
Exploring Transition: Aryn Kyle



A run-down ranch, a family divided by chasms in close proximity, an immersive, increasingly untenable way of life — *"The God of Animals"* is the story of a thirteen-year-old girl, but it is also the story of a disappearing lifestyle once crucial to the American narrative: work on the land, the horse and its rider, survival because of, in spite of the natural world.

"The people who lived on our side of town had been born here, and their parents before them. There were no new restaurants, no clean white houses. No one complained of dry skin. As the valley transformed around us, the locals relied on the history of weather to discriminate between those who could be trusted and those who could not." (Pg. 68)

In a library of novels driven by precocious child-narrators, Aryn Kyle's *Alice Winston* stands out, not for her gifts, but because she does not possess the right ones. Coming of age in a culture that rewards remarkable riders, Alice is an outsider, a diligent worker, a utilitarian rancher and a child struggling with classic conundrums, textured by context: the strictures of family, the opacity of human relationships, the right angled road away from home. To earn a livelihood, she and her family must perpetuate their clients' idea that animals' principle utilities are entertainment and pleasure, while behind the scenes the Winston's work brings them into daily contact with life's brutality. Through Alice's attentive observation, Kyle explores the contradictions that emerge when a way of life is reduced to fetishized culture.

"The boarders whispered and giggled like children, addressing each other as girls — 'Girls, we need more drinky-drinks,' and, 'I've had the most fabulous idea, girls!' ... And while I didn't want to pay attention to them, didn't want to admit that I noticed them at all, they always seemed to be having more fun than anyone else. I couldn't stop watching." (Pg. 95)

In *"The God of Animals,"* readers confront an America in transition, the threat posed by homogeneity, and the loneliness that envelops those who live at its threshold.

— Carlin M. Wragg, Editor

Note: This transcript has been slightly modified to enhance readability.



Aryn Kyle: [Reads: *The God of Animals*, Chapter Four, pages 86-88]

Carlin M. Wragg: I wonder if you could start by talking a little about the characters we've just met. Who are they and how are they interacting with each other? The main voice we hear is that of Alice Winston, who is a young girl. Can you talk a little bit about her and where she came from?

AK: Alice is a thirteen-year-old girl who's growing up on a dilapidated horse ranch. At the beginning

of the book her older sister, Nona, who is a local celebrity, a star in the horse shows, runs away and elopes with a rodeo cowboy. Without Alice's sister around to bring in clients, Alice's father really struggles to make ends meet. The only thing she can really do to help her father is to work. She's not a natural talent with horses; she doesn't really have the charisma her older sister had. She's just a very lonely, watchful person.

And she has this very strange relationship with her father. They work side by side all the time but they

don't really talk to each other. Her father, on one hand, she really believes she knows him better than anyone else, and on the other hand he's this great mystery to her, as is her parents' marriage, which is what she was thinking about in that scene.

CMW: And there are a couple of other people mentioned... Well, one is a person, the other is a horse, Darling. Can you talk about that horse and what she means to the ranch?

AK: Definitely. Darling is this mare that Alice's father picked up at a horse auction at a time when he really didn't have the money to buy a new horse — their house is literally falling down around them, it's the hottest summer in years and their air conditioner is broken... And Alice's father, Joe, has made a little bit of money by taking in boarders — wealthy women who board their horses at the barn. He overcharges them for everything and makes a little extra money and then takes Alice and Sheila Altman, a girl who takes lessons at the barn, out to an auction and buys this horse that hasn't been trained; she's still wild. He spends too much money on her and brings her home and has to keep her out in the arena because she kicks through the trailer... she's just this very wild force.

I think that the mare, Darling, throughout the novel represents that wild force of nature. Alice's father has these dreams that he will train her, that he'll "break her," is the term for it, and make a ton of money and win the respect he feels he lost when his older daughter ran away. But of course, as with nature, it's never that simple. The mare puts up a pretty good fight.

CMW: I want to ask you about Polly Cain, Alice's classmate who, we learn in the first chapter of the

novel, has drown in a canal on her way home from school. How did that piece of the story come to you? Did it provide some kind of framework for the novel?

AK: Well, the novel began as a short story. I originally wrote the first chapter as a short story back when I was in graduate school, and the idea of this drowned girl is, I think, where everything started. You know, the drowned girl is one of the few things from my own life in this novel. When I was in eighth grade a girl I went to school with drowned in a canal on the way home. She just went home one day and never came back.

