Ellis Avery

The only writer ever to have received the American Library Association Stonewall Award for Fiction twice, Ellis Avery is the author of two novels, a memoir, and a book of poetry. Her novels, *The Last Nude* (Riverhead 2012) and *The Teahouse Fire* (Riverhead 2006) have also received Lambda, Ohioana, and Golden Crown awards, and her work has been translated into six languages. She teaches fiction writing at Columbia University and out of her home in the West Village. She is also the author of the 9/11 memoir *The Smoke Week* and the recently arrived memoir-zine *The Family Tooth*.

I want to thank Ellis Avery for her generous contribution to the interviews on this blog. It's been my pleasure to receive such thoughtful, informative answers to my questions.

Ellis Avery's scintillating, gorgeously woven *The Last Nude* (Penguin, 2011) was written about art deco artist Tamara de Lempicka, a bisexual painter in Paris during the Jazz Age, from the point of view of her American muse, Rafaela. It is a nuanced, complex book about Parisian politics in the Jazz Age, about painting, about love and queer power dynamics. Her writing style is sumptuous and supple. People have compared Avery's sentences to brush strokes and as a painter (and a once-teenaged painter's model), I felt this acutely.

JEH: Ellis, I think you know what a big fan I am of your novel *The Last Nude*. Both as a book that goes deeply inside the life of a painter, and in literary terms, but also, and in particular, as a lesbian writer and painter. Can you please tell us about its inception, and then how you managed to bring it to fruition?

Ellis Avery: I'm honored by your words, and grateful for them. If I could, however, I'd write about my own experience, like Rafaela's, of feeling intensely visible, sometimes all-too-visible, in my teens and twenties (sexual harassment on the street, being sent to modeling school, modeling for two painters, one a lover and one a friend).

If *The Last Nude* is a Jazz Age *Girl with a Pearl Earring,* then my Vermeer is the Art Deco painter Tamara de Lempicka, who was particularly active in Paris in the 20's and 30's.

Tamara De Lempicka's most critically acclaimed painting, above, which the New York Times called "One of the most important nudes of the 20th century," was a 1927 oil on canvas called *Beautiful Rafaela*. When I saw this painting at the Royal Academy in London show in 2004 it literally made me weak in the knees, it's such a sexually forceful image.

And just as startling for me was the fact that on the wall, in prim curatorial presstype, was the information that in 1927, while in the throes of a bitter divorce, de Lempicka met Rafaela on a walk in the Bois de Boulogne and took her home. Rafaela became her model and her lover, and their relationship lasted for six months to a year. I wasn't so much shocked to learn that lesbian cruising existed before 1990 (okay, maybe a little) as I was to see the story right there in black and white in a major art museum. Suffice to say, I found this story hair-raisingly sexy. What I found moving was to discover that fifty-some years later, in 1980, the painting Tamara was working on when she died was a copy of *Beautiful Rafaela*.

My novel, *The Last Nude*, tells the story of Tamara and Rafaela's affair in 1927, from the model's point of view, and the story of the last day of Tamara's life, spent working on the copy of *Beautiful Rafaela,* from the painter's own point of view.

JEH: When I was staying in Paris in 2014, you helped situate me with a link to an essay you wrote when you got back. I lived a couple of blocks from one of Tamara de Lempicka's homes. Can you link here so readers can enjoy it, too?

Ellis Avery: Postcards

JEH: How much of the novel is factual? Did you, for instance, know that Rafaela was American and in the Bois looking for men when Tamara cruised her? Is it documented that they had an affair, or just known or assumed de Lempicka got involved with all/many of her models?

Ellis Avery: After seeing *Beautiful Rafaela* at the Royal Academy show in London, I wanted to write about her, but I had to set the idea aside for a couple of years, and it wasn't until 2008 that I could really get going. In the intervening time, I read as much as I could about inter-war Paris and Tamara de Lempicka, including the Catalogue Raisonée of her entire oeuvre, which had assembled by Alain Blondel of Galerie Luxembourg, the curator responsible for launching the revival of interest in de Lempicka's work in the '70s and '80s. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the very last painting Tamara was working on when she died was a copy of the painting that had inspired my book, a painting inspired the girl she met in the Bois du Boulogne half a century beforehand! I get goosebumps just thinking about it even now.

