

Make Believe

by Joanna Scott

A READING GROUP GUIDE

On writing *Make Believe*

Joanna Scott talks with
Leonard Lopate of “New York & Company,”
WNYC, New York

LL: At first glance this book seems something of a detour from your usual themes. Not only is it set in the present, but it deals with some very au courant issues — race, adults battling for custody of children — not the sort of thing that we’ve seen from you in the past.

JS: Yeah, I would like to say that I shift with each book. I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing, but I tend to turn my back on my last book. So, book by book, I think I’m not necessarily following any patterns. This seems in a way my next step, not necessarily a turning away from all my past work.

And it deals with one of the great themes of America and American literature, race.

Which I’ve dealt with before. I’ve written about slave ships and illegal slaving in the mid-nineteenth century. I’ve also worked race in in other ways. Because it’s our country’s concern, it’s my concern as a writer.

You once said that you weren’t too good at writing about yourself, and that once you got started getting into history and other people’s lives you were freed as a writer. But here you have moved a little closer to home. Make Believe is not about your experience, but it’s about your time.

I was a little nervous about that. . . . I’d look at this wild world and I’d ask myself: How can I write about it? I don’t know the words for things. I don’t know the name of that person. I don’t know his story. So it required more invention, and that’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to push myself away from what had, in a sense, become a crutch for me, the crutch of history, the crutch of fact. I wanted to see if I could throw the crutch away for a book.

And this very definitely relates to things that we’ve seen in newspaper stories recently, even though obviously you wrote the book before Elian Gon-

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zalez's case came up. Make Believe is about a black boy and a white girl who fall in love and he's shot and killed while she's pregnant with their child. His parents help her care for him. Her parents deny her, which is an atypical situation today. But soon she too is killed and the grandparents fight over custody of the child. Even though he's never met his white grandparents, the boy ends up with them — and that's a whole other matter here. You're not interested in the legal aspects of this. You don't even write about the court case except maybe the judge's literary tastes.

I don't. I thought of that as a hinge. There are other hinges in the book too that are not visible, but they're crucial, they're essential. I try to explain why the judge makes that decision, a rational decision, but I didn't want to spend time writing a scene, a court scene, that I wasn't interested in. I was too interested in my characters to spend time in the courtroom.

Do you think that this is likely to have happened — that a judge would have awarded a child to the parents who have rejected him rather than the ones who have been raising him?

Well, I slipped in a little fact about how the white grandparents had been supporting the daughter financially. I also checked with some lawyer friends in my neck of the woods and they gave me the nod. They felt it was okay given the idiosyncrasies of law.

You have the white step-grandfather — it's not the boy's real grandfather — really being motivated by self-righteousness and a religious conviction. That's what compels him to take this child away from the grandparents who've been bringing him up and who obviously adore him. So do you think that those are things — that religious conviction is something that would get somebody to do something so outrageous?

Well, I want to say that anything I write about is a possibility. It's not necessarily a formula for the drift of religious thought. I think in this case that what you consider self-righteousness, it begins with confusion. The boy's step-grandfather wants to be a good man, and that becomes a fierce desire for him. And as it becomes fierce internally it needs some sort of external reaction response.

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The way you structure the story is we meet these people and then we go back and we learn about them, much the same way as we experience people in real life. You meet somebody, you don't know much about them, and then in time you learn more and more details. You've obviously chosen that approach for a reason, but it's one that we don't find in most novels.

Tell me more about that. I'm not sure what is different here.

It seems to me that what happens is that after you introduce the character you then go back and we learn about that character — in the same way that if I meet you. First I meet you in a very particular way and then I will eventually learn all these other things about you. So it allows you as a writer to go back and forth in time.

Yes, structurally I'm kind of all over the place, aren't I? But it felt like fitting pieces of a puzzle together for me. It felt quite natural once I had a sense of how the structure would come together. The parts when I do go back in time, when I do elaborate on the lives of the people who are at that point of the narrative gone now, it enabled me, yes, to tell their stories, to fill out the characters.

But it also forces us to reassess our own sense of stereotypes and expectations.

I see what you're saying. And then this hopefully is what happens every day with us as we sit here and talk.

Things get more and more complicated.

And a reappraisal goes on continuously.

Is that something that happens while you're writing the book?

Absolutely.

You keep on throwing in complications?

And it's part of the discovery of fiction that's so marvelous, that's so exciting. You have to work with the logic of a character. You break

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out of that logic and either you have to create another compelling logic that makes sense or you drift into a madness for the character. But usually you stay within that logic, that way of thinking. Within that way of thinking, you can do anything.

