

THE NEXT BIG THING

The talented poet, Clare L. Martin, has invited me to talk about my recent books for an expanding interview series called **The Next Big Thing**. Clare is the author of a recently published poetry collection, *Eating the Heart First* (Press 53). You can read her interview at her [blog](#). I will in turn tag four other writers that will tag others and so on, as to create a chain of responses that will serve to connect writers internationally.

Here are my responses regarding my short story collection, *Flying Carpets* (March Street Press 2012) and my recently published full-length poetry collection, *Tea in Heliopolis* (Press 53, February 2013).

TNBT: What is the working title of the book?

Hedy: *Tea in Heliopolis*

TNBT: Where did the idea come from for the book?

Hedy: I was born and raised in Heliopolis, a residential suburb of Cairo, Egypt, then lived several years in Lebanon. We left Beirut at the onset of the civil war--that lasted fifteen years--and lived several years in Europe, before coming to the United States. I began *Tea in Heliopolis* and *Flying Carpets* several years after coming to Michigan. Both books reflect an attempt to recover people, places, affects pertaining to an almost mythical past that is at the same time lost yet alive. In *Tea in Heliopolis*, there is a great space informed by art, because my mother was very artistic and instilled in me her passion for painting. My other poetry manuscripts, one in English and the other in Spanish, are mainly inspired by visual art. I am looking for good publishers for both manuscripts.

TNBT: What genre does your book fall under?

Hedy: *Tea in Heliopolis* is a book of poetry

TNBT: What actors would you choose to play the part of your characters in a movie rendition?

I have a hard time imagining a movie being made out of my poems because of the myriad of voices and persons evoked, but it is quite an interesting prospect. In *Tea in Heliopolis*, the voice oftentimes disappears into a work of art or a landscape, like a flowing tapestry, a visual rendering of time elapsed and evolving backdrops. I would find it easier to see

several of my short stories from *Flying Carpets* being cast on the screen. Although there isn't a recurrent character in the book, there is great attention to details, which brings each character to life. I have toyed with the idea of having my stories portrayed on the screen and a producer would easily find the right actors. I would love to have Maryanne Zéhil, who has recently produced two beautiful francophone movies about Lebanon, pick a story from *Flying Carpets* for one of her next projects. I would have to collaborate on the script, but since French is my first language, that would be a great pleasure.

TNBT: What is the one sentence synopsis of your book?

Hedy: I would be unable to come up with a concise description, but the following comments by Diane Wakowski illustrate the essence of *Tea in Heliopolis*:

"...The trope of life, as moments flowing from the paintbrush wielded skillfully by a poet, allows Hedy Habra to capture details redolent of old masters, exquisite and visceral, and creates her remembered world with the wild imagination and color of a Van Gogh. Moving through life in Egypt, to Beirut, then to America, with a kind of post-Newtonian sense of everything happening simultaneously, the chronicle captures the bravery it takes to remember and yet experience a beauty transcendent to pain..."

TNBT: How long did it take you to write the first draft of the manuscript?

Hedy: I started writing the core of *Tea in Heliopolis* and *Flying Carpets* during my MFA program at Western Michigan University. I was fortunate to work with Stuart Dybek and Herb Scott who were great mentors. I kept on revising, adding or replacing poems or stories over the past twenty-two years. I often changed titles and then opted for *Tea in Heliopolis*, which is the title of one of the poems, and kept it for the past decade even as the manuscript was undergoing major changes. Several poems allude to Heliopolis, and it seems that the scenery of one's youth represents a referential point for an author--for me, at least. I was also working on other projects during that period of time. I took a break from creative writing while getting my Ph.D. in Spanish and my book of literary criticism, *Mundos alternos y artísticos en Vargas Llosa*, has just been published by Iberoamericana/Vervuert in September 2012.

TNTB: Who or what inspired you to write this book?

Hedy: My inspiration for writing came from a sense of displacement, of belonging to so many places and cultures, all of which made it necessary to conjure up some points of reference in order to keep them alive, as one would in a photo album. But unlike photographs, these recollections, stemming from selective memory, are filtered by the imagination, become transcendent and are converted into symbols.

As he neared the end of his life, Jorge Luis Borges said: *“The task of art is to transform what is continuously happening to us, to transform all these things into symbols, into music, into something which can last in man’s memory. That is our duty. If we don’t fulfill it, we feel unhappy. A writer or any artist has the sometime joyful duty to transform all that into symbols. These symbols could be colors, forms or sounds. For a poet, the symbols are sounds and also words, fables, stories, poetry.”* I feel the need to recreate soothing or painful images that have impacted me in order to maintain all the facets that form my plural identity.

I cannot mention all the literary influences that inform my writing because I have always been a voracious reader in several languages and feel that reading in different genres is equally inspiring. I strongly believe that my favorite writer is the one I am reading passionately at the moment. My allegiance to poetry began when I was very young with Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and I am a great admirer of Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz, just to name a few, without taking the chance of omitting or offending anyone.

TNTB: What else about your book might pique the reader’s interest?

Hedy: I imagine that it would be the alternate settings, the moving back and forth from Egypt to Lebanon to Michigan. The many flashbacks are presented through daydream lenses as static medallions and animated scenes at the same time, creating interplay between past and present.

One of the things that I hope will catch the reader’s attention is the cover art, a watercolor I have painted representing the terrace of the Heliopolis Palace Hotel, which used to be a landmark associated with celebrations, gatherings and tea parties. The former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak converted it into a presidential palace in the late sixties. This grand hotel symbolizes the period during which I lived and grew up in Heliopolis and this hotel is associated with a way of life that no longer exists.

TNTB: Will your book be self-published or represented by an agency?

Hedy: *Tea in Heliopolis* is published by Press 53 and has been released in February 2013.

Make sure you check the following amazing writers’ responses coming up soon!

1. [Yahia Lababidi](#)
2. [Kate Hill Cantrill](#)
3. [Carmen Calatayud](#)
4. [Helene Cardona](#)