

# K. Tempest Bradford

## Mary Anne Mohanraj

Hi, everybody. I'm Mary Anne Mohanraj. I'm here today from the Speculative Literature Foundation and I'm interviewing K. Tempest Bradford. Tempest and I have known each other for a very long time at this point, starting, I don't know, maybe twenty years ago, but our first professional engagement was when she wrote a story, "Until Forgiveness Comes," which was published in the magazine I founded, Strange Horizons. It totally blew me away, the story, written in the wake of the Twin Towers falling, and it's one that I teach fairly often. So I wanted to ask Tempest to cast her mind back to that story. I know it's been reprinted since then in an anthology about the Towers falling, and I'm sorry, if you can remind me of the name,

## K. Tempest Bradford

It was "In the Shadow of the Towers."

## Mary Anne Mohanraj

That's right, In the Shadow of the Towers. And so we can find it there. You can find it at Strange Horizons. In the story, you have people who have been through a disaster and who are involved in an act of remembrance, and it's using technology to create holographs. Is that fair? I mean, tell me if I'm describing it right or wrong in any way. And as a result, it's tremendously vivid. And you put us in that moment, and then you ask some very hard questions about who has the right to be there, what kinds of things we want to commemorate and how. So maybe if you could just talk a little about what led you to write that story and what you were thinking about as you were putting it together?

## K. Tempest Bradford

Sure. So, I wrote that story because I was living in New York during 9/11 and like a lot of other people, it took me a very long time to even process that experience. And I was pretty far away from it because where I was living at the time was Inwood in New York which is at the very top of Manhattan. My friends and I often joke that any kind of disaster that happens like the Cloverfield Kaiju would be far from Inwood, and we would have plenty of time to escape. But on that day, it felt less like, "Oh, I could escape because I don't know what's happening." It was an experience that a lot of New Yorkers had. After that, even though I was still living in New York, I tried hard not to pay attention to the commemorations around 9/11 because it was all too much and I still hadn't dealt with my own stuff around that. But then, maybe five or six years after, I was like, "Well, I think I'm pretty well-processed now. So I can listen to NPR on the 9/11 Memorial," and I was wrong. I was listening to, I think it was Margot Adler, talking about what they were doing at what was still a hole in the ground. They would have people come up, and they would have them read the names of their loved ones who died. Then, there would be a bell strike to indicate that this is when the first plane hit and this is when the second plane hit. So they were essentially recreating the day because they started at whatever time in the morning everything kicked off; they had people reading the names and ringing the bells. And I was like, "Woah! Do you all realize you are doing some heavy ritual magic here?" And I was thinking how we got to this point where this ritual is being played because even though it is a key part of human experience,

it hasn't always been part of mainstream American experience because we don't see a lot of rituals going on. But here one was created. So I started thinking about ways to get into thinking around the rituals around mass death and how that might play out if the culture was different, if it was a culture that was even less squeamish than general American culture is about talking about death. American culture does not deal with mass death well. I was also thinking about how New York City has been the venue for so many moments like that. I went to NYU; one of our school buildings was on the location of where the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire happened. In the 1920s or 1930s, there was a major disaster on the Staten Island Ferry where a bunch of people died. Even though the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire happened early in the 1900s, when I was in school in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was still a ceremony in front of that building every year on the anniversary. So I wanted to process my feelings around the way we ritualize remembrance of mass death, and how that can be detrimental and comforting at the same time for different people. I was thinking how when we ritualize mass death, it can also continue to make it so that nobody can move on from their feelings, or they can't move into the process of dealing with the issues that lead to those people committing those crimes. There is also the risk of conflating the people who commit those crimes with everyone from their culture and that becomes harder and harder as you spend more time wrapped up in the same rituals. So that's what I wanted to talk about, and because the NPR piece had inspired it, I wrote it like an NPR piece.