The idea for this story, I think, began with that drowning, whenever it was, that had stayed in my head for a lot of years. I wrote the story around this drowning and around this ranch. And years passed between the time that I wrote the story and the time that I thought about going back to expand it into a novel.

When I went back to expand it, I was looking at the short story and I knew that it was going to be the first chapter of the book, and so I was looking at it and thinking: "Okay, this is the framework. These are the rules I have to work with. This is the world. Everything that happens in the novel needs to come from this first chapter — it needs to begin here."

One of the aspects of the story that I really didn't know how I was going to develop into an arc was the drowning of Polly Cain. I really didn't want to write an entire novel where Alice was just hitting the same note over and over again, you know, mooning over this dead girl. So I knew that this drowning had to put something new in her path, and ultimately that's where the relationship with the teacher comes from.

Alice, in her morbid obsession with Polly Cain, ends up really quite accidentally stumbling across the information that Polly had this telephone relationship with this teacher. And Alice, seeing that, seeing Polly Cain as an absent place that she can step into, a role she can fill, begins to pursue that relationship. Which then, of course, for Alice's

character, ends up moving her from one place in her life to the next place.

CMW: The relationship that she develops with the teacher, it borders on inappropriate but it doesn't cross that line. How did you maintain that distance and negotiate that terrain?

AK: It was really important to me, even from the very beginning, that while the relationship was clearly inappropriate — I mean a young girl shouldn't be talking on the phone with a grown man in the middle of the night, especially her teacher — it was really important to me that Mr. Delmar never be dangerous in the predatory sense.

I think that relationship for Alice is dangerous because she thinks she understands what it is, and she doesn't. She's young, and it leads her in a dangerous direction. But it was always really important to me that even though all of that was true there was still something genuine between the two of them, that their connection was, in some way, real and important to both of them.

Delmar is really the only character throughout the novel that Alice talks to. A lot of what she tells him is lies, but still, she reveals a lot about herself that she doesn't reveal to anyone else. And as I was developing that relationship I always thought that Delmar was a lonely screwed up guy who was making bad decisions, not really a villain.

CMW: I'm so curious about how one can write a book for adults — and tell the story from the point of view of somebody who's young — and have it be adult literature that really deals with these adult themes.

AK: It was something that worried me a little bit when I was working on the book because I knew I wasn't writing a children's book. Just because your character is a child doesn't mean you can protect them. They still need to be able to make mistakes and have action.

I think that's one of the biggest dangers about choosing to write from the point of view of a child, that children are somewhat limited in what they

can do, and characters have to do stuff. So it's a bit of a challenge not to protect that character and to let that character make mistakes, and have desires, and go in dangerous directions.

I have a lot of stories that are also from the point of view of children and while I'm not super interested in the experience of childhood, I think that the view from childhood is very interesting, especially in our culture, which tends to treat childhood as precious and something that needs to be protected.

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I think any childhood, even a happy childhood, can at times be pretty brutal, so I think that the view from childhood can be very interesting, the way that a child narrator can see so much without understanding it all.

CMW: These characters live in what place and what region of the country?

AK: When I began working with setting I was picturing the town that I grew up in, which is Grand Junction, Colorado. It was a familiar setting to me. I didn't have to do research. I knew what the land looked like. I knew what the weather felt like. But the longer I worked with the novel the setting and the weather really did evolve into their own characters. The final setting is its own place to me, at least in my head. I don't just see Grand Junction any more — I see a different kind of place. But I will say that most people from Grand Junction recognize the town pretty easily when they read the book.

CMW: The two things you just mentioned, the weather and the sense of place as characters, certainly come through in the novel and I think so particularly in the passage you just read. It seems that this is really important to the story in a way some other novels don't need it to be, that they

don't need a place as animated as this one is. I wonder if you could talk about that sense of place and why it was important for you to develop it as you did.

AK: It's interesting the way that, at least for me when I'm writing, certain things that I think aren't going to be important become important during the process of doing different drafts. It happens to me a lot with different characters. I'll be using a character as a prop, almost to move one scene into the next, and suddenly I'll think, "Oh wow! This character is going to be really important to the whole arc of this novel. I'm going to have to go back and work them in so that they're real and not just a caricature."

