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Joy Williams Raymond Meeks for The New York Times

The Misanthropic Genius of Joy Williams

The writer's new story collection establishes her as one of the greatest chroniclers of humanity's insignificance.

A few years ago, the writer Joy Williams's favorite church decided to dispose of a few extra pews after a renovation. Williams stole a church pew in April and October, when her frequent cross-country drives take her to Laramie, Wyo., but she wanted a pew anyway. She borrowed a trailer, and a friend to help her load the pew and drove a thousand miles, pulling it behind her enormous Bronco, her two German shepherds in the cab with her. Now the long, dark pew lives in her house in Tucson.

When Williams was a child, her father was a minister at a Congregational church in Portland, Me. "He gave a beautiful sermon," she said as we hiked through Arizona's Santa Catalina foothills on trails she walks every morning. I asked if she had ever considered being a preacher like her father: Her stories often reveal themselves as parables, and her writing on the environment is equal parts fire, brimstone and eulogy. "Oh, no, I'm too shy," she said, before lapsing into a companionable silence, the only sound her Chuck Taylors' crunch on the trailbed. "Maybe that's what I need," she cawed suddenly. "A pulpit that I take from reading to reading with me."

Williams is wiry and tanned, her hands and face biblically wrinkled. She is 71. Years ago, she lost her eyeglasses before a university appearance and had to wear prescription sunglasses at the lectern; appreciating, perhaps, the remoteness they facilitate, she has worn them ever since at all hours of the day and night. Not unlike that church pew in her living room, the sunglasses seem like an act of disregard for everyday comfort, an eccentricity that makes everyone else uneasy but Williams more secure.



Williams in Key West, Fla.
Raymond Meeks for
The New York Times

It was just after dawn, but already the air was stifling. We reached a summit, and Williams drank from her dogs' scratched and dented water bottle. Fat black ants swarmed into a crevice near our feet. Atop a nearby hill stood a trio of saguaros, the bottoms of their trunks black from some recent fire or decades-ago disease. Miles away, a single impossible thunderhead dropped rain in curtains over the Sonoran Desert. Nothing we could see cared about us.

To call her 50-year career that of a writer's writer does not go far enough. Her three story collections and four darkly funny novels are mostly overlooked by readers but so beloved by generations of fiction masters that she might be the writer's writer's writer. "She did the important work of taking the tight, minimal Carveresque story and showing that you could retrofit it with comedy," George Saunders told me, "that particularly American brand of funny that is made of pain."

The typical Williams protagonist is a wayward girl or young woman whose bad decisions, or bad attitude, or both, make her difficult to admire: She drives away while her husband is paying for gas, or ransacks a houseguest's room to read her journal. In Williams's precise, unsparing, surprising prose, her characters reach for the sublime but often fall miserably to earth: "Sam and Elizabeth met as people usually meet. Suddenly, there was a deceptive light in the darkness. A light that blackly reminded the lonely of the darkness." She has a gift for sentences whose unsettling turns — "While she was thinking of something perfectly balanced and amusing to say, the baby was born" — force readers to grapple, just as her characters grapple, with the way life will do what it wants with you. Other writers I spoke to about

Williams's work expressed a sense of awe at the grandeur underlying her stories of weirdos and misfits. "She's a visionary," Karen Russell told me, "and she resizes people against a cosmic backdrop."

This month, Knopf will publish "The Visiting Privilege," a collection of 46 stories that cements Williams's position not merely as one of the great writers of her generation, but as our pre-eminent bard of humanity's insignificance. The collection's epigraph is a verse from 1 Corinthians: "We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." When Don DeLillo called to talk about Williams, he quoted that verse back to me. Then he said: "This is the definition of the classic American short story. And this is what Joy writes so beautifully."

Joy Williams likes a good road trip, so let's take one through a Joy Williams story. The road is familiar — you recognize the religious undertones; the dark humor; the animals flapping overhead and squashed on the pavement. You smile at Williams's disarming manner of juxtaposing words, pressing unsettling meanings out of them: "The two women sat in the living room surrounded by wooden ducks. The ducks, exquisite and oppressive, nested on every surface." You think you know the route you're taking, but after a few detours and hairpin turns you may have lost track of how you're ever supposed to get to where you're meant to go. The ride might end with the squeal of brakes and shattering of glass. It might also be beautiful:

The car flipped over twice, miraculously righted itself and skidded back onto the road, the roof and fenders crushed. ... None of them were injured and at first they denied that anything unusual had happened at all. May said, "I thought it was just a dream, so I kept on going."

And the exclamation points! When they appear, they hit like hammers. They suggest a kind of wonder at how she, and we, ever could have ended up in all these strange places. ("Daddy was smoking and drinking more and surrendering himself to bleak pronouncements. He was sometimes gruff with them as though they were not everything to him!") Ann Beattie said of the punctuation mark: "Other writers use them too much and injudiciously. Joy uses them judiciously, often because a character is uneasy about the disconnect between the text and the subtext. It's like laughing nervously as you say something."