Between 2004 and 2008, I also wrote about fourteen miserable pages of the book that would become *The Last Nude,* all the while wondering if I'd ever be able to write a book again. But I was reading, thinking and taking notes, and on a May afternoon in 2008, half under the spell of one of those epic writer naps that seize me when I'm working best, I wrote the scene that becomes the climax of my book, the scene in which Rafaela lands in the Seine. That scene was so exciting to write and gave me so much hope for the book.

From June to December of 2008, I had summer break followed by leave from my teaching job. That period began and ended with artists' residencies, one at Yaddo and one at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. For three months in the middle, I was able to stay in Paris, accompanying my partner on a sabbatical semester. During those seven months, I wrote a thousand words a day, five days a week, and at the end of that time, I had the first draft of my novel. The craft surprises that occurred during that blessed first-draft period were the discovery that I could borrow formally from Henry James's *Washington Square* to write my ending and the realization, after I thought I had finished my draft, that I needed to write the book "again," as it were, from Tamara's point of view. Eighty-two-year-old Tamara's voice came to me all in a rush, and it scared me. She is based on the real Tamara de Lempicka, as described by those who knew her

in Laura Claridge's excellent biography. She is also based on my grandmother, who died at the beginning of that year.

The Last Nude is dedicated to my partner, Sharon Marcus, but it is also dedicated to the memories of Elaine Solari Kobbe, the grandmother I mentioned, and Austen scholar Katrin Burlin. a beloved professor from my undergraduate years, who died in 1998. She is the professor who shaped my thinking most radically by asking the deceptively simple question, what if we posit that the fruit of female creativity is "art"? That is, why are paintings "art," but quilts "not art?" Why is sculpture "art," but cooking "not art?" I was surprised to discover, as I worked, that I was trying to write the kind of novel I would have first encountered in one of Katrin's classes, one that not introduces the reader to the dazzling work of a half-forgotten woman genius, it also takes to task the notion of genius itself.

JEH: Does *The Last Nude* resonate with today's issues?

Ellis Avery: One important plot point is that Rafaela falls in love with Tamara, and when Tamara accuses her of wanting to get married, Rafaela realizes that was, in fact, what she'd most wanted. "Was it so impossible, to want what I'd wanted?"

JEH: Talk to us about the myths of the artist, particularly as they played out in Paris and in *The Last Nude*.

Ellis Avery: One of my working titles for *The Last Nude* was *The Artist and Its Discontents*. My novel both expresses a debt of gratitude to modernist giants Woolf, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Joyce, and Stein, and introduces readers to de Lempicka's brilliant paintings. At the same time, it also explores my distrust in the Romantic myths of the artist—as genius, as holy innocent, as solitary, inspired creator of art for art's sake—which continue to underlie so many novels about artists and writers published today. Instead, the painter in my novel is not only a woman who has not been canonized by the art establishment, she is a woman who was neither independently wealthy nor pretended to be above material needs: in fact, she only foundered as an artist when she no longer needed money. The author in my novel never becomes an author. The artist who finds happiness and fulfillment in her work is instead Rafaela, the model who leaves the painter to open her own dress shop. The art she makes is not permanent, but ephemeral. She does not work alone, but with colleagues. Her imagined critics are not men, but women. Her work does not project the illusion of existing for its own sake autonomously from its viewer, but is created in conversation with its wearer. The day of Katrin Burlin's untimely death—at her desk, of an aneurysm, while translating her mother's memoirs—before I got the news, I was thinking about something she'd said in class: "the female *bildungsroman* tends to get stuck in the bedroom." That's like complaining that coming-of-age novels by people of color get hung up on racism, I was arguing with her in my head when I got the news. I still miss her so much. I still want to show her my work. I still want to argue with her. But at the same time, her contention turned out to be the reason it was important for me to end the Rafaela section where I did, not with the end of her love story with Tamara, but with the beginning of the story of Rafaela coming into her own as an artist. I use the demoted and trivialized art of clothing design to juxtapose Rafaela's story of talent, ambition, and fulfillment with that of frustration and depletion that characterizes the stories of the fine artists she loves. In doing so I hope to valorize a more egalitarian perspective on art, art-making, and art appreciation.

