

Only Knowing People Intimately Tells You Who They Are: An interview with Amy Bloom

By Libby Garland

Amy Bloom is the author of the highly acclaimed new collection of short stories, A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You. Her earlier fiction includes the short story collection Come to Me, which was nominated for the National Book Award, and the novel Love Invents Us. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, Antaeus, Story, Mirabella, Self, and Vogue, among other publications.

CLAL Senior Fellow Libby Garland spoke recently with Bloom about the very human issues that have most engaged the author and former psychotherapist in her work: the complicated ways people can be connected to (and disconnected from) each other in their relationships and communities, and the difficulty and importance of coming to understand other people intimately.

Libby Garland: *One thing I like very much about your fiction is that it is often about unconventional crossings—unlikely connections between people, whether in a cross-generational friendship or a taboo love affair, or unexpected transformations people make. Why are those the subjects that compel you?*

Amy Bloom: Well, I guess because all intimate relationships are crossings. No matter how conventional the frame, I think to know and engage with someone intimately is always a crossing of a border, always fraught, even if you've been married fifty years.

LG: *At CLAL, one of the things we question is the Jewish world's preoccupation with intermarriage—its fears of boundary crossing, and its desire to police its boundaries.*

AB: I think any small group struggles with that. If you're a small group and you're attached to your identity, there's no way not to understand that as soon as you leave the *shtetl* walls, people will begin intermarrying. You know, it's a big, seductive world out there, and if you want to be part of it at all, you run the risk that your children will embrace it. This doesn't concern me personally, but I understand that people feel anxiety about it.

LG: *But I always find those experiences of crossing the richest and most interesting.*

AB: Sure, crossings always lie somewhere on an engaging spectrum—from the unlikely ones to the almost impossible to the transgressive. And what someone else regards as transgressive I may regard as simply unlikely. Also, different things bother different people. Intermarriage doesn't bother me. Encouraging

your thirteen-year-old daughter to get a nose job bothers me.

LG: *How come?*

AB: Because the idea that a pretty girl with a large nose who looks Jewish needs to be surgically altered as soon as possible seems to me unfortunate. In general, I think that plastic surgery for adolescents—whether it's breast jobs or nose jobs—is really not such a great idea, unless of course a person is in some way disfigured.

LG: *Talking of plastic surgery reminds me of the title story in A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You, which is about a mother who helps her teenage daughter get the sex-change operation she's wanted for years. How does that story fit into your ideas about the connections between surgery and identity, and about how far you should go to change yourself or your kid?*

AB: There are different points of view about somebody being transsexual. But if you believe that some people are actually born in the wrong package, and that they will always be not just more like the opposite sex, but in fact the opposite sex inside, I certainly understand wanting to do something about that because it may never change. And it's not that I think that if you have a big nose you shouldn't fix it under any circumstance—but I do think that if you're thirteen or fourteen the people who are driving that train are your parents.

LG: *And that makes me think about your novel, Love Invents Us. The mother in the novel has this redecorating fetish that's very painful for the daughter.*

AB: Yes, it was painful for the daughter to be such a project, but also for the mother to feel that the daughter needed so much fixing.

LG: *I understand the novel took place close to your home of origin?*

AB: Yes, parts were set in a real or imagined Great Neck, where I grew up.

LG: *So what was Great Neck like?*

AB: Not unlike the town in the novel. I wasn't very happy there, but I don't know that I would have been very happy in any suburban community. I like the city and I like the country; I'm not much for the in-between.

LG: *Were you part of Jewish life in Great Neck?*

AB: Not at all—except that it was inevitable that one should be part of Jewish life in Great Neck, given the make-up of the town. No, my parents didn't belong to a synagogue, and I was very rarely in one except when my grandparents wished to go for the High Holidays, and then I would be sent as a little gift package to go

with them.

LG: *What was that like?*

AB: Boring. I stared out the window of the religious school, surrounded by a bunch of kids I'd never seen and wouldn't see again until the next year. It was largely a non-event for me. Then my grandparents would swing by, pick me up, and we'd go home.

LG: *So you didn't go to the services?*

AB: I was at the children's services—they had them so the adults wouldn't be disturbed. My memory of this is largely one of indifference. I put on a dress, I brushed my hair, I sat in the back row, nobody talked to me, I didn't talk to them, and then my grandparents picked me up.

LG: *Do you think it was important to your grandparents that you went?*

AB: Apparently. I think they would have preferred that my parents go with them, but my parents had no intention of going to synagogue.

LG: *So you were substituting for your parents?*

AB: Yes, I was like a little Purim basket, sent along as an offering. I can't have done it more than three times, though. So I was never really in a synagogue until I had children. By then, I was living in a very Christian part of Connecticut and I thought that if my children were not to grow up celebrating St. Sebastian's as a central holiday in their lives, I'd better find a synagogue.

LG: *You were in Middletown?*

AB: I was in Middletown then. Now I'm in Durham, another small town in Connecticut.

