



The following introduction was written for Claudia Rankine's reading on April 15, 2005, by Pratt Institute Writing for Publication, Performance and Media major, A.L.McFadden.

CLAUDIA RANKINE

I've said ahead of time that I'm probably not the best person to introduce Claudia Rankine because I have such a bias towards this book. The first time I read *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, I was in the waiting room of a hospital, which is probably one of the best places to read a book like this because the reality of it is pretty much glued down right in front of you for a good four hours. What struck me first and most intensely was Rankine's ability to get you as the reader to admit you're on the same page as her. Her use of graphics, quotes and stories give me the same kind of *jouissance* I imagine you'd get from reading someone else's diary. And in a lot of ways, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* reads like an autobiography, but if anything, it's the autobiography of American culture and not just Rankine herself. Her discussion of sadness isn't the melodramatic, egoistically personal writing you'd find in most self help sections, but the straightforward and often humorous exploration of topics like depression, prescription drug dependency, rape and racism. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* allowed me to be engaged in the text and admit things about myself, my culture and even the nature of sadness that I had never thought of before. I remember watching the people surrounding me in the ER waiting room and reading lines like "I'm thinking this as if trying to weep," and I couldn't and still can't shake the feeling that she must really understand the kind of sadness masses of people feel every day on their own, not the kind of sadness that's shoved down our throats, three times daily, with food.

Rankine isn't afraid to tell you if you're waiting for you life to happen. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* doesn't pass sadness off as something to be bottled up or fixed with anything that comes out of a bottle. She confronts the fact that many of our problems as Americans may be linked to our inability to recognize the reality that a life might not matter. Antigone is mentioned as both a character and a theme in the book, and much in the same way as Antigone was more comfortable walking among the dead because she understood them and was connected with them, Rankine is able to dig around in the uncomfortable spots we have as a society—the spots that say that everyone who isn't in a morgue is alive, or say that it's okay for some people to die and not others. I would prescribe this essay to anyone who has ever struggled with or felt assaulted by human spectacle or even the kind of sadness that doesn't have a name. Rankine's essay attempts to simply understand what is here; where here is, what it means to be here, what it even means to be, and if being has a meaning at all. At the very least you won't feel manipulated in the slightest. One of the best qualities of this book is how honest and honestly simple it is in all of its emotion. As Rankine says in one of my favorite moments, "I write this without breaking my heart, without bursting into anything." This book is full of great lines capable of standing on their own, which help make it impossible to put down once you begin to read, even if you're not stuck in an ER.

The following introduction was written for Richard Maxwell's reading on December 3, 2004, by three Pratt Institute Writing for Publication, Performance and Media majors: Lindsay Nouis, Juliette Richey, and Brianna Jacobson.

RICHARD MAXWELL

"If I had to pin my style down, I'd call it realism." This is how the acclaimed playwright, and one of *Entertainment Weekly's 100 most creative people in entertainment*, Richard Maxwell, sums up his style. *And how true.* As he sees it, "It's not another reality that you're trying to create. You're seeing what happens in the moment, which is, for me, the highest reality." Maxwell often casts people who don't know how to act, preferring to see people be "afraid and brave." His experimental style is evident in the songs he writes for his plays, and in the way, as the New York Times states, his characters "often deliver lines without inflection...The less demonstrative their behavior, the deeper they seem."

Originally from West Fargo, North Dakota, Richard Maxwell studied acting at Illinois State University, ultimately winning a fellowship with the Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago. While in Chicago, he co founded the Cook County Theater Department, a company that challenged the principles of traditional acting training, like the idea that a scene cannot work without the presence of conflict. Richard says, "We were convinced we could come up with our own rules, so we broke them all."

He came to New York, and sought out the experimental theater troupe, the Wooster Group. In 1999, Maxwell's play *House*, won him an Obie Award. This led to his current gig as the Artistic Director of the New York City Players, a non-profit producing organization, whose stated goal is to "bring high quality theater to the public at large." *The New York Times* gushes that Maxwell is "a genuinely new talent at work," while *Entertainment Weekly* calls his plays, "sometimes hilarious" and "strangely affecting." His most recent play, *Good Samaritans*, premiered at St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, in October 2004.

Good Samaritans tells the story of Rosemary and Kevin, respectively a rehabilitator and an addict, who meet and form something resembling a relationship: they sing songs and have sex. As Lindsay already said, Maxwell presented *Good Samaritans* at St. Ann's Warehouse, and he set the stage to look somewhat like an elementary school cafeteria. When entering the theatre, I couldn't help but think to myself, "How are two actors going to fill all that space?" I was wrong, in that I was still expecting a conventional form of theatre from Maxwell, but what I saw instead, was way better.

