

INTERVIEWS & PROFILES

JERI PARKER

A MEMOIR ABOUT AN UNEXPECTED FRIENDSHIP BECOMES A LOVE SONG TO LANGUAGE

By Sarah Rettger



Photo courtesy Kent Miles

JERI PARKER KNOWS HOW TO MAINTAIN a sense of patience and wonder: When a bear wandered into her Idaho cabin one morning, for instance, she refused to panic, instead telling herself, “He’ll only be here once, so take it in.” She observed the bear instead of chasing it away—it eventually departed peacefully—and now cherishes the memory.

With a similar sense of purpose, Parker waited until the time was right to publish her first book. “I seem to want to have a highly refined, thought-through piece,” she says, which is why she went through multiple revisions, considered and decided against working with several traditional publishers, and finally joined with friends to form a publishing company, Winter Beach Press, before sharing her memoir, *A Thousand Voices*, with the public.

What Parker calls “a long gestation period in the refining stage” seems to have worked for the book, which has gained both local and national attention. *Kirkus Reviews* calls *A Thousand Voices* “a loving tribute to friendship that proves how one person can influence the life of another,” noting that it “transcends the ubiquitous ‘me’ and ‘I’ of memoir and hovers on the brink of being a compassionate cautionary tale.”

The book tells the story of Parker’s relationship with a deaf boy who both charmed her and expanded the limits of her world. “I was teaching high school. I was about 28,” Parker says, when a friend told her, “I have a boy you must meet” and introduced her to Carlos Salazar. The teacher and the student quickly formed a bond, although Parker makes it clear that they educated each other: “He taught me to hear, essentially,” she says, and she learned to understand the variety and importance of nonverbal methods of communication.

When, many years later, she decided to write about Salazar’s story, Parker found that beneath the tale of a boy who, despite his inability to hear, was “preternaturally quick” and “central to any group he was in,” she was writing on a more universal theme. “Little by little, what emerged was the story beneath the story,” she says. Eventually she realized the book was “a love song to language,” an appropriate theme for a writer whose style tends toward the poetic.

Parker, who has roots in Idaho and now lives much of the time in Salt Lake City, finds that her association with the West is a key part of both her identity as a writer and her more recent work as a book publisher. She read *A Thousand Voices* at The King’s English, a landmark bookstore in Salt Lake City, and has found that promoting an independently published book works best in “a region you have command of.”

Although she has found an enthusiastic audience in Salt Lake City, Parker does much of her writing in a cabin in rural Idaho, which she calls “the ideal circumstance for writing.” She built the cabin slowly, treating her Idaho property as a summer refuge during her years of teaching. “I lived there for 12 summers, three or four of them in a tent,” she says, until the house was finished. The building process reflected the same patient and deliberate approach she takes to crafting a narrative, and in fact, she linked the construction process to her writing aspirations, telling herself, “When I get this finished, I’m going to be a writer.”

The rural setting also provides a link to Parker’s youth, when she first developed a love of storytelling, inventing new identities for herself, her sister and a cousin. The three looked so alike “we could pretend to be triplets,” she says, which inspired their role-playing and offered their imaginations free rein. “I guess you could say we came out of the oral tradition of an earlier time,” Parker says. “I cried when we got electricity.”

Parker continued to develop her writing in college, where she “fell in love with Willa Cather” and found that her teachers appreciated her writing style and offered support. “When your cover is blown, people begin to mentor you” as a writer, she says.

By now, of course, Parker has adapted to telling her stories within an electricity-driven world, but the traditions and forms of oral storytelling still shape her writing habits. Although she primarily relies on human colleagues for feedback during the revision process, there are times when she reads her work aloud to a more unconventional audience: her flock of chickens. “They’ll tell you what your good passages are and walk off at your bad passages,” she says.

After many sessions with the chickens, *A Thousand Voices* made its way to a human audience through Parker’s Winter Beach Press. Parker hopes to use the press to publish the work of other writers as well: “I didn’t want it to exist as a vehicle for just my endeavors,” she says, and she continues to look for other venues to publish her own work. She currently has agent representation for her first novel, which is on submission to traditional publishers.

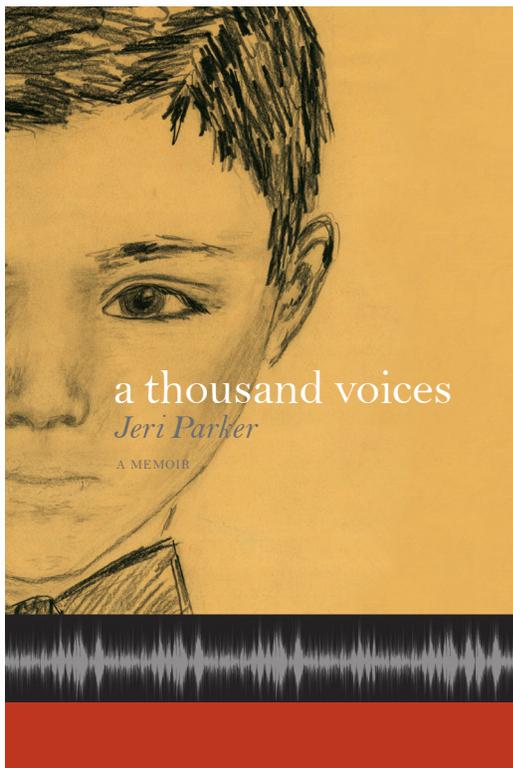
But there are no immediate plans to invite submissions to Winter Beach Press, since Parker, who is also part-owner of a bed-and-breakfast, wants to

make sure she does not take on more than she can handle in the literary world. “We’re quoting E.B. White right now, saying ‘don’t buy 300 chicks if you only need eight eggs,’” she explains.

Parker’s first priority is making time for her own art—she is also a painter, and her works have sold throughout the United States, as well as internationally—and for writing. Although writing is a late-in-life career for Parker, who spent years working as a teacher and then as a corporate writing consultant, she has no concerns about waiting to publish until her poet’s ear was satisfied with *A Thousand Voices*. “It’s never too late, until you don’t recognize the words on the page,” she says.

Sarah Rettger is a writer and bookseller in Massachusetts.

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A THOUSAND VOICES

Parker, Jeri

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