### **Mary Anne Mohanraj**

I've got two follow-up questions. I want to talk about technology first, and my second question is when it's valuable to ritualize and put effort into remembrance and when it can lead to damage. It can lead to clinging so hard to the past that we wound ourselves again and it gets in the way of healing. To link it to my question about technology, I think your use of holography here probably influenced a story of mine. I have a story, "That She Might Fly," published a few years ago. In it, there's a father who's lost a daughter, and he had taken holograms of her while she was alive. And he sets them up all over his house. So when someone comes into the house, they think it's full of little girls and slowly they realize what's actually going on. And he has to be evacuated because there's a disaster coming, and he can't bear to leave. Apart from the influence of your story, I had gone to Alcatraz, and I didn't really expect very much from going there, but they had set up audio recordings of people who had been there. I don't know whether it was the actual people or actors, but as you walked past the cells, they kind of faded in and out, so you could hear them talking. It was tremendously ghost-like and unnerving. At one point, it made me want to cry. There was one man talking about how many nights when you're in Alcatraz, the sound of people partying in the city across the water would carry over the water. It was incredibly effective, and it was just an audio recording. So, let's talk about how you were imagining technology affecting this process.

### **K. Tempest Bradford**

Technically, it is a magical process, but I also wrote it in such a way that you could read it any way. The whole point was what these people felt that they were invoking; a lot of people are invoking their dead relatives as a way to see them again, even though their dead relative is not actually interacting with them. It's like the thing that's left behind.

### **K. Tempest Bradford**

In ancient Egypt, there are five parts to the soul. The 'ba' and the 'ka' people know about the most because they get written about the most. The 'ba' is your personal soul that goes from person to person as you reincarnate. The 'ka' is the spark of life that everyone gets from the Creator. Then, there's the 'sheut' which is the shadow. This is not really a person, it doesn't have the consciousness of the person; it's a shadow of what they were. Various ancient Egyptian texts came up with the thinking that if you were going to invoke the shadow in the place where someone died, it would be like those few moments before death. But you couldn't talk to them and have them react to you. That's what I wanted; not ghosts that came back and interacted with you but ghosts that just existed. So, I wrote various people dealing with those ghosts in different ways. Some said goodbye, and that was it. Eventually, the shadow would disappear if nobody calls them up, and they became a metaphor for how people let go because nobody was invoking the shadow anymore. But then there are some people who think that they're not just invoking the shadow. They believe they're literally pulling these people from the afterlife for this ritual, putting them back where they were when they died. That is what a lot of this is about; people not letting go and really holding on to their loved ones. There's another story I wrote called "Elan Vital," which was recently reprinted in "Black Sci-Fi Short Stories." I wrote it to deal with my mother's death from cancer. It's based on a dream that I had and continue to have. In the dream, I would say something like, "How much time do we have left?" She would reply with, "I have about a week," or "It's just today." I finally realized after years and years of having this dream that my brain was trying to tell me "I've brought your mother back but I can only back her up from death for a certain amount of time." That's why I kept asking about the time. From that, I wrote this story about a woman who literally brings her mother back to life. She gives up some of her life force for her mother to come back to life. So she's kept in this stasis in the moment before death, and then she's given more life to come back. And sometimes it's for a couple of hours, sometimes it's as long as a day, but however long it is, it's taking that off of the person's life, right? In the story, the mother and daughter finally have the conversation about how the daughter needs to let go. The daughter has given up too much of her life force, taking years off of her life just to spend more time with her mother. I feel like a lot of my early stories were about how people want to cling to the people that they lost, especially if they lost them in a terrible way a sudden way. I remember when that story got published on Escape Pod, some people in the forums didn't understand it. Other people replied to them saying if they had gone through such a big loss, they would understand. That was the most sort of satisfying comment I could have ever gotten: other people who understood that grief understood the story that I was trying to write. That grief has affected everything I've done ever since.

### **Mary Anne Mohanraj**

That's right; it's more ghost-like and magical.

### **Mary Anne Mohanraj**

To some extent, you're using tech; to some extent, you also use magic. I want to do a side-by-side reading, and it'd be interesting to see the similarities but also the differences in how you handle these issues. You're working on a novel and you were traveling to Egypt and doing research. How has your travel research gone? What led you to work in that area?