And that's how the setting happened for me too. I mean, for the first draft or two it was just place, it was just background so the story didn't exist on a sound stage, but then as I worked and reworked the book different layers of the setting began to reveal

themselves.

Setting and weather, they became so important to the story because, as I understood the story better, it wasn't just about a girl and

her loneliness, but about a family's desire to control the animals around them — their desperation to do so — and even while they're trying to do this, the land around them is controlling them, that it's just such a futile effort to try to control your environment because it simply cannot be controlled. As I worked on the novel I realized that a big part of Alice's growth as a character was learning to understand that; that in order to live you have to participate and not control. So the setting and the weather became really important to the story at that point.

CMW: In the beginning of the passage you just read Alice says, "I don't think I know anybody from

the East." Do you think there's something about this sense of place and weather and landscape that is unique to writing about or out of the American West?

AK: I think that anyone who's familiar with the West and who is interested in the way that the country is changing... One of the things that sparked my interest in returning to the short story and expanding it into a novel was moving back to my hometown. I had been away for about ten years, going to school, and I moved back and was just amazed at the way the town had changed during that period of time.

A lot of money had moved in and the town, people who'd been there for generations and generations, like my characters, were being pushed farther and farther to the outskirts of the valley to make room for strip malls and Walmarts and Olive Gardens, and I just thought, as I looked around, how strange it was to see this town that had so much personality beginning to look like any other town across the U.S. You know, with that progress came a lot of good things too. There's a symphony and a nice movie theater... it's not all bad by any means, but

there are ways of life that are, good or bad, disappearing, and I think that's a really interesting place to set a story about identity. You

know, "Who am I?" and "Who do I grow up to become when the world that I'm familiar with is ending?"

CMW: Well maybe that would be a nice moment to transition to another passage...



AK: [Reads: *The God of Animals*, Chapter Two, pages 33–35]

CMW: I thought this passage was an excellent illustration of how you don't shy away from the

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brutality of this world and the brutality of life in general. Why was that important for you to explore in this novel?

AK: You know, I think it's a really genuine present part of that lifestyle. I mean, in the ranching lifestyle there is a lot of brutality. But I think in life in general that's true too. The world is a harsh place.

One of the things that interested me in the character of Alice was that for most of us, hopefully, the coming of age experience is about discovering that the world can be cruel, and accepting that. For Alice, she's grown up around this. You know, she's not naive to the cruelty of men. So for her the journey was not about discovering that and learning to deal with it, but I think more about discovering that it exists in her as well. You know, Alice makes some bad decisions. Alice, a few times, really does make choices out of a cruel place. And so her journey is more about accepting that that exists in herself, and what to make of that.

CMW: One of the things I wanted to go back to is, among the questions that you get, I've heard people ask you if you grew up on a horse farm. I wanted to know if you could speak to that and I wonder what you think about the imagination in writing and why we're inclined to ask if certain details come from writers' lives?

AK: People are usually pretty surprised that I didn't grow up on a ranch, I don't have a sister, my mom gets out of bed and goes to work every day. This whole life was not my life at all. But I did take riding lessons for a few years when I was a kid, and at the time — probably from the ages of eleven to fourteen, ten to thirteen, something like that — the horseback riding experience was everything to me. I was really, really into it. I spent my summers at the barn, I went out there every day after school.

At the time I thought it was such a wonderful, romantic life. I was so envious of those people— that that was their world and their home. That

they were surrounded by horses and dogs just seemed like a dream come true. And then I got a little bit older and looked back on it and thought what a naive perspective that had been, that those people were working really hard to maintain their homes and their businesses.

So the character of Alice really began for me when I was thinking about what it would be like to grow up in a place where you had to withhold your attachment. She really couldn't fall in love with these horses because they were going to be sold, you know, it

was the family business. And then that grew into the mother being absent and the sister running away... the character began with

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some of those questions: What would it be like to grow up in this world?

I think a lot of my writing begins with something I lived or something I saw, but then develops from the question, “What would it have been like to live through that experience if I was this person, or that person, or if this had happened rather than that?” I think everything begins with actual experience and then the imagination turns it into something else.

CMW: In writing a story, how do you think about where to begin? What do you think placing it at a certain moment in time in the lives of the characters makes possible?

