Dear Kate Chopin [1]

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Open Letter by Emily Toth

A Graveside Chat with Your Biographer

Dear Kate (may I?):

I hope it's all right to first-name you, since I've known you for most of my adult life. I've written your life story twice and spent over forty years on your literary career. (You spent only thirteen, 1889 to 1902.) I've pondered the mysteries in your writings and wondered, "What would Kate Chopin do?"

I wish I could speak to you.

Imagine that right now we're having a picnic, a tête-à-tête, next to your gravestone in Calvary Cemetery in St. Louis.

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The stone has the wrong date for your birth (1851 instead of 1850), and I wonder why. Did you routinely lie about your age, as you seemed to in the 1880 census, where you're listed as 27 but you were really 30? And if you did lie about your age, why by only a year or three?

No one questions the death date, 1904, a hot August day at the St. Louis World's Fair. For my visit to your grave, I've packed a hearty St. Louis-style lunch: bratwurst, pumpernickel, and Budweiser. (You knew the Busch family.) I pack a lunch for you, too, though I know you can't eat it.

As a child, you were already a "teller of marvelous stories," according to one of your former classmates at the Sacred Heart Academy. You must have known you had the writer flair at an early age. So did I. We had female teachers who were mentors, who set us to writing extra journals (now they'd be blogs). You also grew up in a household of women who loved to gossip. At home and at school, you were surrounded by women who weren't cowed by convention.

I, a child of the 1950s, was more obedient—and so, at the age of 26, I was thrilled the first time I read about "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" in your great novel *The Awakening*. I never wanted to be like everyone else, and neither did you, and I want to ask you about how far you went.

I'm not asking about sex—or at least not premarital sex, which was what grownups shrieked about in my youth. I imagine you got the same warnings, but you wouldn't have been tempted by the local crop. You complained in your diary about young blades "whose only talent lies in their feet." You were so bored. You were so right.

So, you cleverly married an outsider, a Louisiana man. Oscar Chopin had spent his adolescence in France, where—he wrote a cousin—the young women in a house of ill repute did some serious damage to his "pipe." I wonder if Oscar ever told you about things like that.

He did take you to live in New Orleans, away from the world you knew—your first big step toward emancipation. I wonder if you wanted to have six children in nine years. I'll bet you were furious when Oscar's cotton brokerage failed, and you had to move to his family land in rural Louisiana. The entire village of Cloutierville was one long dusty street.

Here comes the knot, the critical years I'd most like to ask you about. Were you thinking what I think you were thinking, back there between 1879 and 1884?

You were in your late twenties, a critical age. So was Edna Pontellier at the time of her awakening in your novel. So

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was I when I first met your writings. In her 1976 bestseller *Passages*, Gail Sheehy describes the “Catch-30 Crisis,” that heady time when people uproot their lives and change careers, spouses, orientations, and more. I was primed to notice what you seemed to be up to.

You did feel melancholy and marooned in your new place. It was a tiny, French-speaking village; you were a fashionable, brash Yankee. You made enemies—and you attracted someone else’s husband. Everyone I talked to, descendants of people who’d lived in Cloutierville, agreed on that. He’d been “sweet on Kate.”

I don’t know when that sweetness started, and I’m very curious. Had marital life changed? (You suddenly stopped having children.) Did the romance start while Oscar was ailing in his last year? Or did it begin after Oscar’s death from swamp fever (malaria) in December 1882, just before Christmas?

It would be so uncouth to ask you.

The new man was Albert Sampite (“Sam-pi-tay”), a wealthy, married local planter whose hobby was consoling widows. Was he the first bad boy in your life? Was he exciting at first—with his gambling, his illicit aura, his volatile temper when he drank? Did you worry about his wife, Loka, a small, plain woman who couldn’t possibly compete with your cosmopolitan glamor?

