Alumni

Writer, Interrupted

By
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In May 2001, Milda De Voe and her new husband bought their first apartment, one block from the World Trade Center Plaza, in Lower Manhattan. On warm nights, De Voe ’01SOA, a writer and actress with a confident carriage and long red hair, would walk to the plaza to attend free concerts. During the day, she worked on her short fiction and contemplated writing a novel. Wary of distractions, De Voe gave little thought to having children: it was enough to create characters.

One morning in September, De Voe overslept, missing a meeting on the plaza. She woke to her apartment shaking. Through her window, she saw the Twin Towers spewing black smoke into a blue sky. Millions of pieces of white paper were floating down.

De Voe escaped her rattled building through a neighbor’s elevator, and she and her husband spent the next month camped out uptown on her mother-in-law’s floor. Unlike many of her neighbors, De Voe couldn’t wait to get back. “It never occurred to me to move away,” she says. She came back in October, when the streets were still covered in ash.

Around this time, De Voe’s father died suddenly, and her feelings about having children changed. By the new year, De Voe was pregnant.

In July 2002, De Voe gave birth to a son and began to raise him in a neighborhood that was itself facing the uncertainties of regeneration. She had a daughter four years later. De Voe found herself “struggling to make it as a writer and a mom,” she says. “Both jobs are 24/7, and I didn’t know what to do for myself as an artist or for my kids as a mother.” For De Voe, parenthood was not a natural progression but a demanding task that posed a direct threat to her life’s ambition.

In 2008, De Voe attended a community meeting about allocating public funds to bring the arts to the vicinity of Ground Zero. It was there that she conceived her idea for an organization that could provide networking opportunities and audiences for professional writers who also were parents. She called it Pen Parentis.

“After becoming parents, some writers begin to neglect their work, and others begin to neglect their kids,” De Voe says, recalling her own feelings of isolation in her struggle to balance the two. Pen Parentis, funded in part by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, greeted the world in January 2009 with a mission to support writers who, as De Voe writes in her essay “The Happiest Farmer,” “love their children, but couldn’t put down their laptop any more than they could ignore their toddler when the kid ran a fever.”

De Voe now acts as Pen Parentis’s executive director. Her Columbia classmate Arlaina Tibensky ’99SOA is curator of the Pen Parentis literary salon, which convenes the second Tuesday of each month on Platt Street.

“In order to build a neighborhood,” De Voe says, “we need to repopulate this place with culture.”

On a recent Tuesday, members and guests of Pen Parentis gathered in the Gild Hall Hotel’s Libertine Library, a distinguished-looking English tavern with oak bookshelves, red-leather sofas, and Persian rugs. People came to talk about their babies, in both senses, and to listen to writers Sarah Gardner Borden and Rebecca Wolff read from new novels. In her opening remarks, De Voe, who writes under the name M. M. De Voe, welcomed her guests and told them that the salons could be a good way to meet “everybody who is anybody — and has children — in literary New York.” She then presented author Frank Haberle with the second annual Pen Parentis fellowship grant of $1,000, awarded to a writer with young children, and to be spent on supplies, office space, and child care. Haberle thanked the organization for its support of people who try to write and, “more frighteningly, who write and try to parent.” Borden read from her book about a mother juggling children, a husband, and an affair. The audience tensed at her descriptions of everyday frustration, including a scene in which the mother shoves a wrapped tampon into her baby daughter’s hand in a desperate attempt to entertain her. Wolff read from her poetic ghost novel, *The Beginners*, and afterward confessed to her own difficulties. “Look, I published a book of poetry about postpartum depression,” she said. “There’s a direct correlation with life there.” Borden, when asked how motherhood has affected

her work, replied that a child's "innate knack for metaphor" continues to inspire her. Plus, she said, "I really did hand my daughter a tampon."

When the reading was over, two young women clutched cups of wine and chatted. One wanted to have her copy of *The Beginners* signed. The other asked, "How many children do you have?" The first woman looked back at her in surprise. "I don't have children," she said. "I just came to hear fiction."

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