



Compass Rose

Literature and Art Journal

Compass Rose interviews **Angela Balcita**

Compass Rose: *What do you do when you are creatively stuck?*

Angela Balcita: You mean other than re-check my email, clean my house, do a crossword, and take a nap? Well, first, I try to relax. I get nothing done when I'm too stressed out. Then, I go read something I've never read before, like the fiction in this week's New Yorker or whatever is new in some of my favorite literary magazines. I look for something new that I like, and I try to copy what the author is doing. Usually when I'm stealing other authors' work, I get a surge of ideas, and something will come out of it.

CR: *Is there a particular place or pen that you use when you write?*

Balcita: Because I'm a writer with a day job, I write wherever and whenever I get a chance. Right now, I really like working in coffee shops and libraries. When there are other people working around me, that usually keeps me focused.

I start writing by hand in a notebook with an inky blue pen. Once I get some momentum going, I start typing out those ideas in my MacBook.

CR: *Who has influenced you the most?*

Balcita: My professors in both undergrad and grad school really taught me how to love writing and reading. I have many talented friends who keep me curious and interested in the many forms of art in the world. I feed off their knowledge and wisdom daily.

CR: *How has your MFA helped your writing?*

Balcita: The best thing that came out of my MFA was finding a community of writers. If you can find at least one person who can be a good reader for your work, someone who you can exchange work with and who you can rely on for sound advice, then that's worth everything.

It was also nice to get a way from working world for a while and just concentrate on my writing for a couple years. In grad school, my days were spent talking about literature and writing in a world where people wanted to talk about those things. In the real world, it's rare to find people who love writing as much as you do.

CR: *As you were developing as a writer, were there any artists you tried to emulate?*

Balcita: I think I'm still developing and still emulating other writers. But mostly, what turned me on to writing and nonfiction were minority writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Sandra Cisneros, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., James McPherson.

CR: *How did they affect your work?*

Balcita: They taught me to point the difficult moments and emotions in my life and to go there, to explore it. They taught me that my words matter, that finding my voice was one of the most important tasks as a writer.

Once I found my voice, I could express myself in the way I wanted to be heard. They also taught me that it is worth taking the time to explain the world from my point of view because someone out there is interested in hearing it.

CR: *Who are your current influences?*

Balcita: I am currently in love with Anne Carson. I would like to marry her if I could. Miranda July's new book of short stories really rocked my world. I love reading the work of Lia Purpura and Lydia Davis. Dave Eggers is changing the way I look at nonfiction, as is Sarah Vowell.

CR: *How do you approach a new piece?*

Balcita: Depends on the piece. Sometimes, it starts as an idea, and I try to find words to capture that idea. Sometimes, there is a moment that strikes me and I want to figure it out, so I start writing it out on the page. Regardless of how the seed is planted, I pick up my pen and just start writing. I put everything out on the page, no matter how silly it looks or messy. Sometimes these thoughts come out as lists, or as jokes, or as drawings, or as poems. Whatever it is, I try to take whatever is swimming around in my head and transfer to the page.

Once it's on the page, then I can start shaping it into something intelligent. No matter how profound and complex my ideas are, they don't count as essay until they make their way to the page.

CR: *Explain how you deal with criticism.*

Balcita: Criticism and I don't usually get along. I try to let things roll off my back, but sometimes harsh words will stick to me. Actually, even polite criticism sticks to me. I keep all my rejection letters and rejection emails. I have quite a large collection. But I think part of being a good writer is trying to figure out which comments you'll listen to and which ones you'll dismiss. Criticism is going to come no matter what I do, so I'm

always trying to figure out which ones makes sense to me and which ones will make my work better. The other ones I put aside.

CR: *How do you decide when your work is done?*

Balcita: When it feels right. I wish I could be more exact, but you never really know when something is done. I could keep revising forever, but then no one would ever see my work. So, I usually stop when I can read a piece in its entirety to myself out loud and I like the way it sounds. When I enjoy reading it the whole way through without stumbling or cringing through a passage, then I'm usually ready to send it out into the world.

CR: *Is there a particular type of writing (reading or writing) that you enjoy the most?*

I like humor writing, work that makes me laugh out loud. I like reading writers who play with experimental forms. Even though I usually stick with a traditional style of prose, I love to look at the way writers' minds work and how they play with structure and language.

CR: *What advice would you give to aspiring writers?*

Balcita: Write your ass off. Write anytime, anywhere you can. Write on napkins, write before you go to bed, write on the bus, write outside. Take notice of the moments in your life where you experience something weird, or times when you were left with an uneasy feeling, and try explaining that feeling on the page. Listen to music; look for art in the world. Allow yourself to have your mind blown off. Cut the cynicism--it's unattractive.