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12 QUESTIONS WITH HEATHER ROSE

hoopla digital: You could have developed a fictional work of art to center this story around. What about *The Artist Is Present* compelled you to focus on it as the central inspiration?

Heather Rose: Let me begin my saying how lovely it is to discuss the book with hoopla readers. Thank you all for your interest in *The Museum of Modern Love*. I'm writing these answers from my home in Tasmania on a very wild, wet, windy night.

In answer to your question, in Melbourne in 2005 I came across a photograph of one of Abramovic's early works—*Rhythm Zero*. This sent me off on an adventure of research and imagination. I was fascinated by an artist of such emotional complexity. I did begin with a series of fictional works and a fictionalized version of Abramovic. When I heard Abramovic was giving a performance in 2010 in New York, I knew I had to go. Once I sat with Abramovic at *The Artist Is Present* it changed the book, including the need to have that artwork at its heart. It was such a compelling work and Abramovic herself was so magnetic. I realized nothing I could imagine would be more powerful than Abramovic or her art. Strangely, in the earlier draft of the novel, my fictional version of Abramovic was sitting at a table alone having a meal and people from her past kept appearing. So in some ways it wasn't such a leap.

hd: Can you discuss your character development process, especially for those characters who, though playing minor roles, are so impactful to the novel overall?

HR: Characters tend to walk into my mind without much introduction. It seems to be my job to follow them about, listen and observe, and try to capture them in words. I write many tens of thousands of words of backstory about my characters. Very little of that ends up in the book, but it means that when they are talking with another character, I understand what they would say in that circumstance. I know what drives them, what's wounded them, what they love and what they fear. That applies even for minor characters such as Hal, Arky's agent, or the dead Tom Washington, Healayas's ex-partner. I think it's very important to know your characters deeply. I spent a lot of time acting in my teenage years and writing characters is similar to preparing to act a part. I need to walk around inside my characters to be able to write them with authenticity.

hd: When Marina granted you permission to include her in the book as herself—without fictionalization—it must have been exciting! Tell us about your reaction, and how the novel evolved with that development.

HR: I was so delighted when she said yes. But then I felt this enormous weight of responsibility settle on my shoulders. I didn't want to get it wrong, let her down or—even worse—offend her! In truth it paralyzed me for months. But then I told a friend that while I was sitting with Abramovic during *The Artist Is Present*, I had decided to (telepathically!) ask Abramovic if she'd be a character in the novel. I know it sounds strange, but suddenly Abramovic leaned forward in her chair and I heard her speak these words in my head: "You must do it, but you must be fearless." So my friend wrote that in blood red ink on a piece of paper and stuck it above my writing desk. That was the advice that got me to the end of the book. You'll see I used that in the novel too. It's probably very important advice for life generally!

hd: This is your first adult novel to be published in North America. What does it mean to you as an author to have your book widely available to this new audience?

HR: It's the most wonderful, exciting thing! I have spent a lot of time in America. I spent four years traveling back and forth from Australia to America in my twenties. I did over 20,000 road miles through the Midwest. I love the American landscape. I love American people. I feel so at home in New York and have been there six or seven times now. I used to own an apartment in Harlem. My eldest son lives in San Francisco. It feels so wonderful to know my books have finally made it to one of my favorite places in the world, and to some of my favorite bookstores in the world.





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hd: You've written about relationships so honestly and brilliantly for this book—many of which are complicated, ruminating on each character's successes and missteps in love. Can you share some about this?

HR: Hmm. Thank you! I'm not sure what to say about that, other than I was given these beautiful characters to work with. The depressed Arky, the grieving Jane, the damaged Healayas, the daughter Alice, even the woman in the animation Arky is working on. The entire cast was full of curiosity for me as the writer. I don't start out knowing how my novels will unfold. I think of writing as psychic orienteering. Clues arrive and I follow them. I am as amazed as anyone when the whole thing weaves itself together. It's a magical, mystical process made even more magical and mystical because I had a muse in the midst of the novel, popping in from time to time to tell me more about the story. It was strangely reassuring.

hd: Discuss the importance of creative, progressive spaces like MoMA. What are some other spaces that make room for the types of creative freedom that inspire you?

HR: I love art galleries. I think they are places of infinite wonder. They house something far beyond paint and clay and film and sound. They hold some of our greatest observations of the human experience. I think any place that allows us to bare our souls, to take a moment to breathe and reflect, any place that opens our hearts is a good thing. Solitude seems to be key for me. Solitude without interruptions so I can really listen to my characters and ruminate on ideas and sentences.

Finding a sense of the sacred seems very important in the creative life. So it's about finding what inspires, what elevates, what nourishes. For some people that's in art galleries, for some in churches, meditation spaces, yoga or dance studios. It might be driving alone on a long road or simply being out under a starry night sky. It might be through music. For me it's being by the sea or walking in an old forest. I meditate daily and that's enriched my creative life. I live a very simple life. I'm also learning to paint so if I get a quiet afternoon to play in my little art area, I also feel that sense of freedom.

hd: What would you say was most challenging part of writing this book? The most fun part?

