



Waxing Poetic

Becca Klaver (MFA '07)
Photo: Courtesy of Becca Klaver

Becca Klaver's journey from her back yard to the Big Time.

BY: JAMES H. EWERT JR. (BA '07)

Becca Klaver has come a long way from the ravine in her back yard. That's where she and her sisters passed the summers by creating fictional languages comprised of made-up words. And when she wasn't building her pretend vocabulary, she filled spiral-bound notebooks with rhyming stanzas about unrequited love—poems, she says, that were little dramatic monologues of fictional characters, lyrically abstract. She was eight years old.

Now twenty-nine, Klaver is a graduate of a signature program in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences: the MFA in Creative Writing - Poetry, housed in the Department of English, and she's compiling a

collection of contemporary poetry written by women poets. The as-of-yet-untitled book is an anthology for teenage girls, which she's co-editing with Associate Professor Arielle Greenberg of the Department of English. The two developed a close friendship while Klaver was an MFA candidate.

And yet Klaver's connections with the Department of English and Greenberg might never have happened if it hadn't been for a poem she read six years ago in a small, independent bookstore in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, called the Woodland Pattern Book Center. Thumbing through a book that day, she came across the poem "Tornado at Dairy Queen." Its ending resonated with her deeply:



Photo: Andrew Koszewski

*“Just a mess—paper cups and brick,
that one sobbing girl, scoops, void of wind
where wind was. Thank you. We thought we would
die. We were still wearing the right kind of white hats.
In the midst of it, we saw nothing. The sweetness
twisting furious past.”*

The author of the poem was Columbia’s own Arielle Greenberg.

“That’s how I learned about [Greenberg’s] theory of the ‘gurlisque,’ which spoke so much to me about how I envisioned third-wave feminist art and writing,” says Klaver, who applied to the MFA in Creative Writing – Poetry program in the Department of English not long after reading Greenberg’s poem. “It was one of those moments when you’re so grateful that someone has articulated these vague inklings you’ve had.”

Since earning her MFA in Poetry in 2007, Klaver has established herself as a serious poet of

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The Department of English’s MFA in Creative Writing – Poetry, led by Associate Professor Lisa Fishman, is one of the only single-genre Poetry programs in the country. Although the number of students admitted varies a bit from year to year, the department tends to admit about twelve highly qualified MFA candidates a year, and graduates of the program have published full-length poetry collections through national publishers at a ratio that’s almost unheard of in the poetry world. “It’s incredible what our students have accomplished on a national scale,” Greenberg says. “We are really proud of them.”

“The program itself is ideal for anyone interested in being exposed to, and writing, challenging, innovative, experimental work,” Klaver says. “Experimental is sometimes code for inaccessible in the poetry world, but at Columbia it’s the opposite of that.”

While Klaver’s interest in writing may have originated with creating fictional languages in her back yard, her passion for prose has carried on throughout her life. In high school, she excelled in creative writing and English. Coming of age as a writer when the Internet became ubiquitous, her first writing group was on an AOL message board called “I was a Teenage Writer.” These were her formative years, she says, and much of her work today attempts to process and analyze that period of her life.

Although a great deal of her success as a poet and publisher can be attributed to what she learned as an MFA candidate, Klaver traces it all back to that small Milwaukee bookstore, where a poem about a reunion, a tornado, and a Dairy Queen changed her life.

“I just loved how Arielle used every twist on tornado—swirl, sweetness ... and spun them out until they were hardly metaphors at all,” Klaver says. “This was language at its most playful, and it had an urgent human heart, too.”

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“extreme and astute intelligence,” Greenberg says, who “represents the best of Columbia students.” Her writing has appeared in dozens of literary journals, including *Sawbuck*, *Avatar Review*, and the Department of English’s own *Columbia Poetry Review*. She’s also published a book, *LA Liminal*, which is based on her experiences in Los Angeles as an undergraduate student at the University of Southern California. On top of all that, she’s the co-founder of Switchback Books, a nationally known, Chicago-based feminist press, and she’s working on a PhD in English at Rutgers University. She credits the Poetry faculty with helping her find her poetic voice.