LG: *So how did you go about figuring out what you wanted to do with your kids?*

AB: It wasn't that hard; I wanted to find a synagogue I could tolerate. I found a small synagogue nearby, with a wonderful young woman rabbi, and we joined and that was it. I was reasonably active, on the board and in the Hebrew school, and the girls chose to stay on after bat mitzvah as teaching aides and then teachers in the Hebrew school. And there you have it. I don't think I really have a great feel for religious life.

LG: *Meaning the institutional stuff?*

AB: Well, I was happy to be involved when it played a significant role in my kids'

lives, and I can still imagine being involved, but in general, given time constraints, I usually have to choose between being involved in local Democratic politics and being involved in the synagogue. I did the synagogue for about ten years, and now I'm doing local Democratic politics.

LG: *One of my favorite stories in the new book is "Closing the Gates," about a woman having an affair with the non-Jewish husband of her synagogue president. It captures the texture of synagogue communities so well—sometimes with great irony, sometimes poignantly. Do you think of your writing as reflecting contemporary American Jewish life?*

AB: Yes, sure, the story is absolutely about community life, and about the high holidays, and about the possibility of forgiveness and atonement. The subject of Jewishness emerges sometimes in my work, but I wouldn't say that it dominates my fiction. If someone reads my stories and connects with them on that level, that's fine. But I don't think it's on the front burner of most of what I write, and I wouldn't say it's a central issue I grapple with.

LG: *"Closing the Gates" is also a wonderful commentary on the Yom Kippur liturgy. Do you think the story itself could work as alternative liturgy for the holiday?*

AB: I don't know. I think that would be for someone else to decide. My current rabbi said he liked it.

LG: *What did he like about it?*

AB: I think he liked the complications of the spiritual and moral universe I write about.

LG: *How did he come to see the story?*

AB: Oh, we're friends—he reads my work, we play tennis together.

LG: *Do you think—and I'm thinking here about how your kids grew up in a small Christian town—that growing up in Great Neck made you feel Jewish in a particular way?*

AB: I was certainly very conscious that I was a Jew. I mean, I lived in a town in which the public school system closed for the High Holidays. That gives you a clue: something like 95% of my high school was Jewish. I was certainly aware that the dominant culture in my little town was Jewish; that undoubtedly accounted for my actively seeking out non-Jewish friends. You know, Jewishness was simply there, like in the water or air, in a way it wasn't for my kids. They were part of a small minority; they had to deal with their share of either friendly or unfriendly anti-Semitism. I'm sure it built character.

LG: *Do you have a sense that Jewish institutions are not very good places for thinking about intimate relationships with people or the moral complexities of the world?*

AB: You know, my best friend is quite a religious and spiritual person, and I think she experiences the best of the Jewish institutions with which she comes in contact as places in which there is certainly room for dialogue, and meditation, and growth. And I think she makes a point of finding—and shaping—institutions like that. I have a lot of admiration for that, but I don't have that much contact with these institutions. I don't think Jewish institutions are worse than other institutions. Perhaps they're a little noisier—but I think that's a good thing, not a bad thing. Certainly I have had great moments in my life sitting in a pew in the middle of *Kol Nidrei*, but I don't go to institutions for dialogue and growth and meditation. I sit in my backyard for that. I'm sure that if one were so inclined, it would be a lifelong struggle to get institutions to be responsive because the nature of institutions is inertia. It takes a lot of work to change that river. I suppose that if I were a spiritual person, I would always need to find a way to be connected to that part of my life, whether it was through an institution or not. Since I'm not, that issue doesn't really arise.

LG: *You're not?*

AB: I wouldn't say so. It's not part of my makeup. It's just not part of who I am.

LG: *I always feel bewildered when that question comes up. I'm never sure what people mean by "spiritual."*

AB: Well, I don't have even the remotest interest in theology, or discussions about or ideas about God's role in the universe, our relationship with God, God's relationship with us, or heaven, or hell, or angels, or God's grace. All very interesting subjects, but they don't speak to me.

LG: *But your stories all work with the things I think religion, at its best, struggles with, too—real human relationships, the complicated moral universe. What is it that makes writing the place where you contemplate those sorts of things?*

AB: I'm a writer, so writing is that place. If you're a painter, painting is that place. I'm sure other people work those things out through their sculptures, or through their gardening.

LG: *And yet, writing is something you came to later on, after being a psychotherapist. Are the things you care about in your stories also things you cared about, or came to see, as a therapist?*

AB: I would actually say that the things I cared about led me to being a therapist and also emerge in my writing. I think that, to some extent, good therapists are

born, not made—born deeply curious about other people, with a capacity to listen, a sense of humor, an emotional resiliency and a kind of effortless compassion.

LG: *Do you miss being a therapist?*

AB: Sure. I was good at it. I knew what I was doing. In therapy, you get a partner to work with, unlike in writing, where you don't get a partner.

