

## A CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN TICHY

---



Photo Credit: Susan Tichy

Susan Tichy is the author of four books of poetry: *Gallowglass* (Ahsahta Press, 2010), *Bone Pagoda* (Ahsahta Press, 2007), and *A Smell of Burning Starts the Day* (Wesleyan University Press, 1988). Her first book, *The Hands in Exile* (Random House, 1983), received the Eugene Kayden Award for Poetry. Susan received a B.A. from Goddard College and an M.A. from the University

of Colorado, and is a Full Professor at George Mason University, where she has taught since 1988 in the MFA and undergraduate programs. Her work has appeared in *AGNI*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *CutBank*, *Indiana Review*, *Ploughshares*, and other journals. Her latest book, *Trafficke: An Autobiography* is forthcoming in early 2015 from Ahsahta Press.

*Quiddity* Poetry Editor Tracy Zeman conducted this interview about Tichy's latest poetry collection via email. The following text of this interview has been edited for the journal.

**Tracy Zeman:** *Trafficke: An Autobiography* encompasses large subjects—ancestry, real and false; early American history, what happened to the land and its people when Europeans began their “settlement”; American slavery; Scottish history and the MacGregor proscription. The discussion and juxtaposition of those subjects reveal a number of significant themes: literacy, texts, unrecorded histories, words and violence, history and violence, land and power. I could name many more. What compelled you to write this book? To undertake such an enormous project?

**Susan Tichy:** That's like asking Frodo Baggins why he left the Shire—you have no idea where a journey will lead.

I had been raised with a strong Scottish-American identity, a MacGregor identity, and pride in the rise of our 17<sup>th</sup> c. immigrant ancestor, Alexander Magruder, from prisoner of war to prosperous landowner. I had read all I could find about Alexander—there isn't much—and found no overlap with the much better documented history of Clan Gregor, to which he was said to belong. This made me curious, and a little skeptical, but there was no obvious path by which I could learn more. Then, in the mid-1990s, I read Francis Jennings' *The Invasion of America*, which focuses on early contact history

“That’s like asking Frodo Baggins why he left the Shire--you have no idea where a journey will lead.”

along the east coast, and it dawned on me that Alexander Magruder was an original displacer of Natives in Maryland—a fact not featured in family stories. In hardly more than an instant, Alexander stepped out of the hazy Scottish past into a dreadfully realistic American story. He stopped being legendary and became historical. So, though there was little more to be learned

directly about Alexander’s biography, I began to investigate the historical forces and circumstances that governed his life. *Trafficke* began with that simple idea: to figure out who and what Alexander actually was.

And then came language. For a poet, reading historical documents is an orgy! Words shape-shift constantly—which foregrounds their materiality and historical contingency, but also, paradoxically, illuminates something enduring and immaterial in a word. I knew from the day I first put ink on a page that *language* would also be a path of entry. Everything else came from those two decisions. *Thirty-one miles of metal shelves / bill path in.*

**TZ:** Your last two books, *Bone Pagoda* and *Gallowglass* were written almost entirely in couplets. *Trafficke* is written in a mixed form, prose and verse, and the verse falls in various forms, from single lines to entire pages. Why did you choose a mixed form for this book?

**ST:** I began *Trafficke* long before either of those books. Chronologically, its inception falls after my early books, *The Hands in Exile* and *A Smell of Burning Starts the Day*. *The Hands in Exile*’s primary setting—the Golan Heights—provided context for the poems. In *A Smell of Burning*, by contrast, I was working with a complex and highly particular history with which most American readers were unfamiliar. I wrote the story into the verse, or tried to—but it was a struggle, and I didn’t always like the result. In *Trafficke* I wanted to liberate the verse, without cutting it loose from its motivations and contexts; so I built a narrative platform in prose. Through the work itself, I learned a deep reverence for the dance between forms—they each translate and make possible the other’s movement. The whole book is about needing to know, expanding one’s willingness to know...thus also about the limits of what we *can* know, what each of us is capable of knowing. The shifting form demonstrates that sense of limit, but also the ways forward.

**TZ:** The verse in *Trafficke* is deeply beautiful, a type of polyphonic chorus that includes

various dictions, texts and languages. It reinforces the sense of the prose, but at the same time changes it—lightening, darkening, warping, commenting or interpreting. The prose at times can be poetic and enigmatic, and the verse sometimes functions as a list of artifacts or people. How did you intend the prose and verse to interact throughout the book?

**ST:** I like your list of possibilities—*lightening, darkening, warping, commenting or interpreting*. All true. Yet boundaries are always zones of violation; so, yes, at times the *prose* becomes *prose poem* and verse sometimes plays a role in narration. I think (and you can tell me if I'm wrong) that the verse has a wider range of emotional registers, and can dive more deeply inward. It can love beauty for beauty's sake, and toss around fragments of language with greater abandon. Sometimes the shards land lightly, and sometimes tragically. Most readers of this book will be readers of poetry, so the verse is also a place of refuge. It has its own kind of density, but offers respite from an overkill of information in the prose. Still, you can't just hydroplane through the lyric passages: sometimes the verse betrays you with facts, and sometimes you can't make sense of the prose if you slid too lightly through the verse.