Williams talks like a Joy Williams character; in our time together, she was extremely reticent, yet on several occasions she burst out with a revelation so breathtakingly personal that I, too, laughed nervously. The rhythms of our conversation — chitchat punctuated by silence interrupted by exclamations of despair and rage — were like none I'd ever had before. Once, to my horror, I found myself asking her how she'd like to die. She replied instantly: "A car crash! It's quick."

Williams met her first husband, Fred McCormack, while she was

attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop. They moved to Florida, where he worked as a reporter, and they had a daughter, Caitlin. Williams wrote in a trailer outside Tallahassee where they lived for a time and that she would portray in her story "Woods": "The place smelled of cigarettes and mice that wouldn't be trapped. The paneled walls bent to the touch." She would later recall that living situation as "excellent, practically morbid conditions for the writing of a first novel."

By the time that novel, "State of Grace," was nominated for a National Book Award in 1974, Williams had divorced McCormack and married L. Rust Hills, the longtime fiction editor at *Esquire*; he soon adopted her daughter. Even as she settled into a 30-plus-year marriage, Williams wrote fiction that viewed love with a gimlet eye; her characters find love with the wrong people, worry when they're away, are casually cruel when they return. They yearn for passion, yet don't know what to do with it. The young woman adrift at the center of "The Lover" (1974), mid-affair, "wants to be in love," Williams writes. "Her face is thin with the thinness of a failed lover. It is so difficult!"

In that same story, the young woman drops her daughter off at nursery school to go sailing with her lover and, when she returns, has trouble recognizing her child: "There are so many children, after all, standing in the rooms, all the same size, all small, quizzical creatures." Williams is close to her grown daughter and grandson, and spoke of her daughter's easygoing childhood near the beach in Florida. But an ambivalence about parenting percolates through her work. She seems, in the tension between parents and their offspring, to take the side of the children; she has a keen sense of their desires and the small crimes they will commit to achieve them. "All children fib a little," she writes in her story "The Excursion." "Their lives are incompatible with the limits imposed upon their experience."

Williams and Hills eventually settled in Key West. Far from the New York literary scene, they cultivated their own community of writers and threw parties at their house on Pine Street. Even within this more social milieu, Williams recalled, she often sneaked away early and went to bed. Her boozy and mysterious second novel, "The Changeling" (1978), takes up the interplay between interior lives and the natural world: On a tiny island off the Atlantic coast, people rut in the grass like animals, neigh like horses, bite and scratch. In one memorable scene, a girl transforms for just an instant into a deer, her flanks "covered with tight, bright fur."

The novel was — as Dwight Garner, a *New York Times* book critic, later put it — "burned and then buried alive" by Anatole Broyard in *The Times*. "He jumped publication date!" Williams said indignantly of Broyard. "He couldn't wait to screw me." Williams, stung by the review, didn't publish her third novel, "Breaking and Entering," until 1988; the

restless tale of a pair of wanderers who break into vacation houses while their owners are up north, it reads now like an X-ray of its era — anomic, ominous. The Florida beach exists to be seen through bay windows by the foolish snowbirds who live behind them.



Williams and her husband Rust Hills in Key West, Fla., in 1989.

Photograph from Key West Literary Seminar

With the 2000 novel “The Quick and the Dead,” Williams’s work took a sharp turn into a new landscape: Arizona, where she and Hills had bought a house. Williams flings her characters — ghosts and teenagers and seekers — across the desert with a kind of narratorial rage. And the characters give as few damns what people think of them as their creator does. In “The Quick and the Dead,” Williams’s sense of place came from the earth, the air, the plants and animals, the killing heat — and the inconsequence of human endeavor within that world. The stories she was writing around that time similarly revel in the way the desert places each character on a knife’s edge; in “Charity,” a single snake crossing the New Mexico highway sends a car smashing “with a snapping of axles” into a pocket of “sacred datura, a plant of which every part was poisonous.” The accident happens because a boy grabs the steering wheel, trying to run the snake over. Even in the frightening chaos of the crash’s aftermath, Williams finds comedy: “I just wanted that snake so bad,” the boy moans.

Nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, “The Quick and the Dead” reflected Williams’s new environmental fervor, which was stirred in 1997 while she was reporting for Harper’s about the animal rights movement. Her feature, “The Inhumanity of the Animal People,” was republished in a bracing 2001 collection, “Ill Nature.” While her use of the natural world in her fiction is evocative and harshly beautiful, these essays were jeremiads — blunt and furious and uninterested in being even a bit

reasonable. “You have made only brutal contact with Nature,” she says. “You cannot comprehend its grace.”

“Why be polite about this?” she asked me, late one night. “Why be reasonable?” Her sunglasses glinted in the lamplight. “Nothing is going to change until they kill every last wild animal on this planet.”

