

Meet The Writers: Rachel V. Olivier

Interviewed by Karen L. Newman

Rachel V. Olivier lives in Los Angeles where she owns her own business, Putt Putt Productions, an editing and proofreading company. Her first romance novel, *The Holly and the Ivan*, was released by Drollerie Press.

KLN: You initially worked at a research company before starting your own business. What did you research? Why did you choose a career in writing? Were you always a writer or did you have other jobs? What were those jobs?

RVO: I've wanted to be a writer since I was nine years old. I remember scrawling on a piece of paper (those newsprint pieces with the lines below and room for a picture above), "When I grow up I want to be a author like Laura Ingalls Wilder." It was just always something I wanted to do. Of course I also went through phases of wanting to be a nurse, a doctor, a missionary, a doctor/nurse/missionary, an actress, a violinist, and an architect. But I always came back to writing. I just couldn't figure out how to make a living as a writer and my family didn't have the wherewithal to support me while I wrote. I needed to make a living. When I went to college I thought I wanted to be a missionary and was going to get my degree in English Literature with an Education minor so I could teach high school English overseas. Then I took a trip overseas one summer and realized I didn't want to be a missionary after all. I just wanted to travel, and I didn't want to tell other people what to believe. And I didn't want to teach English, either. I just wanted to read and write. But I couldn't figure out how to make a living doing that. So when I got back I dropped the Ed classes, got the B.A. in English Literature, and got the nearest office job instead. I was tired of being broke.

I actually started Putt Putt Productions while I was working for the research company. It was one of those research companies that "helps" students do research for papers. I told many students (of all ages, from all over the world and both genders) that these papers were never supposed to be turned in as is, but were to be used as research for their own papers. Of course, we had no control what the students did with those papers after we completed them and sent them on. It was a morally ambiguous position to be in and a morally ambiguous company to work for. However, it was the first job I'd had since college where I was able to read and write for a living. I spent all day proofreading papers, sometimes copy editing, and being an editorial assistant to the editors who worked

there (on top of answering the phone, taking orders, and working with both writers and students to get orders straight). I also started taking on freelance work, writing resumes, cover letters, research papers and other copy for the first time then. I was only supposed to be there six months. I ended up working there for eight years.

Anne Lamott in her book *Bird by Bird* said that she became a writer because that is the only thing she was ever suited for, the only thing she could do. I had always wanted to be a writer and freelancer, but had never really figured out how to do it and pay the rent. Once I was freelancing at the research company, I was basically forced to become a sole proprietor because the City of Los Angeles sees freelancing as being in business and taxable income. Once I lost my job at the research company in late 2007, I used that (and the six months of unemployment) as the impetus to revamp my life and go freelance full time, or as full time as I could get.

In September of 2008 I got a part-time job at a neighborhood newspaper and I love it! Now, I spend half my days at the paper being a Gal Friday, and the other half working for myself. So, I literally spend all day long doing exactly what I love doing – writing, proofreading, copy editing, researching, and hanging out with other writers!

As to other jobs I've had, I'm a big fan of the Marion Zimmer Bradley Sword & Sorceress series (now edited by Elisabeth Waters). Before each story is a bio introducing the author. In the early anthologies Marion Zimmer Bradley used to remark on how many writers seem to have diverse occupations, and how many of them had had several different jobs over the course of their lives. I find this to be true for me as well as other writers I know. In a lot of ways, writers are students of life – we live our research and put it into our writing – often without realizing it.

Other jobs I've had include picking cherries in junior high one summer. In high school, I picked strawberries a couple of summers, these were on top of the regular babysitting jobs. When I was in college I'd had one job event planning when I was a freshman and failed drastically at that. The next work-study job I had was in the periodical department of the college library. I loved that job. I spent all day proofreading titles, shelving books and hanging out with smart librarians. I would have stayed there if I hadn't graduated. My first job out of college was working for veterinarians, where my duties ranged from answering the phones and checking in patients to cleaning kennels. I've

also been a secretary for an engineering company (I wasn't a very good secretary, but I wrote a huge chunk of a novel while I worked there). I've worked in fast food, did a bit of nannying, various retail jobs, and loved my six-month stint at a bookstore (until the manager realized I was no good at balancing the books at the end of the night). I've also been a barista (loved that job at first when I was working with art, English and philosophy majors and before the company-that-shall-not-be-named went public and became corporate hell), and had a variety of office jobs. One was in the psychiatric department of an HMO, another was invoicing for a chemical company that made cleaning products, and then there was the admin job at AIDS Project Los Angeles (I worked in the Home Health Department).

The job at APLA was the first place where I felt my writing was acknowledged. One of our clients had passed away, and so had a coworker, and this was after some other deaths in the organization. So, I wrote a poem to deal with it. This was when the Names quilt was going around the U.S. so I titled the poem Names. I showed it to a coworker who had been my supervisor at one time. She showed it to someone else, and before I knew it, I was reading that poem at a memorial service we had at our organization. It was moving because of the people we had lost, but also because of the public acknowledgement of my writing. And it encouraged me to keep on going even though at the time all I was getting were rejection slips.

KLN: Do you prefer writing nonfiction or fiction? Why?

RVO: I love writing period. It depends on what idea grabs me that I want to run with. Sometimes it's best described in nonfiction form and others in fiction form. I've woken up from dreams with a singular idea I felt I needed to express and wrote that idea down. One idea became a story (*Santa is My Homeboy* on Mindflights.com) and another idea became a blog entry. And at other times those ideas were written into articles or poems I was writing. Ultimately, however, fiction is my first love.