AK: I'm not sure how it happens exactly. When I write a story... I might have an idea for a story for a while but I usually don't start, I don't write it down, until I know the first sentence. And the first sentence comes from wherever it comes from, but once it's there I can write it. So I'll have an idea of a character, a situation in my head, and carry it around with me for a while until the place to begin presents itself. Then usually it's off to the races

until it comes to the point that I need a middle or an end. Then I can pause for a while.

Beginnings are so important. I can usually tell when I pick up a book... The first line to me is the most important line. It really is. Like, I read the first line and, I'll keep reading if it's not a great first line, but if it's a line that grabs you, that makes you want to read the second line... Just finding that right moment to introduce this character, this world, it's everything.

CMW: Are there any books where that first line jumps out at you that you can think of?

AK: Almost any short story by Joy Williams, who I am in awe of. She's one of my most favorite writers. I'm trying to think off the top of my head... Virginia Woolf: brilliant with the first line. *Catch - 22*, one of my favorite novels, great first line, "It was love at first sight." *To Kill a Mockingbird*... There are so many.

CMW: It's funny, there are two in my mind that stand out, one is the beginning of something and one is the end. My favorite opening is Nabokov's *Lolita*...

AK: Oh my God, that's perfection, that's a perfect opening.

CMW: And the other one is the end of James Joyce's *The Dead*. What about endings? I mean, beginnings, I totally agree, beginnings are so important and I'm like you, I pick up a book, or a book of poems or something and I need it to grab me almost right away. But the end is equally important and also really hard...

AK: So hard! And I feel like there are so many books that I love where the ending wasn't perfect but I forgive them because, I mean, how do you end something?! There is no ending—there's one ending: death, that's the end of life.

It's very, very hard to end a book, and so many of my favorite books, I get to the end and think, "Oh! Oh no!" But when I was working on mine, and I was working on one of the early drafts, I just kept thinking, "I have an idea about where I want to go

but I have no idea how I'm going to get there, I really cannot picture the ending of this book."

And I was typing along one day and all of a sudden I looked down at the sentence I had just written, which was lost in the middle of a paragraph somewhere, and I was like, "That's the last line." And it really helped at that point. From that point on I thought, "I don't know how I'm going to get there but that's where I'm going."

CMW: When you got to the end did you feel like you had to go back and write

something else or was it, by the time you reached it, pretty clear that everything had happened that needed to happen?

AK: I only wrote... I rewrote and rewrote up until the point that I got to the last chapter and then I wrote the last chapter once and I sent it in. And at that time I'd been working on the novel for about eighteen months, but kind of off and on, and I had this really manic burst in probably the last four weeks of working on it in which a ton of work got done. I sent it to my agent really expecting, or being prepared for her to call back and say, "Close, but no cigar. Go back and fix this and this." And she didn't. She thought it was ready to go out.

But it's hard to let something go. There are still a few little things that I think, "Oh..." You know, I still do believe it would have been a better book if I had done one more draft of it. But I was dangerously close, I think, to really being done with it. Nora Ephron had some line in an interview where someone said, "How do you know when a piece is done?" and she was like, "It's never done, but at some point you have to stop."

CMW: It's hard, because it seems like, especially as these characters live and breathe through you for

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so long, that then to let them go into the world no less... You know it's not like they just go into a desk somewhere, one hopes they go and they have conversations with other people, in a way.

AK: Absolutely, and I was so unprepared for that, I really was. I had this idea that you wrote a book and if you were really lucky someone bought the book and I never really imagined. It's like the girls I grew up with that just dreamed about their wedding, you know, and never imagined the day after their wedding, and that was sort of me, so suddenly I'm getting phone calls and getting emails and I was like, "Wait! People are reading it?"

CMW: It seems like it can have this dreamlike quality to it because it is dreamlike. I mean, as a writer, to have something that is going to continue to reach people in the world seems like a wonderful thing... Well, maybe we can finish up with the last section that I talked to you about reading, which is on page 191?



AK: [Reads: *The God of Animals*, Chapter Nine, pages 191—192]

Aryn Kyle's award winning first novel "The God of Animals," Scribner, 2007 was a national bestseller and has been translated into eleven languages.

Her short fiction has appeared in "The Atlantic Monthly," "Ploughshares," "Best American Short Stories 2007" and elsewhere.

Aryn lives in Missoula, Montana.

To download the podcast of this interview and to read additional information about Ms. Kyle, go to www.openlooppress.org