

SUGGESTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

You are an academic and a professor emerita of Women’s Studies. What made you decide to write a mystery?

Until I retired in 2008, most of my time was devoted to teaching, directing my program, and publishing academic work, not to mention raising my daughter, so even though I’d had an interest in writing nonacademic work, I couldn’t make it a priority.

I became interested in mystery, however, in the 1990s when I began visiting Santa Fe and reading the mysteries of Tony Hillerman. His main characters, Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn are Navajo detectives whose points of view, to some degree, come from the margins of mainstream U.S. culture. I was taken by these novels, in large part, because I saw myself as being marginalized at my university, where I was director of the women’s studies program. In the 1990s the state was cutting the budget of the U.C. system and at Davis an increasingly corporate minded administration was threatening to defund the women’s and ethnic studies programs. Faculty from those programs joined together in a community that supported us and gave us heart as we struggled to save our programs, which we ultimately succeeded in doing.

When I retired and had the time, I decided to make this struggle between corporate and communal values the subject of a novel, and, following Hillerman, I decided to make my main characters people on the margins, faculty in women’s and ethnic studies. Also following Hillerman, I decided to cast the novel as a mystery. I wanted to engage serious subjects, while keeping readers hooked in, and I was aware that puzzles and unsolved crimes are one way of engaging reader interest.

One of the most prominent themes in *Oink* is the corporatization of the university, and while the main character, a professor, is investigating an attempted murder suspect she is also fighting against the administration’s bid to run the university like a corporation. How much does the latter come out of your personal experience in the academy?

A great deal of it came from my own experience. In the mid-1990s the state cut funding to the U.C. system and corporate financing of research was on the rise, especially in the sciences. Davis was transforming itself from a university focused on agriculture to one focused on biotechnologies. Administrators from outside the campus were being hired at princely salaries, and the school’s communal spirit seem to be giving way to an ethic based less on community—or on creating a wide ranging educational experience for its students—and more on profit. Trends like this were taking place nationally and internationally, of course, and so *Oink*’s “Arbor State” is meant to represent much wider developments in higher education.

In the wake of budget cuts and an increasingly corporate administration, the first programs to be threatened with defunding were those of women’s and ethnic studies, programs which mentored students who were marginalized by race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender and which taught those and other students to think critically about how these forces shape social and economic life

around globe. In the words of the then Vice Provost: “Small programs like your own will have to prove that they are able to keep up. Only strong and productive units will get resources from now on. Weaker programs will have to become part of big departments like English or Sociology.” You can imagine how thrilled I was to hear that.

In the end, however, the administration’s efforts to downsize women’s and ethnic studies prompted the faculty in these programs to unite and to form a tight-knit community that became a powerful resource in resisting the newly corporate ethic and in successfully ensuring the survival of our programs.

Your main character, Emily Adams, is a foodie who loves cooking and sharing food with her colleagues and loved ones, and each chapter of *Oink* ends with a recipe that has been mentioned in the preceding pages. Talk about how food builds community among your characters and the role it plays in their common struggle to fight against corporate interests.

I decided that *Oink* would feature many scenes involving cooking and dining because, in real life, food had helped bring the community of women’s and ethnic studies faculty together at UC Davis. In an effort to bond with each other, we went to endless lunches, coffees, and dinners, attended each other’s receptions which always involved good things to eat, and even met for breakfast to discuss political strategies. I myself gave a series of lavish buffets which always ended in dancing and which energized us and helped to deepen our sense of common cause.

In *Oink*, Emily cooks to be close with her daughter, and there are several moments when talking about food dissolves tension between women who are otherwise at odds. This is true, for example, when two police women come to Emily’s house to question her about the poisoning and the three begin describing their experience with cornbread. Emily also attends several receptions and meetings where food is served and while eating with her colleagues notices how breaking bread together builds up their sense of group belonging and increases their mutual trust. Sharing recipes with the reader seemed a way of extending this food-based communal experience outward.

How did you choose the recipes for *Oink*?

That’s a fun question. I decided that all the recipes would involve corn which is a common symbol of life and birth. That pigs also eat corn would emphasize a connection between the human and natural worlds, a connection espoused by the Native American elder, Frank Walker, whose emphasis on the community of all life runs counter to the increasing focus on competition, self-interest, and profit all around him. The interconnection of people and of human and natural life are themes that run throughout the novel.

I also wanted the recipes to reflect the multicultural nature of my characters, so there are corn-based recipes from European, African, Asian, Native, and Latina/o American traditions. One of the messages here is that the food traditions and food stories are various but that they also connect us across our differences in some very basic ways.

Many of the characters in *Oink* have a relationship to GMOs. The character of Peter is a prominent developer of GMO corn, and he also is the victim of a poisoning that leaves him in a coma. Members of a militant anti-GMO group have been seen lurking around campus and they may be behind the attack on Peter. These figures represent the extreme pro and anti-positions, but Emily the main character, has a far more nuanced view of GMOs. Why was it important for you to show the kind of middle ground on this issue?

I think the extreme pro-GMO position is best represented by corporations who defend all their GMO-related activities out of concern for their own profit.

I think the extreme anti-GMO movement is largely a response to the greedy practices of corporations whose burning interest is their bottom line and whose money and power allow them to patent and thereby own seeds and technologies that are too expensive for ordinary farmers to buy. The same money and power enables biotechnology companies to resist state and federal testing of their products. These companies also support large scale farming and encourage a focus on mono cropping (or growing one kind of crop) which is bad for biodiversity, the rich variety of seeds and plants and other life needed to sustain life on this planet.

Given the self-interest of one position and given, in relation to the other position, the fact that corporation are not the only means by which GMOs can operate in the world, more nuanced positions seemed necessary.

Do you think GMOs can be a force for good in the world? If so, why?

