

Creating a Buzz: The cross-pollination of reality and fiction

By Margaret Hermes

The day the bees invaded my house, I was getting it ready for a party. As I pressed mushroom croustades into miniature muffin tins, the faint drone humming along the edge of my consciousness grew into a distinct and persistent buzz. Following the sound, I discovered a dozen bees battering themselves against the glass of the living room window. Bzzzbzzzbzzz--plink. Bzzzbzzzbzzz—plink. They were inside, trying to get out. I had thought I was finished with my bee story but with each tap against the window, it became more and more evident that bees were not finished with me.

The cross-pollination of reality and fiction is a common experience for many writers. Something happens to us that we can't shake off or we are powerfully struck by what happens to someone else. That moment gets implanted in the imagination, hibernates, and eventually insinuates its way into dialogue and structure. Real-life occurrences inspired several of the stories in my collection *Relative Strangers* published by Carolina Wren Press this past spring. The opening story, titled "The Bee Queen," was written in part to exorcise the memory of an incident that haunted me since childhood. At five- or six-years-old, I witnessed the dreadful stinging of another little girl when she disturbed a nest of wasps while climbing a tree. To say she was stung

repeatedly does not convey the horror of the scene. Amazingly, none of us onlookers was attacked. As I watched the wasps pursue her and listened to her screams, I was transfixed: terrified, ashamed, and electrified all at the same time. I may have been physically untouched, but her wasps left their stingers embedded in my brain, little darts of memory tipped with fear. Years later, I discovered I had an unusually adverse response to insect stings and was advised by my doctor to carry an EpiPen in case of a severe reaction. These real-life elements lay dormant for years, emerging finally as "The Bee Queen" and the story's heroine, Bette Louise Trimble.

Through fiction, I had explored my fears. I had passed my experiences along to my character and worked through them to what I believed a satisfying conclusion. But suddenly my little striped demons were back in solid form, buzzing around my living room. I called my partner, David, to come to the rescue and then I phoned my neighbor, Bob, to ask if he would cross the street for some "bee wrangling." Two years previously, Bob and I wrangled a couple dozen bees out of my living room and back into the wild of our urban St. Louis neighborhood.

A complicating factor in both these situations was that, when I'm not writing fiction, I'm steeped in environmental issues as an activist and proponent of our natural world. I didn't want to harm the bees. I just wanted them out of my house. On the prior occasion, Bob and I had achieved this with the aid of two bug catchers I'd purchased at a nature preserve in Door County, Wisconsin. The Katcha Bug worked on the same principle as a glass and a thin sheet of cardboard, where you place the glass over the insect and slide the cardboard underneath and then transport your quarry to the great outdoors for release. Only this device was made entirely of plastic with a handle long enough to keep your

fingers a reassuring distance from the stingers. Bob had been so impressed with the device's effectiveness and I so appreciative of his assistance and, particularly, his calm, that I gave him one of the bug catchers. Two years later, he again responded to my plea and showed up at my door Katcha Bug in hand.

What began as a bee caucus in my living room became a bee convention. No sooner would the room be bee-free—David, Bob, and I all congratulating each other—than the hummmmmmbuzzzzzz would begin again. My house was possessed. David madly plugged hairline cracks in the window molding with putty and Bob bemusedly shook his head. We couldn't figure out where the critters were coming in.

By this time, however, I'd noticed the gathering in the living room was nothing compared to what was going on outside the window. A dark cloud had formed, a huge black mass of honeybees throbbing outside my house. Thousands. A *swarm*.

"Swarm" is a technical term.

"You are witnessing asexual reproduction," congratulated one of the many beekeepers I telephoned. That's when a colony outgrows the hive and splits, taking its queen with it, not unlike a childhood memory expanding, breaking away, and forming a short story.

According to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln website I consulted, "When honey bees swarm they will settle on a tree limb, bush, or other convenient site. The cohesiveness of the swarm is due to their attraction to a pheromone produced by the queen. . . .The swarm will send out scout bees to seek a cavity to nest in and will move on when a suitable nesting site is found." By the time we saw the cloud, the scouts had already sounded the call and the colony had abandoned its "convenient site." The

cloud was the swarm in migration. The stampede to new digs was in progress.

The black cloud was methodically siphoning itself into two small openings in a defunct chimney shaft on the side of my house. The bees could use the two air intake vents for ingress and egress—they didn't even have to bump into each other coming and going.

While Bob and David wrangled about a hundred bees outside, one or two or three at a time, I phoned the Missouri Botanical Garden, a couple beekeepers' associations, and a whole bunch of beekeepers. Each beekeeper declined my invitation to visit and each one gave me other names to call. I was told that the bees wouldn't sting me *unless* we persisted with our foolhardy capture and release program. Several keepers droned on about how we should halt the wrangling and just open the window. But opening the window was not appealing since there were so many more bees hovering just outside it.

I explained that I have a "sensitivity" to honeybee stings—so far, just prolonged pain and impressive swelling lasting several days—and anxiety that this could evolve into a fatal systemic allergic reaction with my very next sting. I was told that I was probably not sensitive to honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) at all, but to yellow jackets (*Vespula*) or other wasps. I felt defensive when called on to recount the circumstances of my past stings. When I gave up on keeping a long-expired EpiPen tucked behind unopened jars of 1000-year-old quail eggs and pickled watermelon rind in the back of my refrigerator, I worked to master my fear. I purposely grew flowers that attracted bees. I planted crocuses, hyacinths, clematis, six redbuds, and a plum tree for the bees to feast on in the spring; echinacea, wild garlic, mint, black-eyed Susan, mullein, and hosta in the summer; sedum for the fall.