HR: The most challenging part was that it took eleven years. I wrote four other novels in the meantime (including a children's series published in America under the pen name of Angelica Banks. If you have a budding writer in your family who is a middle grade reader, those books are for them!). But this novel wouldn't let me go. I didn't know how to get it right. I rewrote it so many times. It was immensely hard to convey the ideas that were bubbling up. The subject matter seemed infinite—art! It wasn't until I sat with Abramovic at *The Artist Is Present* that I felt it start to come together—but even then it was another four years before it did. And there was so much research. Art history, music composition, film, the history of the former Yugoslavia, Abramovic herself, New York, architecture, medicine, cotton growing, *The Artist Is Present*. It felt endless!

The most fun part? Getting beautiful messages from readers telling me that it's inspired them or nourished them in some way. That is very humbling as a writer to receive that sort of feedback. It makes the long years, and the hundreds and hundreds of hours writing, researching, and crafting the story so worthwhile.



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hd: According to your *New York Times* interview, you flew to New York, raced to the MoMA on a mission to sit with Marina, and then returned every day for three weeks. How did your own interaction with the show inform your characters, namely the main characters of Arky and Jane, returning again and again?

HR: I only met the character of Arky when I went back to my hotel room one night after being at MoMA all day. He was the last character to arrive and I was overwhelmed when I realized he was a film composer because I know nothing about music. Jane was also inspired by people I met during my time in New York at the performance. People who had expected to do other things during their precious week in New York, but found themselves back at the MoMA day after day observing Abramovic instead. *The Artist Is Present* was the most captivating thing to see. Over 850,000 people went to see it. I spent a lot of time after I returned to Australia poring over the portraits taken by Marco Anelli of the people who sat opposite Abramovic. I was so curious about their experiences. I had countless late nights watching the live feed of the performance over the remaining months, too. The MoMA performance had an enormous impact on me and the whole novel. It was really a case of art inspiring art.

hd: Your book is narrated in parts by a sort of fairy godmother of artists—a living personification of inspiration. Talk about that decision, and about your own mental muse or “house elf.”

HR: The muse and Marina’s mother were the first two characters to arrive in 2005 when I first began working on the novel. I cut the muse out for a couple of years, because I was worried it was a little cliché to put a muse in a book. But then, near the end, a dear friend and fellow writer read the manuscript and asked me if there was a character missing. Instantly I knew it was the muse and, strangely, all the passages I’d already written found their way quite effortlessly back into the book. It was only then that I had the sense the book was complete. When I put the finishing touches to the final edit, I remember thinking that if there are muses, then the one that watched over me writing this book must be the most patient muse in the world. And I’m very grateful they stayed for the whole process.

I have begun to think that maybe we get different muses for different books or projects. My current novel has had a very demanding muse who has insisted most every day that I write faster and write harder! But it’s also been the first time I’ve been able to write full time. Before this, all my novels were written around my day jobs. So I’ve been very keen to make the most of every precious minute with this new, hard-earned creative freedom.

hd: Like Marina’s exercise in persistence that was *The Artist Is Present*, *The Museum of Modern Love* was an artistic marathon for you. Would you tell us a bit about the process of writing it?

HR: When I began *The Museum of Modern Love* my children were 5, 10, and 16. By the time I finished they were 16, 21, and 27. I had been running the family business through most of those years (a small advertising agency) and juggling everything we do as mothers and daughters. Until now, I have written all my novels at night, or any time I could get a few quiet hours. Mostly I started at 9 p.m. a few nights a week and worked until 1 or 2 a.m. Sometimes I’d get a weekend away. I was so determined to be a novelist and this was the only way I could fit it in. *The Museum of Modern Love* is my seventh novel and I never expected it would become the prize-winning bestseller that it has. To me I was writing about a depressed musician and a self-harming Serbian, which didn’t sound like a formula for a bestseller! I wasn’t even sure anyone would ever publish it. But I knew I couldn’t let it go. I knew the novel was crafting me as a writer, just as much as I was crafting it. That it’s been such a breakthrough novel in my career, and made it possible for me to write full time—at least for a little while—is still a miracle to me.

hd: What authors inspire you? What are you reading now, or reading next?

HR: So many writers inspire me. And I read very widely. I love different writers for different reasons. I love the musical lyricism of Toni Morrison and the spare weirdness of Haruki Murakami. I love the narrative wonders of David Mitchell and the literary elegance of Edith Wharton. As a fledgling writer I was very influenced by the Brontës, Jane Austen, Faulkner, Hemingway, Tolkien, Ian McEwan, Muriel Spark, Thomas Hardy, Margaret Atwood, and Australian writer Helen Garner. I adore *Middlemarch*, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and *Anna Karenina*. Also *The Signature of All Things* and *Life After Life*. Right now I'm listening to *Homo Deus* by Yuval Noah Harari for the third time and I just finished Samantha Shannon's third book in *The Bone Season* series. I loved reading *Becoming* by Michelle Obama recently, *Star Crossed* by my friend Minnie Darke, and *The Electric Hotel* by Dominic Smith. Next is Barbara Kingsolver's *Unsheltered*. I love her writing and I've read everything she's written. I've probably got thirty books on my bedside table. All my books spark joy!

hd: What do you hope readers will take away from *The Museum of Modern Love*?

HR: Of course every reader will have their own experience. For me, I felt the book gave me such an insight into connection. And into art and the commitment to living a creative life. It also made me more aware of the hard honesty required of deep relationships. And that maybe just taking time to really gaze into each other's eyes is one of the most important things we might do with the people we love.