JEH: Tell us about your relationship with research and your subject while in Paris.

Ellis Avery: Although I love Paris—who doesn't? –it's easy to get stuck in the rut of one's favorite things, so I dealt with that during my three-month Paris sojourn in 2008 by giving myself a conceptual art task. After writing my thousand words, not only did I have to write my daily haiku, as I've done for the past eleven years, I also had to 1) Drink a cup of coffee in a different Parisian plaza every day, and 2) Eat a different French pastry every day. On the one hand, I was living my Paris fantasy adventure; on the other, I found I didn't like the experience of constant restlessness. Never settling into a favorite café or pastry shop, never developing a routine and the relationships that build out of it— never being "a regular" anywhere—turned out to be a fast-track to expatriate melancholy, even if over very superficial things.

One surprise from my time in Paris came from getting to see Tamara de Lempicka's homes. For reasons of plot I moved her first apartment from a posh *arriviste* neighborhood on the Right Bank to an older, more aristocratic neighborhood on the Left, but I got to see those apartments with my own eyes, both the real place and the fictional one. Better, I got to find the studio she designed in the Fourteenth Arrondissement. Although I didn't get to go into the building, even seeing it from the outside—shabby and as it has become—was thrilling. They should put up a plaque. Here's a description of the building, based on what I saw; it's from a portion of the novel that I cut:

Tamara crossed into the Fourteenth. The ubiquitous five-story apartment buildings of Paris lined Arago, but I noticed that while some of them were clad in golden limestone *pierre de taille*, some were faced in stone only up to the first story, and then faced in cheaper brick the rest of the way up. Some were faced entirely in brick. I saw a long bank of newish artists' studios, built to look like a series of Swiss chalets. I saw the high sinister wall of the old prison. What a neighborhood! I breathed a sigh of relief as we turned down a smaller street, approaching the gentler, more abbey-like wall of the Cochin hospital, the garden and graceful dome of the Observatoire.

If that was the Observatoire, then we weren't actually that far from the Luxembourg Gardens, but the quarter still had a lost look, its smaller streets squeezed between noisy boulevards and the walled complexes of hospital and prison. Mixed into the street of apartments facing the Cochin Hospital, I even saw one or two buildings that could have been warehouses.

At first glace, 7 rue Méchain looked like a respectable but low-rent apartment building, plain-faced and shuttered. The 19th-century doorway, however, had been ripped out and replaced with a Deco one, an aperture limned only in sleek subtle curves. Two stained glass windows, round as eyes, looked out from either side of the door, each patterned with overlapping rectangles of black, white, and gray. The floor of the foyer was carved into a spare Mondrian grid of slate and inset doormatting. "I designed this entrance, and then the house in the *cour* is all mine," Tamara explained.

I followed her through the shallow foyer, across a good-sized courtyard, and into a small back building. Inside, I entered a small palace of velvet, zinc, and glass: a wide, shallow room bathed in light from windows facing both the courtyard in front and a garden in back. "Northern light," I noted grudgingly.

"All I could ever want," Tamara said. "And set so far back I get no shadow from the building in front."

A black staircase, glossy as lacquer, swooped up one wall toward a mezzanine that extended over the back half of the house. We stood in the high-ceilinged front half: a cold bright room we shared with only an easel and a couch. The lower-ceilinged half housed a sleek chrome-and-gray living-room set and a long dining table, on which sat two huge vases of calla lilies, lit from beneath by electric bulbs.

"Nice place."

