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An Interview with Gail Griffin

In *“The Events of October”: Murder-Suicide on a Small Campus* (Wayne State University Press), Gail Griffin turns her lens on the multiple ways a murder-suicide involves domestic abuse and violence against women, which is codified in American society. Griffin conveys all aspects of these horrific October 1999 events with compassion and analysis. *Assay’s* Managing Editor Renee D’Aoust talked to Griffin about violence against women and empowering social justice—in the classroom and in our writings.

RED: I consider *“The Events of October”: Murder-Suicide on a Small Campus* (Wayne University Press) an essential part of reading to understand violence against women. You wrote this book to examine a murder-suicide that occurred on the Kalamazoo College campus where you taught, and you include your personal experience as a professor there for thirty-six years. The title came from a flyer on campus announcing an evening event focused on “the events of October.” To you, it seemed a euphemistic or avoidant way to refer to murder and intimate partner violence, and you did a lot of work to achieve awareness about those events on your campus both as the director of the women’s studies program and as the advisor for the campus Women’s Resource Center. In the book, you trace and interweave a wide range of source materials, and you never shy away from your own grief about two young lives lost. Violence against women on college campuses has received much coverage in the past few years, particularly with regard to rape culture. What does

the life of Maggie Wardle teach us about discussing violence against women—in the classroom, on the campus, and also in our writing?

GG: First of all, thank you for that endorsement of *Events of October*. I tried to write the book I'd never seen, a detailed anatomy of a case of lethal male violence against women. It's only one case, but I do think it's illustrative in several ways.

Above all, Maggie's life demonstrates that there is no "type" of woman who is likely to be abused or killed. Maggie was a smart, self-reliant nineteen-year-old, middle-class and white, who broke up with Neenef, her murderer, precisely because he was clinging and controlling, vastly less emotionally mature than she. Neither weakness nor stupidity got Maggie killed. Her death came in that danger zone immediately after a woman has left a man, when she is greatly more likely to be killed, because her leaving the relationship defies his control.

The way I framed her death also challenges narrow definitions of "violence against women." It was difficult for many members of the college community to see her death that way because two people died that night. But 20% of femicides also include the suicide of the perpetrator. Male violence takes men's lives as well as women's.

But ultimately, I believe Neenef's death teaches us more about violence against women than Maggie's. We've spent far too much time analyzing the victims, as if they were responsible for their murders. This approach nicely turns attention

away from the perpetrators. It's time to understand the men who commit this violence. And this was one of my primary goals in the book: to understand Neenef. Like many men who commit murder-suicides, he was very dependent on Maggie, quite nonverbal, depressive, and a product of abuse himself. He committed a monstrous act, but he wasn't a monster. He was another one of the alienated, confused, lonely young men we're all too familiar with of late, who have easy access to a gun and cannot see beyond the end of it.

RED: You write the following in *"The Events of October": Murder-Suicide on a Small Campus*:

One reason suffering is so hard is that gets comparative, or competitive, or guilty. What could we have done, I wonder--as people, as a college community--to convince ourselves that whatever effect these deaths had was legitimate, real, to be honored and suffered and solaced? That all of us were survivors?

What, particularly, do you mean by "competitive suffering" and how might that inhibit—or bias—our ability to address justice in the face of campus fears and traumas?

GG: In the most natural way, we try to get our hands and heads around grief by thinking, "She's not suffering the way I am," or "My loss isn't as great as his," or "They didn't know her the way I did so they can't be hurting as much" or "I shouldn't feel so sorry for myself; look at what they're going through." I've done it; I've heard others do it. Grievors, in their lonely travails, are trying to fit the enormity that has broken into their lives into some kind of context where it takes its place, so they begin to compare. Were Maggie's friends hurt more than Neenef's? Were his friends worse off because their friend was not only gone but a murderer? I wish we could somehow escape that trap and simply accept that

every grief is different, that grievors have disparate needs, and that whatever hurts needs healing. I wonder if that competitive tendency masks other feelings—anger or resentment that can't find voice. I tried hard in *Events* to see the complexity of grief clearly and give every feeling legitimacy and space.

RED: From a nonfiction craft perspective, what method did you use to organize source materials that included college documents, a suicide note from Maggie Wardle's ex-boyfriend, instant messages between the victim Maggie and her abuser, official police reports, college documents, as well as your personal narration about your experiences, feelings, and actions in response? How did you find the form for the book, which strikes the balance so well between reportage, observation, experience, and analysis?