And how much of the plot actually is known to you before you start?

You want the truth here?

Of course.

Probably not a whole lot. I tend to . . .

Because this is a novel with a big plot.

It is.

Usually plotted novels are thought out and then other things happen in the process.

Yeah. I end up throwing out whatever I planned. I do plan, I really do. I plan all the way to the end and then I drop my plans. I change my plans. I alter them.

The book forces you to consider what it's becoming.

Yeah. So I'm constantly rewriting my outline as I'm writing along in my books.

You also throw in another — well, I won't say confusing — but another thing that confounds us for a while. The characters have fantasies and nightmares and you present them as though they're the real thing. And then we figure out later that they're not necessarily. Bo even had a cat that isn't there. Other characters have things that we assume to be true and then discover are not true. That's part of the writing process?

Yeah, since I'm so interested in consciousness — where does that that take me? — that involves the edges of consciousness. And so those dreams, the conversations that don't take place but are imagined — they seem part of consciousness, part of the mind's work.

And they lead to the title as well, Make Believe.

Absolutely.

You have often been linked with writers like Lydia Davis, as experimental authors. Do you think of yourself in that way?

Well, in this regard, that it is a journey into the unknown. Each book I write is something I'm trying out, it's a kind of proposition — will it work or not? I suppose you could call it an experiment. I would hope that, like Lydia Davis, like many other writers . . .

Robert Coover, your teacher . . .

He was my teacher. John Hawkes . . . Those writers, writers like Hawkes or Coover, Barthelme, are very different from one another. So the phrase tends to be used to lump together a wide variety of writers. And that's when I get a little nervous about the term.

In this book, even though it's all written in the third person, you really adjust the third person so that we're in the minds of a lot of different people. We start off in the mind of a three-year-old. Obviously you can't write in the thoughts of a three-year-old — so the third-person strategy was the way to get around that?

To a certain extent. I'd actually sat with my own young children and taken some notes and listened to the way their thoughts translated into language, if that makes sense. They would be thinking hard and the words coming out would be so wonderfully nonsensical, I guess — so free — and I couldn't quite use that language. Here and there I do. I try to evoke the wild language that a child is accessed to. But by using that narrator I can move in and out, and perhaps I describe a sensation that the child himself can't describe.

Another powerful emotion is the protection of your two kids. You're the mother of two kids. Did the fact that you were raising these children affect your decision to pursue this kind of material?

Yeah. The joy I feel with them, that is part of the impulse here that got me going. Their fascinating ways of looking at the world — I

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found myself imagining the world through their eyes, and so that helped me start to design a character, a child who is different from them. I had to make something new, something other. But certainly the fact is that they are my life and this is what I know best these days. Or this is what I want to know best, I should say — let me qualify that.

Jayne Anne Phillips once said that she wrote a book, Shelter, out of fear for her boys because she felt so protective of them.

That fear is great for any parent.

“What would happen if I were dead and these kids were left to the power of the courts, other people?” Sometimes strange things happen. People we thought we knew well will act very oddly.

Yeah, it’s frightening. But I’ve learned how resilient children are and so tried to describe that.



Leonard Lopate’s interview with Joanna Scott was originally aired on “New York & Company” on WNYC. This partial transcript is reprinted with permission.

Reading Group Questions
and Topics for Discussion

1. “Erma’s first thought when she heard the news was not *thank God* or *poor Jenny* but *Now that white girl is gone Bo is mine to raise properly*” (page 38). Do you think it was reasonable for Erma to assume that she would have custody of Bo?
2. Marge notes that “Eddie rarely laughed” (page 41). And yet she seems to consider him an ideal mate. Why?
3. Why is Jenny, at the tender age of sixteen, so ready and eager to have a baby? Do you think she’s emotionally prepared for motherhood?
4. Bo thinks, “Surely Gran and Pop had always been as old as they were now, no older, no younger” (page 79). To what extent do you consider this a childish perception? Aren’t there times when all of us, caught up in our present lives, lose perspective of the past and future?
5. Ann urges Marge to think of Bo “like a cutting from one of your rosebushes, you know, transplanted, and if he doesn’t take, if we’re not right for him, then we bring him back, okay?” (page 103). Do you think Marge is ever actually willing to let Bo leave?

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6. What is the significance of the thriller that Judge Wright reads several months before he issues his decision in *Gantz v. Gilbert*? Describe how reading that novel influenced him.

7. Judge Wright seems to believe that the maternal bond is always stronger than a child's bond with his father. Do you agree?

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