In your stories a decade later, widowhood is mostly liberation. You had been left with the six kids, $12,000 in debt. You’d lost a husband who, by all accounts, was a jolly and companionable sort. But now, you got to do new things. You got to run Oscar’s businesses, much more efficiently than he had, using what you’d learned about money from the women in your family. Did you feel that you were spreading your wings, awakening “unsuspected powers of doing” (a line from your first novel *At Fault*)? In that intense time, were you thinking about writing—or doing?

In my biographies of you, *Kate Chopin* and *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, I speculated. Albert’s land adjoined yours, and it would have been easy to meet over the fence, say, to discuss horse flesh. In “Loka,”one of your short stories from a decade later, there’s a lowlife character named “Sambite” who drinks and fights and gambles in the woods.

I could ask, “What was the nature of your relationship with Albert Sampite?” But you’d know what I meant: “How hot was it?”

Maybe you’d tell me.

It was risky. You were both fertile turtles. You had five sons and a daughter; his wife had had six pregnancies, though only two babies lived. If you got it on, what did you use for birth control? Would a Cloutierville man trek to the wicked city, New Orleans, to get “French letters” (condoms)?

Once you did get it on, if you did, was it like the afternoon delight in your unpublished story “The Storm”—in which the heroine’s “firm, elastic flesh” is “knowing for the first time its birthright”? Were there depths in his “sensuous nature that had never yet been reached”?

You left Cloutierville a year and a half after Oscar died. Did you think about divorce, something that wasn’t really possible in your Catholic corner of the world? Did you move back to St. Louis because your mother was ailing? Or because you wanted to get away from scandal? Albert was a violent man whose wife eventually got a legal separation after he’d beaten her so severely she couldn’t work for a year.

I discovered all that, but I don’t know what it meant to you. Maybe it was only a fling, because you were lonely and horny. Did you know that his wife would claim, years later, that “Kate Chopin broke up my marriage”? I doubt you imagined people in Cloutierville would be talking about you—to me—a century after you left.

I find traces of Albert Sampite in your later writings, especially in the characters named “Alcée” in “At the ‘Cadian Ball,” “The Storm,” and *The Awakening*. The fictional Alcée is always dashing, charming, but impulsive with a hint of brutality. He is not a nice man, but a very attractive one, especially to married women.

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These insights could just be the products of a biographer's fevered imagination. Maybe you were actually a staid wife and mom, and then a very imaginative widow devoted to her husband's memory. I could be describing my own thirties, a time of transition from vulnerable grad student to fledgling professor, when I describe your Catch-30 flowering. I could just be pressing my life pattern onto yours, like a silk screen or a palimpsest.

I think I know how to "read" your writings. Sitting here, eating the second sandwich I brought in your honor, I read your tombstone again, with your name and the wrong birth date. I can read it right—but I may be reading other things wrong, making them more passionate or scandalous than they really were.

No one can redo my research, since my sources are all dead now. No one can say I've been wildly prurient or not prurient enough. You're the only one who can tell me I've misread your life.

And you're not going to.

Emily

Publishing Information

- *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, originally published in 1899 by Herbert S. Stone & Company.
- *At Fault* by Kate Chopin, originally published in 1890.
- *A Vocation and a Voice: Stories by Kate Chopin*, edited by Emily Toth (Penguin Books, 1991).
- *Kate Chopin: A Life of the Author of "The Awakening"* by Emily Toth (William Morrow,1990).
- *Unveiling Kate Chopin* by Emily Toth (University Press of Mississippi, 1999).
- *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*, edited by Emily Toth and Per Seyersted (Indiana University Press, 1998).

Art Information

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- Kate Chopin (1894) [6]; stock photo/public domain.

Emily Toth is a regular columnist for *Talking Writing*. Her eleven published books include biographies (Kate Chopin and Grace Metalious), academic advice books (Ms. Mentor), and one historical novel (*Daughters of New Orleans*). She writes the "Ms. Mentor" online advice column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and is writing a novel about an indescribably vicious academic book club. She teaches at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

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