**TZ:** Yes, I agree, “boundaries are places of violation,” but boundaries are also places that are packed with possibilities—I'm thinking of the ecological term “edge effect” or “ecotone”—because the reader is forced to consider how the two edges mingle and overlap. In the boundaries between prose and verse you create a space where numerous interpretations of themes or words or threads are possible.

**“Through the work  
itself, I learned a deep  
reverence for the dance  
between forms--they  
each translate and make  
possible the other's  
movment.”**

**ST:** Yes, absolutely: violation and possibility, intermarriage, and unpredictable results.

**TZ:** Finally, regarding form, why did you decide to move around in time and place in *Trafficke*? With such complex information, it would seem to further complicate the story to approach it nonlinearly. Why did you do so?

**ST:** I never considered a straight chronology. Only part of the story is *what happened*. The rest is *which parts of what happened are meaningful, which parts do we choose to make meaningful*. So I start with some of the stories I grew up with, and I close with a lyric

repositioning of self in relation to all I've learned since. What you might call the principle narrative actually is fairly linear—from early Maryland straight through to Emancipation. It's the Scottish story-lines that kink and tangle, determined partly by my own wanderings through identity and discovery, partly by the need to bring certain narratives into relation with each other. Ultimately, I needed to bring the Magruder belief in a Clan Gregor identity into dialogue with the Magruder reality of slave-owning.

**TZ:** In *Trafficke* lines like “an history / caesarian delivery at swordpoint into snow,” “paper burns so quickly once the ink has dried,” and “sword-word-sword” create a relationship between history, violence and language. Why are these themes so prominent in *Trafficke*?

**ST:** “[W]ords evolved from centuries of conquest have been created for the purposes of conquest rather than the purposes of knowledge.” – Francis Jennings

“Poetry unsettles our scrawled defense; unapprehensible, but dear nonetheless.” – Susan Howe

“This is my trade; it's the set of skills I have spent my lifetime learning.” – Dick Gaughan

“Never trust a fair copy, words by which the violence of revision is concealed.” – *Trafficke*

**TZ:** In your poem “In Purpose at my Booke” you write:

barn *was built*  
milk house *was built*  
kitchen *was built*  
school house *was built*  
torn down

This is what you might call *passive construction*  
verbs lost in wild grammar enslaved  
dropped comma on the black coast  
a syntax of periphery

I'm interested in the phrases *was built* and *passive construction*, the idea that these buildings just appeared, though they actually were built by slaves. To me this “passive construction” seems related to the “passive destruction” that is so troubling—and deceitful—in the retelling of American History—e.g. Indians just disappearing when

in fact there were very real causes for their “disappearance,” and for deaths like one you mention earlier in the book: “*Hanged himself in ye old 40 ft Tob. house not any reason. (For I had no person to speak to).*” The exposure of this type of passive history seems significant throughout *Trafficke*. Can you talk a little bit about this thread in the book?

**ST:** The *passive construction* passage is unusual in that many of the lines, and the whole catalog of passively constructed buildings, come from an account of exactly what I’m writing about—Nathaniel Magruder on the Virginia frontier. In a remarkable grammatical feat, Nathaniel’s is the only agency in the farm-building narrative. There’s no denial that slaves were *there*, but they were just something Nathaniel *had*. They did not *act*. This language is unusually explicit, but, as you

**“Only part of the story is what happened. The rest is which parts of what happend are meaningful, which parts do we choose to make meaningful.”**

say, it only makes visible what is everywhere implicit in the telling of our history. I have quoted such language throughout the book in order to own it—because we do own it, like it or not—and to resist passivity by my own acts of construction. Littering the text with traces, with paths that appear and disappear before they can be followed, just as they do when one reads a partial (in both senses) historical record, I build a model of that record. I can’t restore what’s lost, what was never recorded, but I can build a model of narration that admits to its failures, to the facts and to the absence of facts, showing its own messy seams. Who says *my cook, Jane*? Who says an African man who hanged himself had no reason? Who was beating her fists on the ground? Whose shame did I bring to the Maryland of 1795, divided between free and slave economies? Each fragment is like a face looking out at us, or a voice whisked away even as it speaks. Collage method elides contexts, even as it builds new ones. This textual instability is itself a figure for various ideas, including the violently public yet delicately personal nature of racial/racialized experience.

**TZ:** From previous conversations with you, I understand that between the first version of *Trafficke* and the current manuscript you discovered that the tie binding the Magruders to MacGregors was false, and that the discovery of this false history would cause quite a stir among the American Magruders. Can you talk about your feelings when you made this discovery? What it meant to you personally and to *Trafficke*?