KLN: Who has influenced your writing? Who are your favorite current writers?

RVO: I started writing as a child because of Laura Ingalls Wilder (the Little House books), Louisa May Alcott (Little Women books) and L.M. Montgomery (Anne of Green Gables books). Later on, by the time I was 12, I had fallen in love in C. S. Lewis' Narnia Chronicles and *Screwtape Letters* as well as J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy and *The Hobbit*. I used to daydream about taking classes from them until I found out they'd both passed

away years before. I had a huge crush on the boy who introduced me to the Lord of the Rings. He and I used to exchange notes written in runes and stained with coffee. He added some nice illustrations, but I wasn't as good with those.

In college I fell in love with Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich. I also took a poetry workshop from Emily Warn, and I absolutely adore her poetry. Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* was one of the most influential books I've read that kept me writing, as well as *Starting from Scratch* by Rita Mae Brown.

Currently, while there are many authors I enjoy, the ones that inspire me are Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, Naomi Novik, Vicki Pettersson, Rachel Vincent and Stephanie Rowe. I'd like to add more people, but I'll quit there. Each writer has different strengths I admire, such as attention to details, playfulness, intelligence, humor, vocabulary, and of course storytelling.

KLN: Your first book is a romance that occurs during Christmas. What other holidays are in the upcoming series? Why did you choose romance? Do you plan on writing a science fiction or fantasy book in the future?

RVO: I think because I like Christmas so much as a holiday, I tend to write Christmas stories more often than not. When I first started writing about Holly, it was just going to be about her and it was inspired by the carol, "The Holly and the Ivy". When I realized that there were three other women in the band, I also realized this could be the beginning of a paranormal romance series, with one story about each woman.

Romances are fun because they're another form of fantasy. It's fun to daydream about being swept off your feet by someone who makes all your nerve endings zing! Paranormal romances just take that fantasy a few steps further. Other times of the year I plan to be covered in that series include Spring Equinox, Summer Solstice, and Samhain (or Halloween), and maybe one other add on, but I'm not sure what time of year that one will be. But it will be in the same world as the others, but with a girl who's not in the band.

I have a novel I've been working on since college that I'm not sure will ever see the light of day. It may end up in a shoebox. It's been revised so many times. It will probably end up being YA fantasy if it ever does get finished and sent out. But currently, I've had an apocalyptic tale, a novella, accepted for publication and have a space opera novella submitted elsewhere, and a magic realism/slipstream short story sent out somewhere.

else. Oh, and a riff on a myth that I have sent out somewhere else. I'm also working on a couple of tales based loosely on fairy tales. Some of them have romance elements in them and others are nowhere near romance. So, yes, definitely, there are science fiction and fantasy books out there in my future. I hope.

KLN: Do you have any hobbies? If so, do you incorporate them into your writing? Please give examples.

RVO: Hobbies! Well, I used to play the violin and I've used that in some of my writing. My experience as a barista and playing in musical groups I used in *The Holly and the Ivan*. When I had a garden that was one of my hobbies and I have used that in some of my poetry. I try to grow indoor plants where I am now. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. I used to collect handbags and teacups. I'd still like to do that, but I live in a studio with no place nice to display things and L.A. is not a good place to find deals on antiques. They tend to be overpriced. Have not yet used that in any of my writing, except maybe a poem that has yet to be published.

I also spend my fair share of time on Facebook and tribe.net for social fun and some intelligent discourse. Sometimes when I'm behind my computer all day, it helps to have fun with some of my online friends. I can see using some of my online experiences in a story, though I haven't yet.

I don't know if this would be called a hobby, but I also do volunteer slush reading and volunteer review and article writing for a couple of different speculative fiction places. I'm also vice president of a neighborhood writers club. Other than that, my favorite hobbies are reading and hanging out with friends. I just finished reading *Prey* by Rachel Vincent and I'm working on *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Steig Larsson. I also love hanging out with friends for dinner or coffee or a beer. I think some of my best dialogue has come from paying attention to the conversation when I'm hanging out with my friends.

KLN: Thank you for agreeing to this interview. Is there anything additional you'd like to share with our readers?

RVO: To any writers out there, or anyone with a dream, don't give up and pay attention are the two best pieces of advice I think I can give. Even when you have to go back to mundane life for a while, keep your hand in whatever dream it is you have. Don't give up on it. And pay attention to anything that catches your attention. It caught your attention for a reason and you might be able to use it later. ∂

A Day in the Life of Iris

by Rachel V. Olivier

Iris spread her palette
across the pale blue wash of the sky.
And with a dip and a stroke
made a swathe of color—
then stood back to muse on her work.

Dewy rainbows on spider webs
she tucked between bushes
in the early morning sun.
Beauty surprised
by dayspring creatures.

Sibyl strode by on one of her walks—
gloomy and morose —
as usual.
So, Iris poured a rainbow
through a waterfall

Sibyl smiled,
and all was well.

Iris spread orange, yellow and red
across smog-ridden cities where
houses stared blankly
at vacant lawns, pot-holed streets,
closed factories...
hopeless children trudging home from school.

Then the oil spill
she could do nothing about.
(even Goddesses have their limits.)

Iris splashed a dose of iridescence
on the water.
Beauty the call
to be cleaned up.

And when Nemesis delivered
her sentence of death,
late one sultry, summer afternoon,
Iris grabbed a handful of colors,
and threw a prism into the sprinkler
in the front yard.