Clover reigned in the backyard and a golden rain tree dominated the front. I used no herbicides or pesticides in my garden and only kitchen compost for fertilizer. Some of my best friends were bees!

After my living room was quiet for an extended period, Bob optimistically departed and I began laying the table for the party while David meditated on the ways of bees. Even though the bees had all first appeared at the same window, after David had plugged every possible crack, he knew they couldn't have continued entering that way. It stood to reason that since the swarm was relocating to the unused chimney shaft, that had served as their pathway into the living room. While the back of the fireplace area had been sealed with an iron plate, David noticed that the mantle in the century-old house had pulled slightly away from the wall in several places.

I remembered the scene from the annoying Hitchcock film, *The Birds*. The one where a bevy of small wild fowl swept down *through the chimney and into the living room* and savagely attacked all that bad dialogue and acting and directing. So I brought up a heavy plastic tarpaulin from the basement and we sealed off the entire area around the fireplace with blue painter's tape. Then we had the party. The guest of honor was a Swedish-born philosophy professor and psychoanalyst who—contrary to her heritage and training—seemed oblivious to all the *Sturm und Drang*.

That night, the bees slept. But I didn't. My head buzzed uneasily as I lay listening to David, who had put in a full day's work as a bee wrangler and party host. I couldn't help thinking that the sound bees make was awfully like snoring.

The next day, with the morning's hum localized to the fireplace, I called more beekeepers, who directed me to folks who

practice both beekeeping and bee extermination, delicately referred to as "removal projects." I had been nurturing the hope that some bee charmer would appear and extricate the queen and all the others would follow and the colony would thrive (elsewhere) and pollinate and reap nectar and construct combs and reproduce and everything would be the bee's knees. One after another, the apiarists disabused me of my naïveté. Locating the queen and saving the bees was no longer possible. The University of Missouri Extension website was quite firm: "Once a swarm establishes a nest inside a wall, it requires killing the bees."

I'd watched PBS and listened to NPR. I'd heard about Colony Collapse Disorder. I worried about what would happen if the bee population shrank and honeybees failed to do their job. Those busy migrant workers pollinate *one-third of the crop species* in the U.S. We're talking about apples and strawberries and melons and citrus and soybeans and tree nuts here. And I was going to sign the death warrant for an entire colony. I'd be responsible for the slaughter of thousands, for whole fields going barren.

Depressed as well as anxious, I made calls to keepers who were part-time assassins. When I explained that the chimney openings were about 30 feet above the ground, all but one wished me luck. The one who agreed to come said, first, he was going to have to borrow a longer ladder. And, second, I'd have to reconcile myself to having my chimney disassembled. "It's not just the bricks," he said. "Breaking into those flue tiles is going to be a bear. Can't predict what this is going to run you. Those tiles are *hard*."

Now panicked as well as depressed and anxious, I avoided the living room entirely.

Then I called Critter Control.

Two days after the baby-faced killer from Critter Control did his work, there was no activity around the outside air vents and no buzzing on the inside. Still, we waited two *weeks* before unwrapping the fireplace. David peeled away the tape and gathered up the tarp while I went upstairs to work on writing this piece. That was our division of labor. I know: he needs a union.

At my computer, I had the grim satisfaction of learning that we could blame this invasion, as well as everything else, on Global Warming. Spring came early this year (Global Warming!), causing bees to emerge from their hives, but then turbulent weather (GW!) made the colonies return to their hives more frequently before finding a new home with the result that this year the swarms had grown in size. Substantially. This was not a local phenomenon. I found reports of early, massive swarms across the country. ABC news reported residents of San Francisco confiding that “40,000 bees in one swarm was enough to keep them on edge.”

Downstairs the hearth tiles were covered with rotted bee corpses, and dust, and some sticky substance—honey? insecticide? bee venom? “Not a pretty sight,” David commented with typical understatement. Seeing my face, he added, “But I don’t have the same empathy for insects that I do for people.” He fashioned a mask from a green bandana and, in frayed jeans and an old T-shirt, looked more like a bandito than my hero.

He swept up the bees and tape and deposited them in a grocery bag. As he scrubbed the tiles, he told me to hunt up some scented candles to get rid of the smell. He described it as pungent, “acrid and sweet,” while my verdict was “sickening.” The clove-infused candles seemed an apt conclusion to the ritual of exorcism.

Now our chimney vents have inserts, courtesy of Critter Control, which allow air transfer but prevent insects and bats from moving in, so we hope that marks the end of our bee adventure. But I want everyone to be ready for the ensuing episode if next spring brings another invasion. Both David and Bob had birthdays coming up: I had two “Bee Wrangler” T-shirts made, just in case.

Meanwhile, if you’re curious to learn how the Bee Queen’s story unfolds, I hope you’ll get a copy of *Relative Strangers*. You may also enjoy trying to pick out the other bits of reality that infiltrate my fiction . . . and relating to stories that reflect how we all, at times, are strangers to those who should know us best.

c. 2012 Margaret Hermes

“The Bee Queen” appears in *Relative Strangers*, by Margaret Hermes. Published in 2012 by Carolina Wren Press, the book is available through www.carolinawrenpress.org or your local bookstore.