BOA exclusive interview with Nickole Brown on *Fanny Says*

Almost everyone has a grandmother they love; it's a subject fraught with sentimentality and rocking-chair clichés. Why does your grandmother's story merit a book?

I always called this book a biography of my grandmother, but once Patricia Smith called it my "unleashed love song" to my grandmother, I thought, *yes, that's what I've written*. You see, Fanny helped raise me. She taught me how to clean towels till they were shot through with bleach-burn holes; she taught me how to put on a pot of pinto beans. She taught me what it is to drive a white Cadillac Eldorado with atomic-red leather seats down Dixie Highway from Kentucky to Florida and back. Fanny was also the only grandmother on the block to tease her hair to Jesus every afternoon, glue on a pair of false eyelashes, then holler for us *fuckers to get on in the house.* Yes, every day, she called me a *fucker*, so much so that I thought it a term of endearment, like *sugar pie* or *sweet beets*. She was bawdy, tough as new rope. She was the only person in my life that always told me the hard truth, straight. Born into a house of seven children during the Depression, she married young, like most all women of her generation in Kentucky married, barely fifteen. Not too long after, she had seven kids of her own. I've been telling Fanny's stories for years, trying to keep everything she said. This book is my way to remember, to put it down, to keep alive a fierce and singular part of myself that lives only through her.

And the reader? Well, I suppose I want the reader to keep her alive, too. But my best hope is that the reader might somehow gather up some of what Fanny had, and if need be, pick herself up from a difficult situation and walk straight past, as Fanny taught me to do, with her head held high.

Would you consider this book of poems to be creative nonfiction? What sort of research did you do to imagine your way into your grandmother's life and capture her voice?

It's not truth I'm after, but authenticity. What I mean is that, yes, I did try, as best I could, to tell the life of Frances Lee Cox, from Bowling Green, Kentucky, but I'm only able to tell the story I know, through my own botched and biased lens. I can't vouch for the facts, but only my own perception of the facts. I'm her granddaughter—a daughter born to her daughter, who was just one of her seven children—so I only have what was given to me.

Now, in terms of research, I can name the artifacts I used to bring me to her. We lost her when she passed in 2004, and my inheritance consisted of a Prada bag—her favorite—in bubble-gum pink, and in it, I have a pair of her terrycloth house slippers; a mess of her hair rollers and clips; one of her plastic cigarette filters and a gold lamé cigarette case; an empty bottle of her nerve pills; an empty bottle of her hair color; a few stray bullets; and a pamphlet from Jefferson County Family Court leftover from the day I took her there to file an Emergency Protective Order against her husband, my grandfather. This is what I have of my grandmother that I can hold, and I held these fragments in my hand every day that I wrote these poems.

Most importantly, there are my notebooks—a whole drawer of them dated back to 1992—full of her stories, as I always did write down just about everything Fanny said. My memory is unreliable and moody, so I needed every bit of what I had to get back to her.

***Fanny Says*, in part, wrestles with a legacy of domestic violence that riddled your grandparents' relationship. Can you talk about this?**

Sometimes it’s impossible to say it, but it’s true: Fanny did love my grandfather, and yes, he broke his own heart over her in turn. The way he treated her was inexcusable, irreparable. But in my writing, I can’t take sides, and even though my younger self would be furious at this, I won’t place blame, not in these poems. You see, for me, ambivalence is the only place from which to write. There are no villains and victims here, just life, every bit as confusing and devastating and chock-full of joy. Negative capability talks about being able to live with mystery, but for me, it's also about honesty scrubbed free of false binaries and imposed sense. I aim for writing that doesn't force you to choose sides, that knows (and acknowledges) the whole truth.

Fanny Says **is a mix of monologues, lyric revelries, sequences, and epistolary poems, and each looks different on the page. Can you talk about forms within this hybrid collection?**

I once thought about writing Fanny’s story as a traditional chapter narrative, but I didn’t dare: my memory was too fragmented and I knew the definitive nature of prose would feel like a lie. What’s more, Fanny was too contrary and complex for me to sketch out in any straightforward way. What I did have, however, was a number of approaches to understanding her, and each came to me speaking its own particular voice and arrived quite distinct, looking different on the page from the others.

For example, the pieces in prose form—nearly all that begin with “Fanny Says”—are in my grandmother’s voice; I didn’t write those pieces but wrote them down, nearly word for word, as she said them. They’re in simple paragraphs because line breaks would be of my making, not hers. In these pieces, I’m attempting to get out of her way and let her tell her own story. It’s my hope that here I disappear entirely, that it’s just the reader and Fanny, sitting together in a room.