Yes, I do because genetically engineered crops can and are addressing problems of world hunger and because public funding of research allows researchers to share resources with developing nations, presenting an alternative to corporate ownership of seeds and technologies. Major scientific bodies like the World Health Organization have found no issues with the GMOs now on the market, and I know many people who work on GMOs and trust their expertise and politics. I've also read a good deal about how genetic structures are always changing anyway.

A good resource is *Tomorrow's Table Organic Framing, Genetics, and the Future of Food* by Pamela C. Ronald and Raoul Adamchak which points out that crop genes are always changing, whether through humanly controlled cross breeding or through random mutation. Efforts to produce crops that grow better or are more nutritious take decades when you use humanly controlled cross breeding. Genetic engineering takes only a generation to make similar changes. Since world population is increasing, it seems essential to develop foods that are more resistant to drought and flood, to insects and disease, and that are more nutritious to boot. Golden Rice, for example, has a precursor for Vitamin A in it and could reduce blindness in children around the world.

Monitoring for safety will remain important, but since genetic engineering involves different genes in different plants and different environments, each product has to be judged on a case by case basis. You can't just lump all GMOs together.

It's pretty clear that Emily and her women colleagues still face a lot of sexism at the university, and they deal with it by creating solidarity amongst themselves. Can you talk about how the academy has gotten better and worse for women since you first started in it?

There's no question that things have improved for women in academe since the 1960s when I was in graduate school and had only one female teacher at U.C. Berkeley and when I was told not to apply for a job when my male adviser heard that I was going to get married. "Why don't you stay home and write novels?" he said to me.

A new brief by the American Council of Education's Center for Policy Research and Strategy and its Division of Leadership Programs tells us that despite the fact that women are now getting 50% of all doctoral degrees across the disciplines, women do not hold associate professor or full professor positions at the same rate as their male peers. In looking at tenure, the report found that the more prestigious the position, the fewer the number of female faculty members who have tenure. In 2014, for example, male faculty members held a higher percentage of tenure positions at every type of institution even though they did not hold the highest number of faculty positions at every rank. The brief also found a persistent pay gap, with men out earning women by ten thousand a year on average.

While the number of women to hold the position of president has increased since 1986, as of 2011, women only held 27 percent of presidencies across all institutions of higher education. Though there are slight increases at both public and private institutions in the number of women serving as a chief academic officer (CAO), the percentage of women serving as a CAO has declined from 2008 to 2013 at public doctoral degree-granting institutions.

We still have a lot to do.

As a writer, how do you balance trying to highlight political themes in your work with the demands of telling a good story? How hard or easy was it for you to do this in *Oink*?

The biggest issue I faced was how to write so that a general audience would read. I wrote *Oink* as a mystery because I was aware that puzzles and unsolved crimes keep people reading and that within different mystery genres there were additional inducements to reader engagement. Tony Hillerman, who was a big inspiration to me, uses elements of the thriller. At the beginning of *Skinwalker*, the detective Jim Chee looks through his trailer window one desert-black night, glimpses a figure in the darkness, and then boom, boom, boom. Someone shoots at him through the trailer's wall. That kept me reading.

I'm incapable of writing a thriller, however, and, at any rate, I wanted a different feel for my novel so I turned to another genre, that of the traditional mystery or cozy. Traditional mysteries characteristically involve a small community (the university is such a community). They often feature a quirky sleuth, which, in my case, turned out to be a heightened version of myself—me

and my quirks on steroids. They tend to supply humor, of which I gave a generous dose, and some involve food and come with recipes. Each of these can charm and thereby sustain interest, especially the humor.

While the characters in your book are facing formidable challenges and have relatively little power to fight back against the forces arrayed against them—the police, rich corporations, the university’s administration—they find strength in community. This is another fundamental theme in the book. Why do you think community is so necessary and how can it be used as a political tool of resistance?

As my friend Belinda Robnett wrote in *How Long? How Long? Black Women and the Civil Rights Movement*, it is emotion that creates movement culture, emotion that is the conduit through which self-interest moves toward consonance with collective interest, toward a sense of common cause. Love and connection, not purity and othering, build political movements, and this is what true community can create. In the Civil Rights Movement, for example, grassroots black women organized large numbers of ordinary people by going door to door, listening to their needs (instead of coming at them with an agenda), worked at meeting those needs and built face-to-face relationships of friendship and trust. A sense of connection and closeness is what gives people the will and the strength to fight injustice.

Another example is the cross race community I participated in at U.C. Davis when faculty from the women’s, American’s, and four ethnic studies programs formed a political alliance to defend our programs from being disappeared, to address issues of inequality on campus, and to form a community in which we would feel at home. Largely led at first by women but then by men as well, this inter-racial community came together because of small everyday acts of working on the relationship—showing up at each other’s talks and demonstrations, becoming engaged with each other’s personal lives, listening to each other, checking in, talking out conflict, offering support, throwing parties, occasionally dancing joyfully with each other in the hallways outside our offices, and eating meals together.

The lesson I take from this is that forming and organizing as communities can accomplish a great deal and that communities which involve the often invisible labor of “working on the relationship” are especially powerful.

This is the first novel in a series of mysteries, called *Food for Thought*. What’s next for Emily?

So glad you asked. The next book is called *Terroir* with the *i* crossed out so it can also be read as *Terror*. It involves wine making, which is a specialty at “Arbor State,” and it focuses on secrets, especially secret labor. It also explores the idea that terroir, defined as one’s natural and humanly created environment, shapes one’s character just as it informs the taste of wine. Wines can be fruity, spicy, grassy, etc., but if they have too much of certain yeasts, they can also taste of band aid, barnyard, or cadaver. The recipes will be for food flavored with different wines (but not of the band aid, barnyard, and cadaver strains.)