LG: *Yet, like therapy, your fiction is so much about human relationships, even if writing itself is a solitary activity. But do you think that your fiction is, like therapy, also about individual selves, or about identities? In the academic circles I move in, people sometimes talk about identities in isolation, as if we could imagine something about people's selves extracted from their relationships.*

AB: I think identity is an interesting and fruitful area for academics, but not something I find myself thinking about much. I mean, I think people's identities in the world are interesting and complicated and multilayered, and I think most of the efforts to simplify them are mistaken. But it is probably true that when you ask people how they think of themselves, most of the time they will either say, "Well, I'm a Jew, a woman, and a da-da-da," or they'll say, "I'm a woman, a Jew, and a da-da-da." That probably gives you some clue to how they order their identities, but I don't know that it tells you who they are.

LG: *So what tells you who they are?*

AB: Paying attention and knowing people intimately tells you who they are. Everything else, I suspect, is a gross generalization.

LG: *If you have a limited amount of time with someone, how do you figure out who they are?*

AB: The truth is, casual relationships are not of much interest to me. Categorizing people is not of much interest to me, although I'm always interested in how people present to the world and to me.

LG: *Does that mean that interviews seem particularly shallow to you?*

AB: Nobody holds a gun to my head. If it's useful for the interviewer, then I'm glad. I don't feel I'm being forced to stand on a stage and strip away my outer selves to reveal my true being. Seems an unlikely outcome for forty-five minutes. I try to be helpful, because I've said yes—but I always feel sorry, of course, for the interviewer.

LG: *And yet, it seems that in your stories there's often an important play between the complicated reality of who characters are, on the one hand, and the*

assumptions other characters make about who they are, on the other. Isn't that tension, in some ways, the core of the first story in A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You, the story about transsexuality?

AB: Sure—it's about the complexity of who someone is, and what someone really wants. And it's about other stuff that's connected to that: the wish to be seen, the wish to be known and loved.

LG: *So, do you dislike questions like, "Would you describe yourself as a Jew?"*

AB: I am Jewish. I'd say that in the same way that I'd shrug and say, "I am a woman." Those are just parts of who I am. I realize one might distinguish between "I am a Jew and when the Nazis come I'm in big trouble," and "I am an observant Jew," but still, being a Jew is absolutely part of my life and I feel lucky. It's an interesting additional piece of texture. I guess I could have been born not Jewish, and then being Lutheran could have been additional, and interesting. I find it interesting to be part of a tiny group of people, to have those cultural associations. I like that right around Christmas, when my children will be home, they'll say "Oh, won't you please make latkes?" It's a nice thing to do; two of my great dishes are matzo ball soup and latkes, that's just how it is. I don't know. No doubt if I weren't Jewish I'd be someone else, and priding myself on my marshmallow Jell-O mold, who knows?

LG: *So you never just wanted to blend into your surroundings in Christian Middletown?*

AB: I'm not so much of a blending-in kind of person. I live in a tiny, almost entirely white farm town, which is largely Republican and largely Christian, and I'm a dark-haired woman of Eastern European descent, which already makes me look different from everybody else. I wear black, I'm a Jew, I'm a writer, and I'm queer. So I figure between one thing and another, I've got plenty of identity to go around.

LG: *And yet, if you lived on the Upper West Side, that would all play differently.*

AB: Living on the Upper West Side would probably bore me to tears, actually.

LG: *Because you would blend in?*

AB: It's not like I never, ever blend in—I was a member of the PTA. But you know, it's a big interesting world, and I like being in contact with lots of different parts of it.

LG: *And it sounds like all those things to which you might answer, "I am x"—"I am a woman," "I am queer," "I am Jewish," "I am of Eastern European descent"—in some ways emerge in relationship with this community you live in that's really*

different from you.

AB: Sure. Though, on the other hand, the way most people in the town think of me is as my kids' mother, and as somebody who's been very reliable for bake sales, helpful to the library, and active in local politics. I'm sure the other things are part of their consciousness, but it's just part of the package—which is actually how I feel about it, too.

LG: *It seems like interviewers are coming at you from whatever it is that they want to know about. . . .*

AB: Sure, the woman writer, the Jewish writer. What do I care? What's it to me? It doesn't have much to do with who I am. Interviews are hard to do; weaving a narrative around this short little piece of question and answer is a tough job. Of course, people have to have an angle from which to approach it, a little step to stand on so they can dive in. I don't take it personally.

LG: *If you were interviewing you, how would you get around that?*

AB: That would be difficult, I think. It's always better to interview people who have a strong wish to tell you about themselves, and who have a desire to be seen in the world. Those make for easier interviews. I don't know. . . I'm probably more forthcoming on some subjects than on others. But it's always a challenge to figure out how to enter into a relationship with someone you don't know.

LG: *That seems so precisely the task of therapists these days, especially with HMOs. It makes me think of a great piece you did in The New York Times Magazine about how the system makes it so much easier for therapists to medicate kids rather than to do family therapy. It was poignant because it was so much about the refusal to have family relationships be at the center of therapy, and the tendency to focus instead on the kid's pathology.*

AB: Yes—that's why I never dealt with HMOs. Therapy that takes relationships seriously is often the most effective, but it sure isn't efficient. And it makes people uncomfortable.

LG: *Well—if there's one thing your stories do really elegantly, it's taking relationships seriously. Thank you for them, and also for the chance to talk.*

AB: You're very welcome.