

A Few True Exchanges

In Christine Schutt's fiction every word counts and every sentence gleams. Although she is always alert to beauty, her enduring subjects are the many darkneses of intimate life. She depicts families scarred by drunkenness and infidelity, and vulnerable young women in the houses of distant or dangerous men. Her five books include the incandescent story collection *Nightwork* (1996), a required text in many graduate creative writing programs, and the novels *Florida* (2004), a finalist for the National Book Award, and *All Souls* (2008), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. In each story, and in each chapter of each novel, she achieves moments of shocking emotional intensity.

I interviewed Schutt at a coffee shop near Washington University in Saint Louis on a warm day in the early spring of 2015. Schutt had given a reading on campus the night before, and had answered the questions of a class of graduate students that morning. Her work done, she was warm, relaxed, and generous with her time. We talked for two hours. Afterward, Schutt proved to be as rigorous an editor of the transcript of that conversation as she must be of her own fiction, extracting from a 7000 word document the few, true exchanges reproduced here. They appear with Schutt's previously unpublished story, "Family Man." The exchanges and the story may be brief, but it would be difficult to mistake the depth of experience, and the weight, that lie behind.



FENCE: How did you begin?

SCHUTT: I wanted to write poetry.

SCHUTT: “You Drive,” the first story in *Nightwork*, I started to write it in graduate school. The story started in a buff-colored cool library of a Chicago hotel. Now it starts on indulging the eye.

FENCE: That’s the story of a daughter’s attraction to her father.

SCHUTT: Exactly.

FENCE: There’s that line—“...the metals in my mouth, she said, are singing.” I won’t forget it.



FENCE: Does anything surprise you about the way your books have been received over time?

SCHUTT: What surprises me a lot is *Nightwork* having a life.



SCHUTT: I like books that are going to make me sad.



SCHUTT: No, I don’t listen to music. I get up, I walk around, I drink...

FENCE: You drink while writing?

SCHUTT: I do.



FENCE: If I could ask you a more technical point about the writing—has your sense of the arc, movement, propulsion of a piece changed over time? Is your sense of the ending, for example, different?

SCHUTT: (*The ending of an early chapter in Pure Hollywood, a novel-in-progress, in mind*): I'd never killed anyone in my fiction, and I just thought, why not? That's dramatic, and it happens all the time.

FENCE: Violence is present in your other books too but the action circles around the violence. For example, in *Nightwork's* "The Enchantment," about a young girl who lives with her grandfather, you sense terrible trauma in the background, including perhaps incest, but it's so lightly present that you could miss it on first reading.

SCHUTT: Yes.



FENCE: There are some terrible men in your fiction.

SCHUTT: They are terrible. I want to correct that. But there are so many bad men out there.

FENCE: It's interesting that many of your characters are young women in a vulnerable period in their lives—the period of becoming. Why do you think that is?

SCHUTT: They were all named Jack. This Jack came into my room, left, came back and said, "You know what your problem is? You need to get fucked." These men weren't good. Our uncles weren't violent; they just had nothing to say.

FENCE: But you are happy now.

SCHUTT: Yes, my husband, my second husband, it's easy to be kind to him and to love him.

FENCE: Has that made it possible for you to write more, to have that kind of happiness?

SCHUTT: No.