GG: Plus hours and hours of interviews. I'm gratified that you think the balance holds. It was the most extensive and diverse research I've ever done, and it was daunting to synthesize it all. But I have to admit that the "macro" organizational plan just fell into place. Early in my research, I scribbled a simple chapter outline, and it's not far from the final result. I saw the story beginning with Maggie, rising to the night of her death, and falling into aftermath, memory, and analysis. I had to revise my plan to begin with the actual protagonist, Kalamazoo College. To my complete amazement, the night of the crime wound up occurring exactly halfway through the book.

But the "micro" organization, within chapters—that's a different story. In most cases I sketched a general arc for each chapter. Sometimes I had a beginning or an ending in mind. Then I pulled together all the notes that would go into that

chapter—quotations, statistics, descriptions, all of it--and divided them into subsets, and divided those in turn into sub-subsets, until I knew where every single piece would fit and how the chapter would move. I organized the hell out of it; the process felt like a kind of internalization, as if I were metabolizing the terrible story in a way I hadn't before. I think this was probably hardest with the chapter involving the night of the shootings, where I had my interviews plus the police interviews to put together in a way that had some shape but also conveyed the sense of chaos and eruption in DeWaters Hall that midnight. As I told a student in a class that read the book, for each chapter I had note cards spread across two desks and the floor, pinned to the wall, numbered by chapter and subsection, lined up in order, and I rearranged them constantly. One open window and a strong breeze and I was done for. Of course, in the actual writing process, the plan for the chapter sometimes changed as the narrative ran into an obstacle or took a turn of its own, as it often did. You don't want to mess with the flow when it's flowing, unless it's really taking you off course.

The thing about writing nonfiction is that you must let the story speak truthfully but also shape the story toward the truth you yourself see in it. Those two forces must always be operating beneath the note cards and outlines.

As for balancing my own roles as narrator (and character, in a couple places), I mostly went by instinct about when and how to speak and when to back off. For instance, as I told a high-school class in December, when I got to the police entering the room where the shots were fired, I quickly decided to back away

and allow the police examiner's report—factual, unemotional, clinical—to describe the hellish scene within. When the experience gets loud, the writing should get quiet, as somebody once said.

RED: Recently, you've been teaching community-based courses on being a white ally. How do you set the context when you teach workshops about being a white ally?

GG: The first goal is to relax everybody. I'm very serious about racism and about white responsibility for and to racism, but there is no reason to intimidate or shame people. I try to communicate compassion, humor, and a certain kind of safety, though of course if we're doing good work against racism we won't stay ultimately safe. The safety I'm after comes from the notion that we're in this together, we're all fallible, we all have racism coursing through our veins, and this is not about measuring up to some ideal of political perfection.

The second goal is to make clear that when we talk about white privilege—an essential topic in the creation of white allies—we are not talking about something that's intentional or attributable to someone's fault. If it were, it would be a great deal easier to deal with. But it's a product of a system that none of us built. My mantra is that we are not responsible FOR it but we are definitely responsible TO it. If I can get people thinking and talking about race privilege, and seeing how it affects the lives of people of color on a daily basis, we can make a lot of progress.

The emerging third goal will be to help people understand and confront the terrifying upsurge in racism we are seeing in our country now, and the way that unarticulated assumptions of white superiority drive this discourse.

RED: In these courses, do you share a reading list? Are there a few essays you consider essential reading about social justice, that teachers across disciplines might assign in their courses?

GG: I'm going to limit myself to racism, since that's the subject of my workshops. The grandmother of scholarship on white privilege is Peggy McIntosh's "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," from 1988. It's ubiquitous in various versions on the internet and widely anthologized. That essay lays the groundwork for people to do their own privilege lists—and the lists can be about any significant social category, not just race. Because the chief privilege of whiteness is not to have to see or think about race or racism, it's crucial to help white people to actually see it, to be aware of their raced-ness. A white scholar named Robin D'Angelo has an article titled "White Fragility" that has been shared widely and that I've used. She really nails the connection of privilege to the frequent inability of white people to endure honest discussions of racism without collapse, personalization, or escape. She also makes it clear why white people are so often unable to discuss race without becoming defensive, terrified, or inarticulate.

