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York Professor Libby Scheier talks about her latest collection of poetry

by Michelle Hammer

Libby Scheier is the author of three books of poetry: SKY — A Poem in Four Pieces (1990, the Mercury Press), Second Nature (1986, Coach House Press), and The Larger Life (1983, Black Moss Press). She co-edited Language in Her Eye — Writing and Gender: Views by Canadian Women Writing in English (1990, Coach House Press).

Scheier's poetry, short fiction and criticism have appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies. She is consulting editor of *Paragraph: The Fiction Magazine* and former poetry editor of *Poetry Toronto*. She teaches creative writing at York University.

Michelle Hammer: How did you come to write SKY?

Libby Scheier: I did not sit down to write a memoir of sexual abuse. It started in a conversation I had with two friends of mine who are writers, Erin Moure and Gail Scott. We were talking about the differences between male and female perception and language. I raised the issue of the dark sky at night — that cliche of the dark sky and all the stars and you stand there and you wonder where you are in the universe and what is the meaning



interview

Poet and York Creative Writing Professor Libby Scheier talks about some personal experiences that went into writing her latest collection, SKY — A Poem in Four Pieces

of it all. And I wondered if men and women look at the sky in the same

That was how the book started. I started writing about the sky as an image you see every day, and how different people see it in different situations and what role it plays. At the same time, I entered a therapy group at the Barbara Schlifer Clinic for adult survivors of child sexual abuse and incest, and I was in that

therapy process and the two things interacted.

As it turned out, the account of child rape is the center of the book—there is a way in which everything leads up to it and goes away from it. That happened in the course of the writing. It took that shape. It wasn't intended initially. About three quarters of the way through writing the book I saw how it was shaping up and thereafter committed myself to that shape.

Henry Miller said that art has the qualities of being therapeutic. You have been accused by a reviewer of using poetry as therapy. You responded by saying: "For heaven's sake, why not?"

When did I say that?

In your essay "Chopped Liver" in Language in Her Eye.

Right. To the charge that I sometimes use poetry as therapy I plead guilty. So what? I think that artistic expression is many different things. This bugaboo is a White patriarchal bugaboo; you know, that if art is therapy, it cheapens it in some way. It's an alienated idea that the brain is for art and the heart is for something else.

I think that art is sometimes a healing; it is the oldest way that art has functioned in society, as part of a healing process. In a lot of work by women, or Black and Native writers you find this integration.

Certainly there can be bad writing that is catharsis or therapy, and there can be bad writing that has no therapeutic quality, but the fact that it has a therapeutic quality does not make it bad writing.

In SKY, in particular, the therapeutic process I was involved in and my own more intellectual or cerebral explorations on language and perception became impossible to separate. I don't consider SKY strictly a therapeutic book. In some places, it has been criticized for having sections that are too cerebral or too inaccessible. You can't please everybody.

On pages 44 and 45 of SKY are you talking about your parents?

Yes. I am imagining their dreams.

So your father is from Bukavina and your mother was born in Brooklyn.

Yes. My father was an immigrant to the U.S.from Austro-Hungary. He was born in Bukavina, which is now Romania, but at the time was Austro-Hungary. As a child, he lived through pogroms. His grandfather was forced by marauding German soldiers to swallow his long beard; he died from suffocation while my father watched. So he had a very violent childhood... he has good reasons for being screwed up.

My mother had a somewhat better childhood, but quite deprived. She grew up in a working class family in Brooklyn, with lots of children and a mainly absent husband. They had food on the table and there was violence, but she was deprived emotionally.

How did the incident where your heart was outside your body, which appears on page 51, come to you? Did you actually go through it?

Two of the central images in the poem are from two different therapy sessions, one a massage session and one a psycho-therapy session. The heart comes from the massage session and the girl in black is from a therapy session.

In the group therapy, I had this image of a steel box around my heart and a very strong feeling of sludge and steel and so on. I worked on that image a long time, meditating on it and so on. Then in a shiatsu therapy session I had that image of a tiny heart escaping through a hole in the steel box — a child's heart that refused to return to its body. The experience was very powerful. In the poem, I try to bring the heart back to me, and I do.

Did you actually experience it the way you wrote it?

More or less. I mean, every poem is a construction of reality rather than reality itself — a reconstruction. If you believe that memory is selective, you pick out elements, you make things up when you write, creating a thing of its own. But, yes, it is drawn from those therapeutic experiences.

Does the muse always strike before you start a poem, or do you have a strict regimen whereby you sit down to write every day from, say, eight to 10?

The muse! I think the muse is a male business. I don't know that I have a 'muse.' I know that you mean inspiration. My son, who is now 12, has been a muse for me, in a way. I've written a lot about him.

As for how I work, I have to make a speech. Every time I hear somebody say: "You must sit down and write four hours every morning," I know it's a man with a wife who cleans the house and takes care of the family, because I have never been able to organize my life in that sort of neat manner. I have been a single parent now for nearly 12 years, and it's been chaotic. I fit my life around my kid, who I am very devoted to.

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Idon't know that I would organize my writing that way anyway. I identify more with Phyllis Webb, who has defined herself as a pressure cooker writer. You build up a head of steam over a period of time and then write in great spasms, or with great intensity, over the next period. I sometimes don't write for a year — well, I haven't gone quite that long. But often I don't write for months; during that time I live, I think. When the pressure has built up enough, I can work solidly for weeks or months at a time.

excerpt from SKY

I roll my eyeballs back into my head

and look down inside my body and see a steel box in place of my heart and I hot my eyeballs up and superman-stare it and stare and stare and stare and focus and the box drips a little at the corners and begins to melt and I stare a hole right through the box and behind the box are red and spongy crots and clumps of tissue and suddenly a chunk breaks off and escapes through the hole my eyes have burned in the casing and escapes through my chest whooshhhhhhhhhhhhhh and away off in a corner an image lights up and I look and it is a tiny heart racing away away beating like crazy scared as shit and it's out of my body racing away it's hanging in the air a mobile without wires a creature from outer space and I inhale deeply and attach my gaze like a magnet to the tiny heart and I reel it in like a fish my gaze-hook in its folds and the little hook-hole a bleeding mouth and my eyeballs feel the pulse pulse of the tiny heart and I reel it in rolling my pupils upward with each turn of the reel then down then up again

and I inhale deeply and it comes to me slowly and slowly and slowly but it comes and I inhale deeply and here it is and I open my kind adult-woman mouth and take the tiny heart into it curling my tongue around it gently and roll it back toward my throat and I inhale deeply and the heart goes down with the breath and I swallow and it goes down my throat gently like a peeled plum it goes down my throat into the body of a small girl a girl with no skin a girl inside a black space a small girl all red and raw a girl with no skin in a black space with no walls a black space with no top or bottom and I put a square inch of skin back on the girl and another square inch and piece by piece I put her skin back on until it's all on and the tiny heart slides down the girl's throat into her chest slides gently down into her back to the place it ran away from back to where it belongs

and I feel the floor beneath my feet and I stretch my arms out in front of me and flatten my palms against smooth walls and I turn onthe light and see the ceiling above me and see that the room is safe and the steel box has melted away

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