### **K. Tempest Bradford**

So this novel is a steampunk novel set in ancient Egypt. I'm still writing it, I feel like I'll be writing it forever. This novel taught me much about my process. But I needed to go to Egypt. When I was in college, we went to England for a three-week class. We got special access to Stonehenge, so we actually got to walk into Stonehenge and touch it. I had seen pictures of Stonehenge all my life, but I had never gotten the scope of how giant these stones are. These people dragged these stones from far away, and they put them together like this. They're huge. Similarly, I've seen plenty of pictures of things in Egypt, including layouts of temples and writings on the walls, but I knew I needed to go to Egypt. So I visited in 2017, and it gave me exactly what I needed. It gave me the real scope of things. I had to tease out a lot of nonsense from my research to understand how Egyptology had evolved. One thing that always startled me was the claim that only 10% of their population was literate, and I thought; why would there be all this writing on the wall then? I don't believe people in ancient Egypt were staring at this iconography, not knowing what it meant. I've been to Egypt twice now and I can read some hieroglyphics. I have looked at them and realized there's no way that people who literally lived here could not understand them, and that was something I could only wrap my mind around after seeing how much of the writings were everywhere, the inside and the outside of the temples. In the same way, you can't get a scope of the pyramids without seeing them. I appreciate whoever built them because I walked all the way up into the middle of the pyramid and that was hard. Sometimes, you need to be in a place in order to see 'what does that look like in the distance' or 'what does that look like when I'm sitting next to it' because conveying that is key. The characters interact with these different places. So I needed to do that.

### **Mary Anne Mohanraj**

I had a similar experience when I visited Sri Lanka to do some research. I'd known that Sri Lanka had been a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society for 2000 years. But there's been so much recent conflict centered on some of these issues, and it's hard to feel the truth of that. These giant Buddhist temples are beautiful and peaceful. There's often a White Buddha carving, and it's all very spare and Spartan. Just over to the side is the Hindu temple, and it is an explosion of color and gods and goddesses. And you have to think they must have gotten along pretty well if they would go to all this effort to build these two temples in the same building. And people worship whichever one they choose, and then probably eat together afterwards. So it really brought home the reality to me in a way that I don't think I got from books beforehand. So when I read the early draft of your novel, I was totally enraptured by these clockwork figures you were using and the way the spirits were moving through the book. But that was all before you went to Egypt. So I'm sure it's even more fabulous now. I know sometimes it takes a while as novels are hard to predict but whenever the novel finishes, I look forward to reading it. I want to talk about the book that you have coming out. So you've done short fiction and nonfiction. You've written for NPR, and you've done game writing. You also have a middle-grade book coming out in September 2022. And it's called Ruby Finley versus the Interstellar Invasion. Why don't you just tell us about it? What do you want us to know?

### **K. Tempest Bradford**

So this book came out of nowhere for me. I was not planning on writing a middle-grade book. But basically, it's about an 11-year-old black girl who is a genius, and she wants to be an entomologist; she loves bugs, insects, and creepy-crawlies. One day, in the front yard, she sees a very weird bug, so of course, she scoops it up, puts it in a mason jar, and takes it inside. She's trying to figure out what it, but

she can't find it in her books or on the internet. So she takes a picture of it and puts it on Twitter. As soon as she's done, she looks back at the jar and the bug is gone. She looks at the window, and it's burning through her window screen and escaping. Then, five black cars roll up to her house and men in black suits emerge asking about the image. It begins the adventure of these men in black suits and this bug. So that's what it's about.

**Mary Anne Mohanraj**

And she's gonna save the day, I hope.

**K. Tempest Bradford**

She will, she will totally save the day.

**Mary Anne Mohanraj**

That is awesome. I am really looking forward to reading it. I think there's just been a terrific explosion of fabulous middle-grade recently so I'm glad to see your book joining in next; Ruby Finley versus the Interstellar Invasion in September 2022. We're gonna start wrapping up this, but Tempest also teaches writing classes and has for quite a long time, in-person and online. Some of her classes that are coming up are on her website, which is [kaytempestbradford.com](http://kaytempestbradford.com). So I'd like to know if you could give us just a little taste of something that you like to teach.

**K. Tempest Bradford**

As far as writing 'the Other' goes, I have so many things. There are two aspects of writing craft that I have discovered that few people have exposure to, or maybe they have bad feelings about them. One is writing exercises, and the other thing is structure. It depends on how you were taught, but some writers are taught to mistrust structure because it takes the creativity out of things.