For serious students, and for artistry, it doesn't get better than James Baldwin, who understood the fear and delusion of whiteness, its crippling essence, better than anybody. These days I always mention Ta-Nehisi Coates' magnificent *Between the World and Me*. But if the whole book is too much, a teacher could use his stunning Atlantic articles too: have a class of students write about reparations, then have them read his argument, then ask them to write again. Among other things, it's a superb example of a research-based argumentative essay. If I were teaching now, I would teach his memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle*, about growing up in Baltimore and attending Howard.

RED: As a Professor of English at Kalamazoo College, you taught multicultural literature (among other courses) and assigned African-American, Latinx, LGBT, and feminist literature to your students. I'm wondering what advice and support you might offer to a newer teacher who wants to bring a multiplicity of voices and diverse literature into the classroom.

GG: The first question, always, for teachers should be "Who are your students?" If you know who they are (not individually but collectively), where they are developmentally, where they are in thinking about race or gender or sexuality, what they need to learn, that will inform your choices of materials and the structure of the narrative that is the syllabus.

Second, think about the path of the course, just as one thinks about the path of an essay, and consider how one text prepares the way for the next. Have Harriet Jacobs not just follow but respond to Frederick Douglass. Have Nate Parker's *Birth of a Nation* film annihilate D. W. Griffith's

Other ideas: Use film and video—a lot—for cultural and historical context. Show Ava DuVernay's *13th* before you read John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* or Mark Salzman's *True Notebooks*. Have students research the contexts for a text and teach each other. Make them collaborators. Use white writers on racism, male writers on sexism, etc., to show the straight, or white, or male students that they can be active allies rather than silent festering pools of guilty resentment. Treat the literature as literature, with respect and care, and create questions that will push privileged students to confront their privilege all by themselves. And above all, never, ever make the students of color speak for their people.

RED: I've also been searching for ways to create conversations in the classroom that might support the more marginalized voices in the classrooms. Sometimes the loudest voices take over, and not surprisingly, often those tend to be the whitest voices. Suggestions as to how we might counter this common example of white privilege?

GG: Well, my rule was almost never to opt for "open discussion" with no guidelines or structure or prep. I'm very big on structure in classrooms (as in essays). I used small groups (organized strategically), pairs (ditto), written questions in advance, anonymous written questions, and other devices to get the whole group involved and to tamp down the loudmouths. And then there's always the option of having a couple of students monitor discussion for a couple days and report: how many people spoke? How often? Make the class conscious of its own dynamics. Having them read an article on voice and

classroom demographics might be useful too, though I never tried that. I always tried to get at the disgruntlement or alienation or marginalization the privileged students might be feeling, because, if handled correctly, those feelings are the birth pangs of knowledge. This might be done through direct, specific questions for journaling or even on an essay exam.

RED: Your essay “A Creature, Stirring” won the *New Ohio Review*’s nonfiction contest this year, judged by Elena Passarello. I understand it is part of your current essay collection. Would you talk about your current writing and what you are learning?

GG: I was thrilled to win that contest, not least because the essay had been around the block a few times. Possibly there were editors who didn’t think massive grief worked well with an absurdist tale of a mouse setting up house in an oven. And yes, it’s a piece from a collection I’ve just completed, titled *Widow’s Walk*. Nine years ago, after eighteen years in a long-distance relationship, I married my lovely man on New Year’s Eve. One dark night four months later, he drowned in the Manistee River in northern Michigan, twenty feet outside our cabin door. I think of the essays as mapping sectors of what Mark Doty calls “grief’s country,” or passages in my larger struggle back into life from a paralyzing griefhot through with the lightning of trauma. The essays vary a lot; some are quite traditional, others fragmented or mosaic, some lyrical, some analytical in a way, often a combination of the two.

I’m learning a lot about handling powerful and complex emotion—when to look it right in the eye, when to come at it slant, as Emily D. would say. It’s the

tension between the disparate demands of honesty and form, which I mentioned earlier. I've really worked hard to find the edge where self-pity or sentimentality threatens to take over. I'm wrestling constantly with memory: trying to see the past feelings clearly by dropping myself back into traumatic memories where I would much rather not dwell. It has sometimes felt like bungee-jumping. As death will do, this one precipitated me into existential absurdity, and I've had to resist writing myself into hopefulness or bright endings that are formally pretty but untruthful. And then there's the question that any writer considers in putting together a collection: do the parts add up to a whole, and what is its shape? What does a conclusion mean in such a collection? How and when and where does the story "end"? I think I've found my perfect ending in a brief riff on a mysterious missing object that lends itself readily to metaphor. In any case, the book doesn't only trace my road back to the land of the living; it actually constitutes, in many ways, the road itself.