While I was in Paris, in addition to on-the-ground research, I kept up my reading and internet research as well. One day, while doing an online search to find out how much a houseboat might have cost in late 1920s/early 1930s Paris, I accidentally discovered my villain, Violette Morris. My description in *The Last Nude* hews closely to Morris's real biography: "A professional soccer player, she had also become the French national champion boxer in 1923, after defeating a series of male opponents. Her hobbies included motorcycle racing, auto racing, and airplane racing, and her lovers, it was rumored, included women as well as men." Morris, who regularly cross-dressed as a man, got a double mastectomy in order to fit into her racecar more easily, which provoked so much revulsion in her boyfriend at the time that he fed the names of her female lovers to the press, which resulted in her having her membership in the French amateur athletic league revoked. This meant she couldn't participate in the Olympics. Angry, Morris turned on France, and became, as I relate in my novel, a Nazi collaborator. "She went to the '36 Olympics in Berlin as Hitler's personal guest. Before the invasion, she gave Germany the plans to the Maginot Line, and she taught them how to destroy French tanks. During the Occupation, she spied on the Resistance, and she

turned in Jews...When the war was over, the Resistance shot her in the head." Learning Violette Morris's story was one of those magical truth-is-stranger-than-fiction experiences that make all the lonely hours and blind alleys of the research process worthwhile.

One last "research surprise," one that occurred after I came home from Paris, during the rewriting process, was my experience visiting Jill Anderson's dressmaking atelier in the East Village. In a longer version of this novel, we get to watch Rafaela open her own dress shop with fellow students from *couture* school. Getting to spend a few hours in the workshop where all my favorite clothes are made was a profoundly rich experience, both in terms of the wealth of detail it offered for my novel (Jill keeps her patterns locked in a closet! Pushes a rotary cutter through ten layers of fabric at a time! Keeps buttons in jars affixed by their lids to the *underside*, rather than the top of, their shelves!) and in terms of the quiet, focused way that time passed as Jill and her two assistants worked. It reminded me of the way time passes while I'm writing, or, because I was watching rather than acting, the way time would pass when I modeled for a painter girlfriend many years ago. Tamara is not based on my long-ago girlfriend, but Tamara's dog is based on her dog.

JEH: How well did the book sell in Europe?

Ellis Avery: It was translated into Polish and Romanian, and seems to have done well.

JEH: How was it to have such a thoughtful and enthusiastic overall response to your novel?

Ellis Avery: Immensely gratifying! And not a given in my experience with publishing, so I'm all the more grateful.

JEH: I read your memoir of 9/11 called *The Smoke Week* which took me far into the NY tragedy. I used to work in the Towers when I was very young. The book is quiet and nuanced and simple Why did you take the approach that you did?

Ellis Avery: Thank you for the lovely description. I didn't feel obliged to state the official news or take an ideological position. I was certain that readers of the future would be able to find out anything they wanted about the 9/11 tragedy, both news-wise and in terms of the opinions that circulated after the attacks. What they might not know was how ordinary people lived through the attacks and the weird, suspended, heartbroken days that followed-- the millions of us New Yorkers who didn't lose anyone personally but were nonetheless devastated.

JEH: Tell us a little about your first novel *The Teahouse Fire*, still on my bedside table of books-to-be-savoured.

Ellis Avery: Think Japanese Tea Ceremony and you probably picture a willowy kimono-clad woman swishing across a tatami floor. This was my image when I began five years of weekly lessons in tea ceremony, an art form that is part ritual dance, part sacramental meal, part opportunity to handle and use priceless antiques.

One question, however, confronted me early in my studies: why were all the historical tea people men, when almost all my fellow tea students were women? Until recently in its four-hundred-plus-year history, I learned, the Way of Tea was in fact the province of warriors and well-off men, with women welcome infrequently, and often expressly forbidden. Doing research, I discovered one of the two heroines of my first novel, *The Teahouse Fire*: a woman named Yukako.

Based on a real 19th century figure, my fictional Yukako is the daughter of Kyoto's most prominent tea ceremony family, whose luck plummets as Japan enters a period of intense Westernization. Yukako, like her historical counterpart, changes the fate of tea ceremony in the 1880s by getting it included in the

curriculum of the newly formed girls' schools, breaking down the barriers to a male-centered discipline and shrewdly weathering the sudden devaluation of Japan's traditional arts.