**ST:** Right. I finished it in 1999, but knew by that time that a McGruther researcher in Scotland—who for years had been ransacking archives and public records for every early trace of the name—had found no evidence of a Clan Gregor connection. DNA work was just getting started at that time, as well, and I knew that before long we'd have another kind of answer there. In a way it was a relief, as the lack of demonstrable connection had felt like a blind spot right at the heart of the book. And Clan Gregor history—which is breathtakingly violent and romantic, but also a rat's nest of political intrigue—was absorbing too much of the book's energy. So part of me felt abandoned, but another part felt freed. That too-bright light had been switched off and suddenly there were whole new vistas. In Scotland, in those years, I sometimes introduced myself as a former MacGregor. But, in all seriousness, I had to go through a period of mourning before I could start again, this time asking a new question: *why?* Why did Magruders in America believe they were MacGregors? And how long had they believed it?

**TZ:** In some ways that is even a more interesting question!

**ST:** I learned from a folklorist, my good friend Margaret Yocom, how to interrogate an oral tradition. If someone says a belief has been handed down, ask *who* has handed it down--and where, and when, and how. Historically, there's a strong connection between Scottish-American identity and Southern identity. The romance of the Lost Cause embraces both Highland and antebellum culture, the Jacobite rebellions and our Civil War. When I was young I had an urgent need to break that connection, to bring my Scottish identity into contact with contemporary Scotland and with my own politics and art. My first guides were folksingers, who seamlessly connected Scotland's past and present, and thus introduced me to its Leftist and internationalist traditions. *Trafficke* is a more frontal assault, a direct deconstruction of the Scottish-American brand I was fed as a child.

As for American Magruders—we're a divided camp. There are at least twenty thousand of us, by the way, and most probably pay these matters little mind. Of those who are invested, most still embrace the Clan Gregor story, and by some I have been excoriated. In my camp, I'm grateful to all fellow travelers, including both white and African American Magruders and descendants of people my ancestors enslaved: if I have a clan now, we're in it together.

**TZ:** How did you feel when you discovered through your research the extent of the Magruders' slave-owning? And has writing about slavery from your perspective, the perspective of a white woman, been challenging?

**ST:** Well, I knew they'd owned slaves—or that some of them had—but I had no idea the extent of it, nor any idea that it went back as far as Alexander himself. I know now

that this ignorance was part of my general ignorance of early Chesapeake history; but at the time each revelation was contesting with family narratives, my mother's words and silences, the Magruder identity I had been raised with. My mother always distinguished between Magruders in Maryland and our relations in Virginia, who, during my childhood, were still defending their slave-owning ancestors and firmly white-supremacist in their own politics. So when I first saw those words—*one man negro named Sambo*—in the inventory of Alexander's estate, it was like a physical blow. Not just the fact of it, but that name, of all names. I closed my eyes and thought *when I open my eyes, that name won't be there*. But it was there, and so was I, and that was another beginning.

What does it mean to be us? is the implicit foundation for any book of family history. But when the element of race, in the American sense, comes into it, what does it mean to be Us becomes so potentially terrible—in the philosophical sense—that the question is unnerving. The freedom to play is absolutely necessary to creativity; but how could I / how can we play in the language field of American whiteness, where racist and racializing discourse can pull our strings even when we are most actively engaged in resisting it? Such doubts can be paralyzing. But I've come to value—even to treasure—that disabled feeling. It signals the moment (or, more accurately, an ongoing series of moments) in which I stop seeing myself as unraced and therefore automatically enabled. Perhaps there is no right way for a descendant of enslavers to write about slavery, but I'm certain there is no right way to be silent. That's why *Trafficke*, whose narrative ends about 90 years before I was born, is subtitled *An Autobiography*.

**TZ:** There is something so utterly perverse in American Magruders claiming a genetic tie with Clan Gregor—a clan that history describes as either brutal murderers or unfairly oppressed heroes or both—while in fact they were building their families, land, and wealth on the backs of slaves.

**“The romance of the  
Lost Cause embraces  
both Highland and  
antebellum culture...  
When I was younger  
I had an urgent  
need to break that  
connection, to  
bring my Scottish  
identity into contact  
with contemporary  
Scotland...”**

**ST:** Yes, utterly perverse; but in my own way I too was susceptible. Identifying as a descendant of a people who survived genocide is a powerful story: it makes you a living rebuke to power. That was my version of the romance, and it did not include forced labor and human trafficking—or, if it did, MacGregors were the victims. That was a hard narrative to let go of. For most American Magraders, though, an equally important part of the story was Clan Gregor’s inherent nobility, which dovetailed neatly into slave-owners’ sense of entitlement. As one descendant wrote in her memoir, a tribute to her grandmother: *We were born with castles in mind and brought up accordingly*. Well, what went on in those lovely castles—the real ones? Why did so many feature prisons, chains, and heading pits? False histories serve a need. They cover up or distract from other, more disturbing, narratives. Never trust the *fair copy* of who you are.

**TZ:** Finally, the last poem, “Transport,” seems deeply personal. It seems to be the speaker’s visceral and emotional reaction to all that comes before in the manuscript.

**ST:** Yes, though it was not written last, but coughed up and sorted through at various points along the way. An avalanche of shards. A midden heap. A pile of iron shavings drawn to the central magnet of Alexander’s name. Back to where, for me, it all started.