

# An Interview with Dr. Christine Stewart-Nuñez

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Dr. Christine Stewart-Nuñez is a poet, a professor, a memoirist, and a mother of two. She is the author of five published works of poetry, *Untrussed* (University of New Mexico Press 2016), *Snow, Salt, Honey* (Red Dragonfly Press 2012), *Keeping Them Alive* (WordTech Editions, 2011), and *Postcard on Parchment* (ABZ Press 2008). Likewise, her writing has appeared in an array of magazines, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, *Calyx*, *Arts & Letters*, and *North American Review*. She won the 2014 Lyric Essay Contest at the *Lindenwood Review* with her essay “Disordered,” and her piece “An Archeology of Secrets” was a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays 2012*. Her favorite martial arts techniques are the Monkey Elbow and any aikido hand lock, and her favorite cities are

Kyoto, Jaipur, Berlin, Cork, Safronbolu, Prague, and Krakow – though not in that order.

To me, Dr. Stewart-Nuñez has always been a professor. She was my first creative writing instructor as an undergraduate, and now – six years later – she is one of my last writing instructors as a Master’s student. She has taught me new ways to use language to wrestle with tension and human experience, has given me a greater appreciation for poetry, and helped me understand the importance of each word in a written work. Her book of poetry coming out in May of 2016, *Untrussed*, artfully unravels the desires of the present, the reflections of the past, and the possibilities of the future of a woman in the middle of heartbreak.

I met with Dr. Stewart-Nuñez in busy little bagel shop in the heart of South Dakota State University: the student union. The bustle of the surrounding students reflected Dr. Stewart-Nuñez’s busy lifestyle, and provided a background noise for a comfortable interview with a woman I had chatted with colloquially on multiple occasions.

## **When did you first decide to become a writer and why?**

I don’t know when I decided to become a writer. I think I started to see myself as a writer when I was in junior high or middle school aged and I wrote lots of poems for my friends and their boyfriends and their breakups and everyone kind of knew and was like oh, we broke up will you write me a poem? So I wrote those really generic friendship poems and breakup poems. Like, I really didn’t have a boyfriend to write about myself so I just wrote about my friends.

And then I think, in high school I had a teacher who was really progressive. He would always have us write whatever we wanted to in our journals and I would always write poems or something and one time he said, “did you plagiarize this or did you do it yourself?” And I was like whoa it must be good if he thought I plagiarized it because I know I didn’t. When people started saying that I was good at it then it became more than something I just did fun.

**Do have a specific place or time that you write – a certain routine or atmosphere?**

I think rituals and talismans are really important for writers and over my lifetime of writing I’ve had different kinds of them. I think when I was free without children, it was certain places, certain times that helped me get into writing, but now I need to be more flexible so it’s really just having something hot to drink like tea or coffee. And, um, usually in my writing process, before I finish the writing session I give myself an assignment for the next session so it’s easier for me to get myself into that session and I have a clear sense of what needs to be worked on, or what I need to do so I have less time spent with my wheels spinning.

**How has your writing process changed over the years?**

The writing process has changed because I’ve needed to be more flexible, and I’ve written a lot more different kinds of things so I’ve needed to learn a lot. I know myself enough and I have a ton of tools, so I kind of know where I need to be in any particular thing.

A few years ago, I started this thing called

Dakota Women Poets and I asked nine other women poets from South Dakota and North Dakota to come together because I needed a workshop manuscript. I had a manuscript that I needed response on, and I needed people who didn’t normally see my work, people I respected, and it would be good for all of us together, so it was kind of self-serving in that I only invited women who I knew would have a manuscript – a book – ready to go. And I couldn’t travel very easily because I was really pregnant with Xavier, and I had Holden, it’s really hard for my to travel with his needs. So I kind of created that space for us.

I think in terms of the product, it hasn’t really changed. I really use art and place as kind of like a springboard for the self, for personal experience, and as ramps, as a ramp through. And so, I think that I find myself writing about the same things I’ve always written about. Whatever’s on my mind, wherever I see tension, and whatever seems to be a possibility for a creative piece, really.

**You tend to write about the most jarring emotional experiences in your life. Why?**

My two chapbooks aren’t personal based like that, like these – the recent – are. But that doesn’t mean that my personal experiences aren’t informing them or it’s not there. I don’t feel like I write from pain per se, what I do when I’m writing is I’m capturing some sort of emotional tension – something I’m trying to work out. Something I’m trying to figure out. It’s a much more analytical and intellectual process than just, you know, naming the emotions and conveying the emotions, but in poetry it tends to be distilled to the degree that it can be a singular emotion or a singular

moment it's tied to.

