

ESCAPING OUR SOUL CAGES | By Lola Muldrew '82

I love to read. Stories inspire me, spark my imagination, connect me to the world soulfully. I like mysteries. I like adventures. Bookstores and libraries are as much a part of my life as Fuji apples and water. Lately though, I've found myself at a standstill, unsatisfied by the choices available to me book-wise, not reading much because I feel rather particular about how stories relate to *me*. These days, I'm in the mood to read about *my* life—my quirks, my struggles, my fears, my growth. I'm single, I'm black American, I'm 40, I'm a mathematician, I teach Socratically, I have no children, I've been orphaned. Unfortunately, odd duck that I am (aren't we all odd ducks?), I've had no success in uncovering a tale that even vaguely resembles my own – at least not until I read *Jump at the Sun* (William Morrow, 2006), the newest novel from Kim McLarin '82.

McLarin describes herself as having been born a writer. Professionally, she is an accomplished journalist having worked for the *New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the Associated Press. She is the author of two other critically acclaimed novels, *Taming It Down* and *Meeting of the Waters*. She is currently writer-in-residence at Emerson College in Boston.

Jump at the Sun deals with race, gender, class, love and motherhood through the eyes of Grace Jefferson, a middle-class black woman struggling with

her suburban role. Grace's life vision is given dimension and shape through examination of her own history as well as that of her mother and grandmother. This story is about abandonment and desperate choices and naive choices and old patterns and buying in and falling down and waking up and letting go. We move forward by coming to terms with the past.

I am thrilled by what I have read. Kim and I were classmates together for three years at Exeter; we shared some secrets and probably hid the most painful of them from one another. We kind

of knew each other, and then didn't as we went our separate ways so many years ago. Now I want to ask her, How did you climb into my head without my knowing it, dig through my 40 years of flotsam and jetsam, and give words and connection to my layers? This story is not about *me*, but it is, it is, it is! Similarities between me and the characters are few—still I found myself on almost every page of this book. And this both excited and scared me as Kim's words and Grace's struggles invited me into myself:

"Yes, I loved my children ... And every night I got down on my knees and prayed for their whole delivery into adulthood and beyond.

"But those were prayers offered up for what existed, for what breathed and laughed and lived. In truth, I could imagine a parallel life for myself, a life in which the two bits of unrealized humanity that were egg Harriet and egg Paula went down that river of blood like so many before. In this life, I never met Eddie, or maybe I met him and we dated but in the end went our separate, amicable ways ...

"Really, what was my problem anyway? House too big? Bills too paid? Kids too healthy and well fed? I was a sociologist, a kind of societal shrink, and as capable as anyone of casting a skeptical eye over the specter of middle-class American malaise. My life was good, objectively speaking. Envious even, exceedingly blessed, and I damn well should have been able to appreciate it. Outside my door more than three million black American children were living in poverty, and that was poverty defined by the government, which wouldn't even get a person past those grip-and-grin greeters at Wal-Mart. In some cities more than fifty percent of black men were unemployed. Fewer than fifty percent of black Americans owned their own homes, com-



In her third novel, Jump at the Sun, Kim McLarin '82 (above) deals with race, gender, class, love and motherhood through the eyes of a middle-class black woman struggling with her suburban role.

pared to three-quarters of our white friends and neighbors. I, on the other hand, had a chemist husband with a new job in corporate America, a new house, and two healthy, beautiful children who had never missed a meal. Boo hoo hoo ...

“It wasn’t like it was 7 p.m. in South-Central and I had to hide the children in the bathtub because the gang wars were raging again. It wasn’t like I was a Tutsi and the president had just been killed and the streets were boiling and the Hutu radio was broadcasting vitriol. It wasn’t like I was in tower number one and the stairwells were filled with smoke.

“It wasn’t like I was in the field picking cotton with my children and the slave auctioneer just rode past on his horse, headed up to the big house door. It wasn’t like I was uneducated or living on a pitiful government handout or struggling to raise a gaggle of children all by myself.

“It wasn’t like I was my mother. It wasn’t like I was living my grandmother’s life.”

What I appreciate most about *Jump at the Sun* is that it feels so ... *big!* I am part of it and you are part of it, as are many other people I know and have known. We are generalized and expanded. At the same time, this story is intimate and personal. It takes me to that soulful connection space that I crave, where hopefulness and possibilities abound. I encourage you to join me there.