**Mary Anne Mohanraj**

I think people also misunderstand things just from the MFA-program point of view. People talk a lot about things evolving organically. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have to have a structure that works.

**K. Tempest Bradford**

Exactly. We get a lot of students who hadn't thought about doing this kind of background work because they believe everything should come out organically. I remind them it's still organic because you still have to make it up. One of the writing exercises we give students is all about character background. You pick a relationship that's key to the character's life, and you ask a series of questions. What was the beginning of this relationship? What is the first point of real risk in the relationship? What would the character describe as their best day ever with that person? And what is the end of that relationship? So you take that, you pick one, and you write out the scene. After you've written out the scene from the perspective of the character you're focusing on, you then write the same scene from the other person's point of view. Not only does this allow you to get into more of the character's background, but it also helps make that relationship real. The other background exercises we have students do is to answer basic questions. What is your character's greatest fear? What is your character's greatest desire? And there's usually some event in their life that has engendered those things. Sometimes it is the same event, so we will have the students think about the greatest fear and the greatest desire and then write

those scenes of how those came about. They may have thought about it as a writer but wouldn't have deeply explored how it came about. Sitting there and exploring where it came from helps you to get to know your character better. Sometimes you reveal things to yourself that you didn't know consciously. And it's still organic because you are still making it up in the moment. But whatever it is that comes out of that will help you understand that character better in the work-in-progress as you go forward. I'm very suspicious of the idea that you must get to know your character over the course of them going through their greatest change or whatever; you can imbue them with who they are and where they start because that's hopefully going to be different depending on the type of story you're writing at the end.

### **Mary Anne Mohanraj**

To go back to the first thing you were talking about, it reminds me of how that kind of exercise can also be helpful when you have written cardboard characters. So I had one story where I had a villain, and he was just a villain, so he was not very interesting. I ended up realizing that, thankfully, and I wrote a scene from his point of view from earlier in his life. It just crystallized everything about why he's acting the way he's acting. When I came back to the story, I could write him more coherently. I think that writing exercises, especially if you are new to them, can feel like a lot of weight. But I think of it more like running scales on the piano before you work on a piece; it's a little like a jumpstart to get the writing muscles going too, so don't be scared of them.

### **K. Tempest Bradford**

Exactly. Every other artistic discipline has this. When you are learning an instrument, you play a lot of scales and simple songs before you start with something complicated. You practice when you're a dancer, you're doing a lot of sketching that no one's ever gonna see when you're an artist. Writing is perhaps one where practice of this kind is very undervalued, and sometimes devalued. People insist you work on that work-in-progress. But no words are ever wasted. That's the other thing that I hear from a lot of students; they fear that they've ruined all those words because they cannot use them. But you are using them because when you're writing, you learn more about writing. So even though it's not going in your work-in-progress, it doesn't matter because its contributing to your writing skill set.

### **Mary Anne Mohanraj**

And I feel like that may be something where we've failed students a little with science fiction and fantasy workshop models. It tends to be very story focused, on getting a story completed and published. One thing I appreciate about my early writing classes in college and my MFA was I had teachers who talked about morning pages, or we talked about just keeping the pen moving on the page and build in those exercises. I really like Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* which is just full of pages of exercises like this. So all right, well, I've kept you for more than half an hour trying to not exhaust all my writers. Tempest and I are at EXPO; we're at the very tail end of a long conference, finishing it off. So I think we're going to probably go poolside and get a drink next. But I will leave you with a note about her classes. She teaches the *Writing the Other* classes jointly with Nici Shawl, who is also a fabulous writer. I'm not sure quite when this will air. The next class they have scheduled this for April 9 2023. Again, her website is [kaytempestbradford.com](https://kaytempestbradford.com). Tempest, is there anything else you want to leave people with?

### **K. Tempest Bradford**

Just write, WRITE! Exercises. Write. That's it.

**Mary Anne Mohanraj**

Thank you so much, that's great.

**Mary Anne Mohanraj**

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**Darius Vinesar**

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