

The Importance of Being Humorous

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Young adult fiction comes of age: an interview with author M.A. Kirkwood

Reading a novel by M. A. Kirkwood is an adventure into the very depths of human experience, where spirit and humor always meet. Somehow, the world we all know is different here, and that's what is so refreshing about the narrative landscapes M.A. Kirkwood invites us to explore.

Her first novel, ***Simon Lazarus***, came to my attention last fall (originally published in 2003, with a re-release set for early 2013). And I've been telling others about it ever since. Eighteen-year old Simon is on a quest of sorts that somehow leads to his own initiation. There is a spiritual subtext that's subtle, yet significant, in this modern day ***Bildungsroman***, something that's not usually found in most fiction today. In fact, I think of works such as Hesse's ***Demian***, (a classic pertaining to the late adolescent) but with the humorous and engaging narration that's reminiscent of Salinger's *Holden* in ***The Catcher in the Rye***.

Now the author has a new novel, equally rich in complexity and depth, yet delightful in its humorous take on things human and ...well...not so human.

Which takes me to my next point:

Is there such a thing as *spirit* humor?

M.A. Kirkwood surely seems to think so. In fact, she gives us a pretty good demonstration of it in her new work, ***Claire Ange***, due out this fall.

I asked the author (first name, Mary Anne) just how she comes up with such irresistible material for her work and what inspired such an unusual story. There are two narrative voices here running concomitantly throughout. One voice is that of a discarnate spirit entity who has no idea why he has landed in the pages of this story, except that he's curious about 17 year old protagonist, Claire. Then there is Claire's narrative, replete with a bevy of colorful characters and a clever fairy tale motif threaded throughout. Scenes with mirrors, a golden key, lofty wishes to the spirit realm and instead of a wicked stepmother, we have a wicked *mother*. Somehow these two narratives merge into a marvelous culmination.

Firstly, the humor here is so prevalent, yet you also have a spiritual dimension in your work—tell me about the special connection you have with spirit and humor.

I have always maintained that the two are almost inseparable. When we laugh, we release toxins in soul, spirit and body. As you know, there have been medical studies on this, as far as the body. But evolved individuals have known about the soul and spirit part for centuries. A good comedy writer also knows a thing or two about loss and sorrow. I think of writers like Mark Twain who suffered great loss. But to know pain is to open the window to sheer joy. It's a fascinating phenomenon to me, but I also know this in my own experience. I had a dysfunctional upbringing, with complex and difficult parents, but oddly, they had a deep appreciation for humor. My mom could have easily been a stand-up comedian. But she had a complicated and painful early life. Humor was her way out, and so was mine—except I always had this fascination with spirituality, so I bring that with me into my writing.

And there's a strong empathy I pick up on. Apparently, you have a particular interest in the older teen. Why this age group?

Because there doesn't seem to be many stories that address them. When you look at the huge amount of teen reads today—the Young Adult books—most are targeted at the 12 to 14 year-old range. And, if they are good reads like THE BOOK THIEF, then older people will read them, too. The late adolescent is in the threshold years, those twilight years before adulthood. It's the age where a spirit of, say, a 17 or 18 year old, can be transformed when met with an unexpected poignancy in a work of art. Be it a novel, film, or a piece of music. Actually, I aim to bring about this kind of transcending experience--no matter the reader's age-- in the two novels I've produced thus far, but I can't always be so sure.

Perhaps, the humor is there as a sort-of, back-up plan: if they don't get the spiritual stuff, then maybe they had a few laughs. Just in case.

I can't imagine one *not* getting the message: the spiritual and comedic elements work so well here. In addition, what strikes me is the way you show these teens, both *Simon* and now, *Claire*, as they attempt to deal with the seemingly incomprehensible machinations of adult surroundings. How did you come to this particular theme?