Lola Muldrew '82 does her reading in northern California, where she is a graduate student in the mathematics department at UC Davis. She has recently received an NSF Fellowship to research collaborative classroom-based inquiry in math education.

CONNECTING OUR INNER AND OUTER LANDSCAPES | By J. Scott Finn '73

People & Places: Connections Between the Inner and Outer Landscape by John R. Myer '45 and Margaret H. Myer (Peter E. Randall Publisher, 2006), is a visually beautiful book, an object of disciplined elegance. In this fast food nation and age of disposable lifestyles, this is a provocative reflection on the intangible value of our connection to place, to the continuum of history, and to the importance of recognizing our place and our profound power in shaping it. Like the many “landscapes” described, it is layered and complex, and not easily attained in a single look.

Despite its dimensions, this is not a coffee table book, but rather a challenging essay, a sit-up-at-the-table text, which draws on the life’s work of each author. John Myer is an emeritus professor of architecture at MIT and a well-regarded architect whose buildings include the Boston Architectural Center, the library at Marlboro College and the Massachusetts State Archives. Along with Kevin Lynch, he was the co-head of the design team for Boston’s Government Center and the Boston waterfront. A psychiatric social worker, Margaret Myer was an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the Tufts University School of Medicine and a lecturer on psychology at Harvard Medical School.

Together, the Myers have written what is, perhaps, a perfect Harkness book: they challenge our assumptions and perceptions, and ask us to examine ideas we usually don’t consider about the way we inhabit our individual spaces and collective communities. The succinct and dense text is simultaneously analytical and very personal, and represents both the rationalist and the

romantic combined. One cannot disengage the senses from the mind in considering the emotional impact of the built environment. What are our physical and psychological relationships with the tangible reality of our surroundings?

To address such questions, the Myers turn to psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson and the eight stages of man he described in *Childhood and Society*. (I must



Architect John Myer '45 and his wife, psychiatric social worker Margaret Myer, draw on their respective fields to explore “the profound importance that places have for people, whether they realize it or not.”

admit a preference for Shakespeare’s version as spoken by Jaques in *As You Like It*.) The Myers guide us through Erikson’s language of personal development—trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, ego integrity—in order to find a way to talk about ideas of our spatial surroundings that are less easily explained. Their goal: to develop a language of place, a psychology of being and space.

Using Erikson’s armature of development, the Myers consider ideas that Charles Moore and Kent Bloomer advanced in their book *Body, Memory and Architecture*. Moore and Bloomer reference the body as the center and measure of the world, and our presence in space as experienced through the senses. The Myers explore the implications of

these ideas through the presentation of several personal design projects, which test the concepts through architectural practice and product. (The dormitory projects they include are wonderfully evocative of a significant time and place, and Boston is offered as a telling example of what can happen when good plans go

unheeded—oh, for the days of an emperor, king or pope!)

The Myers also examine places of cultural and historical significance to test the concepts through precedents that have evolved and proven their resilience over time. These comparisons offer a tactile—or haptic, as J.J. Gibson describes the sense of touch as experienced with and through the whole body—way of creating a synergy, and the theses the Myers are proposing begin to reverberate through time and our understanding.

The Harkness table compels us to ask questions, and the Myers ask us to consider all possibilities, to seize on opportunities to juxtapose familiar ideas in new ways. How, they ask, does *what we know* influence *how we live*? How do we analyze perceptions and preconceptions in order to create better places in the world? As place-makers and not object-makers, are there ways in which we can thoughtfully build that both understand and influence our behavior? And how do we engage *all* citizens as integral and critical constituents in the success and sustainability of our built environment?

The Myers have crafted a very personal offering to the communities of people who populate the planet, asking that we value both the individual experiences of our place in the world, and our responsibility to the greater whole. They ask us all to be consciously aware of our presence in that shared space, and to consider our physical, cognitive and emotional development as critical to our collective built history—past, present and future.

And it is an offering to a familiar way of seeing and learning: *Finis Origine Pendet.* ●

J. Scott Finn '73 is an associate professor at the Auburn University School of Architecture, as well as the director of design for the Town of Mt Laurel in Birmingham, AL.



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