And the lineated pieces? Well, those are mine. Some are letters addressing Fanny directly, and line breaks help pace the message. Others are incantations that arose from memory and myth; their ephemeral nature needed an abundance of white space to contain them, so they look more spare and quiet on the page. Then there are several longer poems in numbered sequences: they are puzzles I was trying to piece together, and their shape is a part of the mosaic of an answer I found.

“A Genealogy of The Word” constitutes an entire section of *Fanny Says*, and deals with the difficult issue of racism in your family. Why dedicate so much of the book to this?

I’ll be honest: I’ve never worked on a single poem so hard as I did this one, and it still makes me queasy. You see, it shamed me—it still shames me—the way that Fanny talked sometimes. To make it more difficult, things never were as clear as I needed them to be to get a grip on right and wrong, good or bad, because as hard as it is to believe, one of Fanny’s best friends in this world was a black woman hired to come to her house every morning. They would put on a pot of coffee and cut-up nearly all day, and once I got older, a part of their fun was to rile me with racist banter and jokes. I suppose it was their way to have a laugh at the uptight girl who read too many books, who saw fault in the way they did things. I won’t make excuses for them, and I won’t make excuses for myself either.

You see, the legacy of the South, sometimes the entire damn culture of the South, well, it shamed me then, and it shames me now. But it’s one thing to turn away from your culture, to even reject it outright; it’s another to abandon your people. I suppose this poem is my way of dealing with some of the ugly truths about my grandmother so that I can understand better. Li-Young Lee talks about this in his memoir, *The Winged Seed*. He talks about how we all, at a certain age, spurn our own kind and feel as if we should pretend not to know them. “Then we find our kind again and love them,” he writes. “If we’re lucky.”

This book captures not just *what* Fanny said but *how* she said it. How did you manage to write the vernacular of her speech without stereotyping her?

There's a way in which I feel like I've been preparing to write this book for a long, long while, far before I knew I would write it. As a grad student, I invested all of my critical studies to other authors writing in dialect, finally publishing my findings in *The Writer's Chronicle* in an essay called "Writing In The Mother Tongue: Approaches to Dialect and Colloquial Speech." In that essay, I discuss the pitfalls of making a character stereotypical by indulging in too many misspellings, especially by riddling words with unnecessary gaps and apostrophes. To me, the risk is that sometimes an exact articulation of a character's pronunciation on the page will get in the way of what's actually being said. I won't say that essay was perfect—far from it, as there are many terrible missteps I'd go back and correct now—but I did get one thing right, and that was this opening sentence: "There is a language that comes from the earliest, freshest part of me, a certain rhythm to conversation and volume to meaning that is as natural to me as breathing, particularly the last precious few deep breaths I took as a child half-awake in my bed, listening to the pop of bacon grease and percolating coffee drum with the melody of women talking, always talking, in the kitchen." In a way, this first sentence was about *Fanny Says*, many years before I'd even begun writing it.

In the book's final section, a number of poems detail your struggle to come out and your ultimate choice to marry a woman. How do these poems fit into the larger narrative?

It's funny: your relationship with someone you love doesn't end when they die. It just changes. So even though I didn't start dating women until after Fanny passed, that didn't stop me from seeking her permission. I'm pretty sure Fanny would never have approved of me being a lesbian, but it pains me to never have had that conversation with her. I mean, what if she would have surprised me with her reaction? Maybe, like so many of the people I mistakenly thought would judge me for my sexuality, she'd say something that amounted to the fact she knew all along and it didn't matter to her as long as I was happy. Maybe she would have wanted to see me get married, that perhaps she would have seen the wedding photos and told me she liked my hair up the way it was, with white roses. Those poems were written to document my relationship with Fanny since she's been gone. To me, she's never left, not entirely. To me, she's still here.

Rumor has it that you're collecting stories from readers about their own grandmothers on your website. Can you tell us more about this?

Sure. The idea came when I started to read from this manuscript a few years before it was published. You see, after every reading, members of the audience were coming up to tell me stories of their own grandmothers. I found it astonishing, really, because I've never met a grandmother even *close* to being like mine. I mean, even when I opened the set with my poem "Fuck," which was Fanny's favorite word, dozens of people stopped to tell me about their grandmothers.

So far, I've heard about a grandmother who wore red wool underwear every day of her life; grandmothers who drank rye whiskey and smoked Cuban cigars; grandmothers who wore Chanel No. 5 and drove a pink vespa around town. My first thought was to write these down, to keep them from being forgotten. So, I'm devoting a page of my new website to grandmother stories sent to me by readers. It will go live by November 2015, so if you want to add a profile of your own eccentric, hateful, unrelenting, steadfast grandmother that you love, send it to me. You can find me at **www.nickolebrown.com.**