I'm not altogether sure, except to say that it's an important one. The late teen is grappling with the crazy world of impending adult things, and the idea is to nurture their spirits with material that respects their inner selves. And their integrity-- that they're more than a consumer-group. Young people are so heavily marketed to in every possible way today, that I don't think they realize it, although, somehow, their spirits do. I want them to be delighted and thrilled when they open and read one of my books. As if they've been welcomed home.

Perhaps a home-coming for the late teen in all of us. And again, spirituality plays a big part in both works, but in very different ways. In *Simon*, it's about *his* quest. In *Claire*, it's actually more about the quest of a discarnate entity. Can you tell me how you came about this?

You mean, the idea of the discarnate's story or about having a discarnate entity as a character?

Both. Let's start with the spirit as a character.

I'll try. The short version is this: If Anne Rice—a writer whose early work I admire, and she is also from my hometown of New Orleans, and raised Catholic, as I was—can create vampires roaming the streets of the French Quarter, then why not have a discarnate entity? And to convey that in a way that hasn't really been shown in fiction before. I also wanted to do this as a way to defray not only the plethora of vampires that seem to have invaded teen fiction as of late, but also, the tired clichés of ghosts, spooks, and black magic that's also so prevalent. I wanted to up the ante a bit and show the phenomena of spirit-life with integrity, respecting the intelligence of all of my readers, be they 17 or 75. Ultimately, I aim to bring about something of significance in my message here, something that asks the bigger questions of our being here on earth. That what we do here matters. What better group to attract than those who are at the threshold of adulthood?

*As far as the specific story, because I don't wish to reveal too much before one has the chance to read **Claire Ange** for themselves, I was inspired by two actual individuals: a composer who had an involved interest in the work of Rudolf Steiner, and a friend of mine's grandfather, who was the Portuguese Consulate in Bordeaux, France during a troublesome time in the last century.*

Yet *Claire Ange* is set in contemporary New Orleans. And although *Simon Lazarus* starts out in New England, he winds up in that city as well. Here, we have New Orleans during the *Mardi Gras* season. The city is so pervasive in *Claire Ange*, it could almost be described as a separate character. Can you tell me how you came about this idea for the setting?

*I promised myself that after **Simon Lazarus**, my next work would take place in California—where I have spent a good chunk of my adult life. But then Hurricane Katrina happened. That changed everything. I had two deaths in my family—one, my older brother suddenly dying one month before the hurricane, and my mother seven months later. In between those events, the home I grew up in and where my mother still lived, was flooded with over five feet of water due to one of the levee breaks at Lake Pontchartrain. You could say I was particularly looking at these questions of the after-life, and I already had been working on this story idea in my mind—I then decided to plunk it all in New Orleans—as a send-up to the city I grew up in and in the way I remember it. I deliberately left the Katrina disaster out the mix. And readers will have to guess the year, but you can be sure it's the twenty-first century.*

So here we have life in the spirit realm, humor, youth and the city of New Orleans. I'm not sure I've come across anything like *Claire Ange* or your first work as well. You surely are a unique and substantive storyteller. How much of your own biography has played into the creation of these stories?

None of my work comes out of any direct experience, per se. Yet having some understanding of emotional pain, enjoying the act of observation, being a good eavesdropper and just having the luck of meeting some fascinating human beings all goes into the process. However, liking human beings is key. Just loving their strangeness and uniqueness is a good part of it.

And where are you-- as a writer-- in contributing to literature? What are your ideas on that question?

One aim is to entertain, but if I can also enlighten in some way, then I'm, perhaps, worthy of the task. We are living in seriously complex times. We need richer stories. I think ones with heft and complexity,

but stories, I hope, that make you really think—about everything that goes on inside of us: in the inner chambers of soul and spirit. Because it's on the inside that we set the tones for any sort of vision we can bring to the world that can somehow transform it, if not save it. See why I like youth so much?

And they are our future. But what I like here is that you seem to touch the youth in all of us. Thank you for spending some time with me today, Mary Anne.

The pleasure is mine!

Penelope Baring is a Director of Camphill Village, Copake, New York, where she has also been an educator since its inception in 1984.

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