A meek pairing of a hip dressed guy and girl shuffled to the piano and guitar set up in the corner of the theatre. Without any indication of show time, Rosemary came out onto the stage as if there wasn't a crowd watching her. She set the table, washed some dishes, and finally looked out the window, meanwhile bursting into a song in her rough, abrasive, untrained voice. I think of myself as pretty open minded when it comes to theatre, but I have to admit that even I was caught off guard. My Maxwellian experience had officially begun. For the next ninety minutes, I was lost in a world where people speak in staccato, monotone voices and express themselves with melodramatic gestures and off key songs.

The end of *Good Samaritans* came as abruptly as the beginning, and I dragged my feet to the subway in disappointment, not because the show was bad, but because it was over. I wanted Maxwell's play to last forever. I wanted to stay in the world where people are honest and not ashamed to express themselves. This was not possible though, and instead I got stuck for an hour at Jay Street.

And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, I present to you the great Richard Maxwell.

The following are sample introductions written and given by Maggie Nelson at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in 2003-04. The mix of factual and evaluative comments, of biography and brief appropriate excerpts from the author's works, makes them both professional and interesting. For their length and interpretive substantiveness, and because they are themselves good pieces of writing, these are good models for your author introductions.

RACHEL ZUCKER

"Rachel Zucker has won all kinds of prizes, including the Barrow Street Prize and the Center for Book Arts Chapbook Competition, taught at Yale and NYU, has also had work in *The Best American Poetry*. But I want to direct my comments toward her first book, *Eating in the Underworld*, just out from Wesleyan University Press. The book re-imagines the myth of Persephone in the underworld via a series of letters between Persephone, Demeter, and Hades, as well as Persephone's imagined diaries. It's a gorgeous book, inside and out. The poems are taut and yet spacious; they feel like they are flickering across the screen in an elegant yet forceful weave of light and shadow. Indeed, the opening line of the book is "If the light were good I could see everything." In many ways it's a book about longing, about the amazing and sad feeling of desire "crested then crestfallen," as Zucker writes in one poem; it's also about transformation: "I have changed form, but such things don't matter. It's so hot the thin-skinned lemons are weeping." It tells a story in time but also feels somehow outside of time, and I know I'll go back to it often. She also has another collection, *The Last Clear Narrative*, forthcoming from Wesleyan UP, so there's something else to look forward to. Please welcome Rachel Zucker."

SIMONE WHITE

"Simone White is currently studying for her MFA at the New School, while also working as a lawyer in Philadelphia. She has also been a fellow of the Cave Canem Workshop for African American Poets.

I've had the pleasure of knowing Simone and her poetry for a long time, albeit with a dramatic hiatus over the years. But I always remembered her work from over a decade ago for its lucidity and easy lyricism; upon encountering it again years later, I am struck by the way she now uses these talents to construct deeply surprising, dense, often beautiful and sometimes scathing poems. Scathing as in: "I never beat my girls or told them to marry/Well, marry at all. They'd cry all night, then I'd say, Girl, this is not the brute short version, it's the nasty one. Buck up." Whether she's contemplating the "identity and nature of the ruling class," the problem of "being crippled by the very features which create the pleasurable black masculine," contending with the various relations between music and poetry, or charting the contours of a fierce internal landscape in which her speaker "wants and wants and wants," Simone's poems always complicate, compel, and sing. Please welcome Simone White."

MARK WUNDERLICH

"Mark comes to us tonight from Provincetown, MA, where he lives, and Sarah Lawrence College, where he teaches. His first book is called *The Anchorage*, and it won the 1999 Lambda Literary Award; his second book of poems, *Voluntary Servitude*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press, so watch for it soon.

Mark's poetry is elegant, hurt, and brave. "In bitter weather, I trust the mind," he writes, and throughout his poems you can feel the mind at work shaping or just charting the various stories of the body--where it has come from, what landscapes it has seen, what it has loved, what it has desired, what it has suffered. The poems beg others or themselves to tell these stories, even as they constantly edge against their breaking down. I love the phrase from his new book, "an appointment to make it whole," as that's how the poems feel to me--like appointments or promises to this wholeness, with a quiet acknowledgment of the impossibility of such a thing. "Don't wreck me, and I say I won't, but how can I know that?" he asks in his new book's title poem, deftly striking into the mystery of the hurt we cause each other, or that the world causes us. These poems take place in a kind of persistent, even cultivated vulnerability, in which even light can potentially do harm. Reading his new book I kept thinking of this line by Andre Breton, who writes: "It is by an extreme capacity for defiance that certain unusual people who have everything to hope and everything to fear from one another will always recognize each other." Mark's poems seem to me to emerge from the heart of this discomfiting but exciting kind of recognition. They ask hard questions about the stakes of tameness, and of wildness. Please welcome Mark Wunderlich."
