

A Conversation with Katharine Weber, author of **TRUE CONFECTIONS**



1) Your previous four novels have ranged across a wide variety of themes and settings, and each time you have written something very different. What was the inspiration for *TRUE CONFECTIONS* and is it once again, a departure from anything you have written before?

True Confections is a departure from my pattern, because it does have a connection to my last novel.

Triangle has at its heart the Triangle Waist Company sweatshop, the factory that was the scene of the tragic fire in 1911. *True Confections* has at its heart a candy factory. Both novels are about the American immigrant experience into subsequent generations. And the new novel flows from *Triangle* in another sense. In 2006, I published an Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times* on the 95th anniversary of the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire. Focused on children in factories, I wrote about recent Third World factory fires in which children are still dying while making cheap goods for American consumers. Although it wasn't factory work, I came across many references to child slave labor on African cacao plantations today. And so although it turned into a novel about a chocolate candy factory in New Haven, the origins of *True Confections* are in Cote D'Ivoire, on the west coast of Africa. Child slave labor is a troubling reality in many of the cacao plantations in that African country which supplies 40% of the world's chocolate. A runaway slave from a cacao plantation rescued by a guilty American candy maker could be a way into the story. Although that element, while key, is no longer central to the novel, it's where *True Confections* began.

2) *TRUE CONFECTIONS* is hard to categorize, and could be described as belonging to several genres. It's about chocolate, and there is a lot of wonderful candy history here, but it is also a novel about a family business in crisis, and a bitter divorce, and meanwhile the book also takes up important issues such as racism, issues of mixed marriage, and the little-known Madagascar Plan of the Third Reich during World War II. How do you describe the novel?

Describing *True Confections* depends on context, as it is certainly all of those things. *True Confections* is a novel about chocolate, love and betrayal. It's a novel about a candy factory. It's a novel about a family business in crisis. It's a novel about a mixed marriage, and race, and racism. It's a novel about the realization of the Great American Dream of so many immigrants in the beginning of the 20th century. It's a novel about the limits of really ever knowing another person, let alone the truth of history. Is the real question whether it is a literary novel or a fun read? Yes!

3) Your narrator, Alice Tatnall Ziplinsky, is unreliable, yet she's oddly sympathetic. Did you dream her up the way she comes across in the pages of *TRUE CONFECTIONS*, or did she develop as you were writing the story?

I certainly set out to make Alice sympathetic as the novel begins, but at a certain point I also wanted to challenge the reader to keep rooting for Alice, despite the growing evidence of her unreliability. Her voice developed in the course of the writing, which inevitably altered the course of the story. I recognize that many readers these days seem to have a rather simplistic belief that the main characters in appealing novels are supposed to be people one would want to know personally and have as a friend or neighbor. I have never thought this was a valid way to judge a character in a novel, any more than it is a valid way to choose one's presidential candidate. It's easy to love the lovable and to be charmed by the charming. Alice is definitely complex and difficult. I wanted to challenge the reader to care about her through the novel even if you also want to slap her.

4) A major underlying theme of this book seems to be the way certain privileged groups of people regard outsiders. Alice, a Protestant, has married into the Jewish Ziplinsky family, but she never wins acceptance from her mother-in-law Frieda. The Ziplinsky family has made its fortune manufacturing three candies (Little Sammies, Mumbo Jumbos, and Tiger melts) inspired by Little Black Sambo, but until Alice came along, the

family has never recognized anything inherently racist in their products. How did you come to focus on this central issue of racism and insider/outsider relationships? Are you concerned that readers will be offended by the racism in *True Confections*?

I make no particular claim for a special understanding of racism and xenophobia, but it has certainly always been a subject I feel is at the center of most conflict in the world. I grew up in a household in which political issues were discussed, and my father, whom the FBI regarded as a Communist, was at various times in his life involved in supporting political groups, from the Free Spain movement to the Hollywood Ten. One of my early memories is sitting on the stairs outside my bedroom at age six, peeking down at a huge Freedom Ride fundraising party for CORE (Congress on Racial Equality), a gathering that alarmed the neighbors because of the number of what were then called Negroes who attended, when at that time, in our neighborhood, the Negroes one encountered were working as maids and gardeners. The corrosiveness of racism is even greater in certain ways when it is unconscious, and as a novelist that interests me very much. The only people who are likely to be offended by *True Confections* are racists.