The afternoon before our hike, I met Williams in a courtyard at the Arizona Inn, a setting the extremely private writer chose precisely to avoid introducing me to her dogs, tortoise, house or car. The hotel is elegant but fusty, the kind of place that offers free ice cream by the pool every night. I asked her how she actually, you know, made money. (The only one of her books that ever sold well is a Florida Keys tourism guide she wrote in the 1980s, which is both gloriously written and perfectly scornful of tourism.) “What a question!” She laughed raucously, but she considered it, sipping a glass of white wine. “It doesn’t add up,” she allowed. “I don’t know! I don’t know how I’ve lived.”

Williams does not have an email address. She uses a flip phone and often writes in motels and friends’ houses on old Smith-Coronas; she brings one with her and keeps others everywhere she stays. Hills died in 2008, and Williams now splits her time among Tucson, her daughter’s home in Maine and Laramie, migrating across the country with her dogs in her Toyota, which has 160,000 miles on it but is pretty new by her standards. (Her last car, her old Bronco, neared 360,000.) She eats a lot of Weetabix.

These days, Williams spends much of her time alone but for her dogs, Noche and Aslan — German shepherds, a breed she’s had all her life. She talks avidly about their personalities and dislikes and fears. In 1997, she was mauled by one of her shepherds, a 9-year-old male named Hawk; the incident is the subject of a hair-raising, heartbreaking essay in “Ill Nature,” which is mostly about Williams’s misery at having to put the dog down after the attack. The essay ends with her dream of walking with Hawk, “my handsome boy, my good boy, my love,” together among the dead.

The sky above the Arizona Inn was fading orange, and a bird of prey was swooping over our heads. I thought of the scene in “The Changeling,” the girl transfiguring into a deer. Williams seems to be searching for nothing less than a kind of artistic transfiguration, one in which humanity’s role in fiction is lessened decidedly. “Short stories need to touch people on a deeper level, a deeper, stranger level,” she told me that night, “and they don’t.” When I asked Williams what she wants out of a great story, she replied, “I want to be devastated in some way.” You can draw a line from her work to young writers exploring the same sun-deranged parts of America — Karen Russell, Justin Taylor, Claire Vaye Watkins — but few writers even try to write as wildly as she does. Though Williams has commented positively about some

contemporary writers, she is frustrated with the state of the modern short story — including, it seems, her own.

“Most of these stories aren’t getting close to what I’m trying to accomplish,” she said of “The Visiting Privilege.” A new novel she has been working on for a decade is, she hopes, a next step — a step away from the “language and the flash and the burn” of today’s literary writing. About that novel, she would only tell me that it’s set in the desert and includes animals of “species unknown, species never seen.”

At the end of the evening, she pressed an essay upon me, one that she hadn’t yet published but that she thought would help me understand where she was coming from. It was 17 pages long, typed, hand-corrected, one section Scotch-taped in. “Give it back to me tomorrow,” she said. I was too drunk and tired to read it that night, and got a befuddled clerk at the Arizona Inn to scan it for me.

A few days after I returned home from Tucson, a letter from Williams — a response to written questions I’d given her — arrived in the mail. The envelope had been filched from a writing residency, with a Provincetown return address scribbled out and “Williams” typed underneath it. Inside she had answered a number of my questions, and many I did not ask. She wrote, “I believe that God is (and must be) a transcendent presence in any worthy work of art.” She wrote that she was grateful that Rust had taken her “into a world of writers and books and sociability I never would have known.” She wrote, “If you had wiped us out in Arizona traffic my last thought would have been — serves me right for agreeing to this profile.”

The same day the letter arrived, I turned on my laptop and opened the pages Williams had given me to read overnight in Tucson. The essay begins as a lament for contemporary language’s inability to cope with the grandeur and tragedy of the natural world. But soon its scope expands to sound the alarm for literature itself, doggedly focused, as Saul Bellow wrote, on “the human family as it is.” “Could this obsessional looking at the human bring about the death of literature?” Williams asks. In the end the essay is a call to arms for a new kind of literature, one Williams sounds doubtful that anyone, including she, can write.

In her letter, Williams referred to her novel, the one she hopes might represent a new way of writing about the earth. “I started it a few years before R died,” she wrote. “I have to think it can be saved.” I had a vision of her then, deep in the Santa Catalinas, her two beloved dogs by her side, the water bottle filled with martinis, as she typed on one of those old Smith-Coronas. Maybe she would find a cave instead of a motel! I hope that when I finally open this impossible novel that speaks the language of this glorious earth, whose implacable beauty will persist long after we are gone — I hope I cannot understand a word.











“Was it only a dream that Literature was once dangerous, that it had the power to awaken and change us?” Williams writes in that unpublished essay. “Surely it must be, become, dangerous now. ... Behold the mystery, the mysterious, undeserved beauty of the world.” Even on my scanned copy I could see that she’d underlined the word *behold* with a jagged single line of pencil. ♦

Dan Kois is the culture editor at Slate and a contributing writer for the magazine. His last article was about the [rock band Spoon](#).

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