cat. When children have someone or something to take care of, it can offer a sense of power even in the most disempowering circumstances. Should a child’s protection of those they love, conceived under the limitations of experience, brain development and the relative powerlessness of childhood, be honored any less than the choices adults make to protect children?

In fact, adults' choices can be as misguided as children's at times. In the final segment of our interview, I asked Fobbs-Guillory how she approached this work of metabolizing trauma as a librarian. She pointed to a key part of librarians' philosophy: Each book for each reader. If someone gravitates toward a certain book, a librarian will not steer them away or make any judgment but simply try to connect the reader to the stories they seek. Navigating parental reservations can be trickier, she says. Parents want to protect their children from all kinds of knowledge and will often complain about the "inappropriateness" of certain books. Author A. S. King referred to this impulse in her July 2024 MFAC graduation speech when she said: "We are instructed to keep the most important truths from children as an act of so-called protection, which leaves them more vulnerable to the topics we are keeping from them. Our job is two-fold: to warn, protect and prepare our readers with the truth, but also to make them laugh at how dumb the world is to put them in such danger." Fobbs-Guillory insists that the safest way to encounter some of the more challenging aspects of real life is at home, sharing a book with a parent. Mary Fobbs-Guillory is one children's book author who plans to courageously tell the truth about the difficult and the beautiful. I look forward to the liberating honesty of her debut novel!

#### Works Cited

Booth, Coe. *Caprice*. Scholastic Press, 2022.

King, A. S. "We Make Paper Boats." Graduation Speech. Hamline MFAC Program, 21 July 2024.