5) Zip's Candies has the motto "Say, Dat's Tasty!" on all of its candy. The phrase is also the tagline of the jingle in the 1960 television commercial for Little Sammies described in the book and available on the web at Youtube and at www.zipscandies.com. Can you explain where this slogan comes from? And was there really a television commercial for Little Sammies?

If anyone thinks they can recall this jingle and this television commercial from 1960, who am I to argue with them? Zip's Candies is, however, an entirely fictional family business. I wrote the jingle myself, with terrific assistance from both my friend the musician Aaron Gandy, who arranged it and recorded it and shares with me the pseudonym "Frieda Ziplinsky," and from the singer Klea Blackhurst, who willingly took on the role of Alice's mother-in-law Frieda, who is described in the novel as not only the author of the jingle, but also the voice heard in the commercial.

With my previous novels I have been so frequently confronted by unexpected confusions on the part of readers about what I have invented versus what is "real" that this time I deliberately put out the bait. I invented the slogan, inspired in part by the actual slogan on the Amos 'n' Andy candy bar, which was "Um-Um, Ain't Dat Sumpin!" I wanted something believable and regrettable, which is to say, intrinsically racist. All three of the Zip's Candies products carry the trademark green umbrella with this slogan, inspired, like the candies themselves, by Little Black Sambo, who carried a green umbrella on his adventure with the tigers.

6) *TRUE CONFLECTIONS* purports to be Alice Tatnall Ziplinsky's Affidavit laying out her version of events in what is apparently an ongoing struggle for control of the family business, Zip's Candies, one of the consequences of the end of her 33-year marriage to Howdy Ziplinsky. This isn't the first time your fiction has utilized documents or other artifacts. Why did you write this novel in the form of a document?

Although I have never set out to write any of my novels in some predetermined format, I do seem to have some sort of unconscious narrative inclination that runs through all five of my novels. Oddly enough, this became really obvious to me only as I worked on *True Confections*. I had a detailed map of the elements and events of the novel, but I hadn't really settled comfortably on the narrative strategy. I had a brainstorm and found the perfect fit for the story, and then realized that for the fifth time, with no forethought or contextual intention, I was writing a novel which acknowledges its own artifactness as part of the story.

In my first novel, the initial part is a journal of letters that gets lost. In the last part of the novel, a character turns up with that journal under his arm. My second novel is a secret journal kept by a woman involved in a political plot to kidnap a painting by Vermeer from the Queen. My third novel is really a novel within a novel, and perhaps a third of it consists of intrusive reader's notes from two of the actual people on whom the novel is based, commenting on the text, followed by the author's notes (she herself is also a character in her novel) defending the text. My fourth novel is stitched from all sorts of fictional artifacts and documents about the Triangle fire, from newspaper articles to oral history interviews to trial transcripts. *True Confections* follows this pattern. It is a rant, an off-kilter persuasion in the form of an Affidavit, yet another narrative as document. I resisted this strategy for a

while, concerned that I was repeating myself. But Alice's narrative, this artifactness, is only the same in the broadest sense. This is how I find voice. Voice is how I drive the narrative.

7) What are you writing now? Are you already at work on your next novel?

If I say that I am at work on my next novel, my editor and publisher will probably come right to my house and make me sit at my desk and work on my memoir, ***SYMPTOMS OF FICTION***, which was due before now and is now due in the next few months for publication in 2011. It's what I am (mostly*) writing now. It's a book about family stories and memory, and about the ways stories were told and retold in my family, and how that was probably central to my becoming a writer of fiction. So I will be writing about the echoes of those experiences and stories that occur in my novels.

Mainly, I am writing about my experiences growing up, saturated in family stories and surrounded by my oddball relatives, some of whom were people of note or notoriety. My fascination with documents and artifacts began in my childhood, with the discovery, when I was an insomniac ten year old roaming around the house in the middle of the night, of letters and other objects in our attic, all raising questions if not answers about a variety of secrets and lies in the family. Who tells the story and how the story is told in different contexts also fascinates me. Who owns history? Whose version can be deemed "true" when there is always another version? So, for example, 800 pages of FBI records about my father tell his story differently from my own experience of those same years in my childhood.

* My next three novels are fairly thoroughly mapped and noted, though the actual writing will inevitably change a great deal about each one. It always does. My next novel is about someone in the background of a tragic home invasion and murder, and then comes a novel about a monkey helper, and after that an Amish story.