As much as *The Teahouse Fire* is Yukako's story, it is also the story of its narrator, Aurelia, a nine-year-old American girl Yukako takes under her wing. The orphaned child of missionaries, Aurelia is Yukako's first student, embraced and rejected as modernizing Japan embraces and rejects an era of radical change.

JEH: What are you current projects?

Ellis Avery: My memoir, *The Family Tooth*, is coming out as a zine this month and as an e-book in February of next year: *The Family Tooth*

Six months after my mother's death, in 2012, I was diagnosed with a rare uterine cancer: I was given a hysterectomy and a 26% chance of five-year survival. Going off my arthritis drugs seems to have kept the cancer from returning, but by the beginning of 2013, I was stuck in a mobility scooter, crippled by an autoimmune condition called Reiter's Syndrome. *The Family Tooth* is a cancer story sandwiched inside a grief-and-food memoir, but more than that, it's a story of hope and, ultimately, triumph: it's an account of the medical and psychological sleuthing that enabled me, a year later, to walk again.

The thread that pulls this book of essays together is food, both in terms of the dietary changes that helped me out of the scooter and onto my feet, and in the way I came to recognize my mother's appetite in my own. At the time of her death, I was not sympathetic to my mother's alcoholism. Over the course of the year that followed, as I learned both that I could control my arthritic pain through diet and that not eating what I wanted (day after day, eleven hundred meals a year) was perhaps the hardest thing I'd ever done, I discovered a deeper compassion for my mother than I had previously imagined.

JEH: What's next?

Ellis Avery: After writing a memoir about grief and illness, I'm treating myself to a pair of projects for adults who love YA fiction. One is loosely based on the Fukushima disaster, but with a dragon instead of a nuclear reactor. The other is-- in part-- about how cats came up with their own internet long before we did. Stay tuned!

JEH: Do you, in the meantime, have any shorter work that my readers might puruse to whet their whistles?

I have three essays selected from *The Family Tooth* available through the Kindle Singles program on Amazon:

The Sapphire and The Tooth
A jeweler with a law degree, for decades Elaine Solari Atwood fought crippling arthritis with hard liquor until she died of a brain aneurysm at sixty-eight, leaving two daughters in their thirties and a lifetime's worth of unfinished business. Forced as a child to play nanny to five siblings, she grew up to become a mother who loved her girls as tenderly as her stifled pain and anger allowed. By way of telling the story of selling her mother's jewelry in New York's Diamond District, *The Sapphire and the Tooth* offers a searing portrait of alcoholism and difficult love.

On Fear
After three years on a drug called Humira, prescribed for a crippling autoimmune condition, I was diagnosed in 2012 with leiomyosarcoma, a rare uterine cancer, and given a 26% chance of five-year survival. When I learned that there was no evidence to show that the radiation and chemo I was offered would save my life, I turned down treatment. But even brave decisions can be terrifying: suddenly, I had to learn how to cope with constant fear – that I'd made the wrong choice, that my doctors would call with bad news, that my time was limited. *On Fear*, the second essay in a series on Kindle Singles, tells the story of

how I learned to live one moment at a time, from meditating to singing in the shower to befriending a black cat named Fumiko. While most readers will never face leiomyosarcoma, the essay offers hard-won wisdom, tools, and hope.

Goodbye, Ruby
Getting one's first period is a rite of passage, but one's last period? Most women don't know it at the time. I mark this unusual milestone in an essay about undergoing a hysterectomy at the age of 39 after being diagnosed with a rare uterine cancer. A wrenching account of my attempt to keep an ovary—and with it the semblance of life before cancer--*Goodbye, Ruby* offers a fond and funny farewell to a quarter-century of menstruation. Of course it's also about beauty, fertility, aging, sex, my mother, Hilary Mantel, and Michelle Tea.

Other essays from *The Family Tooth* can be found on Buzzfeed and The Morning News:

Buzzfeed

The Morning News 1

The Morning News 2