For me, it's like, I have had so many people tell me 'before I read miscarriage poems, I had had miscarriages and I never knew I could talk about them. I never knew it was okay to put language to them, or narratives to them, or images to them,' so I think that I'm willing to take that risk because other people see value in that story and sharing that story, and you know, Audreya Lorde said "your silence will not save you,' and she knew best. Being silent on something, it might feel safer because you don't think anyone's going to judge you, but it can just be like a cancer inside of you. Your silence can be something that just eats away at you.

**In *Untrussed*, the poems sometimes featured Wonder Woman as a protagonist. Why Wonder Woman?**

That's funny. Um, complicated question. Um. I typically use iconic women as another sounding board for different stories or different perspectives, and one of Wonder Women's poems was originally a Barbie Doll poem, and I revised it because it didn't seem to fit her anymore. Like I wanted, Barbie was not enough, she doesn't have enough responsibility.

Wonder Woman is somebody who seemed to have a ton of responsibility to save people, to save her man, she came from this Amazonian all-women, which as a feminist is really interesting to me, like she came from this all women place and yet in the TV show she's really just focused on--the Linda Carter version of her--she's really focused on saving her man and getting him out of trouble. So I think that that worked a lot for the kind of themes in the manuscript where interpersonal relationships and the disillusion of relationships of heterosexual love, right? really. So she became

more of a generative icon for me than others. I wanted see what is she like at home? What is her personal -- what is she really thinking?

**What is your biggest motivation?**

The reason I publish stuff, or I send them out....For me, I want to join the conversation. I know that what I'm writing about is important culturally. I believe that. I'm not saying like, my work in particular, but I think that what I have to say is very important.

**One piece of advice to aspiring writers?**

Make time for it. No one -- no one -- even someone who has the job of a writer, no one's asking you 'when's your next poem coming out? Or when's your next fiction story coming out?' Unless you're like one of the crême de le crême writers. Even the best writers, how many people are like 'Oh my God, I can't wait for the next novel to come out, I'm just dying for it.' You know, it doesn't really happen.

So you have to value that process. You have to love the process, you can't just love the product. The majority of time is spent getting to the end. You have to love that, or else you're going to hate half of your life, or a quarter of your life or it's going to be abysmally, horribly -- you have to, even though it's hard work, you still have to love it. Or else you're not going to do it. So making time and finding value in the process.

Poetry is a great genre because you can write inspired by personal experience and yet have it not be about your personal experience and I think one of the poems -- a lot, most of the poems -- in my book *Untrussed* are inspired by but not about people and there's this one poem in there that was inspired by a day my mom and I spent in Italy, but you would never know that. It seems like a romantic couple.

[Laughs] you know, and it was me and my mom. And I think that that's one of the great things about poetry: that you can play so much with perspective and point of view. In a way, it can be so fictional – poetry can be so fictional, even though it seems more intimate because it's poetry and first person – etc. I like that about it.

At the end of the interview, I requested to put one of her poems in the article, and Dr. Stewart-Nuñez asked if I had one in mind. I chuckled and told her I have a favorite, but she's not going to want it in the article. Which one? she inquired. Oh, I replied, "Wonder Woman Does Dream Dirty." She burst into laughter and said that is the only one you cannot put in there. Oh God! No, no, no. This launched into a conversation about how she had felt tempted to cut the poem entirely from *Untrussed*, but had to leave it because it served a pivotal moment. Needless to say, the poem features some delightfully risqué (and – as always – clever) content.

From that jovial jumping off point, Dr.

Stewart-Nuñez inquired about my plans after graduation and started to mock interview me for a teaching position. Not only is she a professor, a poet, and a mother, but she is also a mentor. She is someone you can share a coffee, laughs, and intellectual conversation with. One moment you can be talking about how her poems about miscarriage have helped others cope with their own losses, then the next you can giggle about Wonder Woman's perceived orgasms. I remember a class period in which she was talking to biology majors about how a report on water quality could potentially save the world, and she stopped, smiled, looked at me, and said, "Your writing [fiction] will save the world too, right?" I smiled and said, of course it will, as the class giggled. But neither Dr. Stewart-Nuñez nor I was joking – not really. Creative writing can help heal the mind; it can help people cope with tragic experiences, or the dull of the day the day.