An interview with Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, August 2008

Q: Please provide a little background on your new novel, *So Many Ways to Sleep Badly*. What was involved in the writing of this book?

A: This book started as a response to dealing with chronic pain that left me unable to hold a pen or type long enough for the frantic outpourings that had previously characterized my writing process. Instead of giving in to the pain, I decided to see how I could use it as a strength, and to write two paragraphs a day, with no intention of plot or structure, and then take a look at the whole thing when I had 200 pages. I wanted to see if this experiment could expand the manic style and engagement of my writing, rather than leaving me feeling stifled.

I've always said that I don't believe in conventional plot structure, that it takes away from the immediacy of experience and the possibilities of voice. My life doesn't have a plot, and I don't want to impose one on it. So this was a test: what would happen if I literally paid no attention to plot?

After two years, I had over 400 pages, and I took a look at the whole thing—what was amazing was that some sort of plot actually emerged! The repetition of voice and character and theme and sound and spark led to a wacky and expansive narrative arc, nonlinear and revelatory. I'm a neurotic editor, so of course I spent another few years honing the prose to a delicate explosion where so many things are happening at once and nothing is coming together like it's supposed to, kind of like my life—the world is falling apart and San Francisco is falling apart and the narrator's apartment is falling apart, and I leave the reader to pull it all together.

Q: Your last 2 books were works of nonfiction, as Editor of *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* and *That's Revolting!: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation.* Can you talk about how in your fiction writing, you address some of the political and cultural issues that are important to you? Is it difficult to communicate "the nonfiction" or the truths about yourself into fiction writing?

A: The politics in *So Many Ways to Sleep Badly* are a bit messier than in my nonfiction work. It was really important to me to include some of the same issues—assimilation, gentrification, war, hopelessness, sexual searching, failures of community, familial abuse, consumerism—but to do it in a less explicit way, so that the reader has to enter on the narrator's terms. I didn't necessarily want to impose a political clarity, but I wanted to indicate the problems with this world and the ways in which queers at the intersections of various margins cope.

Q: What's the relationship between your own personal experiences and the experiences of the narrator in the novel? Is there a relationship? If so, how does the one inform the other?

A: I always say that the difference between autobiography and fiction is that autobiography is all lies, so that's why I write fiction. Oh, wait—but I write nonfiction too! To answer from a different angle, the narrator in *So Many Ways to Sleep Badly* is definitely a lot like myself—she even shares the same name! And pretty much all of the narrator's experiences have happened to me, but I emphasize different parts in the fictional version than I would in a nonfiction framework.

Q: What do you think of your new work *So Many Ways to Sleep Badly* in relation to the earlier novel *Pulling Taffy*?

A: So Many Ways to Sleep Badly was written basically as one flow, whereas Pulling Taffy I wrote in short bursts. Both share a certain kind of frenetic energy, a nonlinear style, an explosive queeniness, an alienation, a desperation, and a sense of sassy style in the space of implosion. But the style is very different—Pulling Taffy is more contained, almost like a collection of short stories, which is how it originated. In So Many Ways to Sleep Badly, six different things might happen in one paragraph and it's almost like music the way it builds up to a crescendo and then falls and then builds. If Pulling Taffy is about searching for home and not necessarily finding it, So Many Ways to Sleep Badly is about when you get to a place where nothing in your life is coming together the way you thought it would, where the outside world is becoming more and more overwhelming, and where it's only sudden moments of connection or insight that mean anything.

Q: Can you talk about your "outsider" status within the gay community?

A: Well, first of all I don't believe that there is a gay community—or, to take the popular term of the moment, an "LGBT" community. I think this notion of a gay or LGBT community is so often used to oppress queers with the least access to power—pull out the sweatshop-produced nylon rainbow flags, and then you can have homeless queers arrested for getting in the way of happy hour, right? There's always violence lurking behind that smiling gay consumerist monolith. Living in San Francisco gives me a direct view into the nightmare of assimilation—this is where certain gay people have actually succeeded at their goal of becoming part of the power structure, and we can take a look and see what exactly happens: wealthy gay Castro residents fight against the queer youth shelter because it might get in the way of property values; gay political consultants engineer the election of anti-poor, pro-development candidates; a gay realty company advises its clients on how to get rid of seniors and people with AIDS in order to get more for their property—community, indeed!

And when I was part of a protest outside of the LGBT Center, and Center staff called the cops because they didn't want queers protesting on their doorstep, then stood and watched as the cops beat us up—blood dripping down one person's face; I and several others were thrown into the middle of oncoming traffic—it's almost like my politics were proven too much. So I don't have any illusions about gay community.

This protest, and many others, actually appear in *So Many Ways to Sleep Badly*—it was really challenging to convey activism, actually. I wanted the politics to be fused with everything else and sometimes contradictory, maybe a window into some kind of clarity, but then that window closes. So the book is sexually saturated, politically incendiary, stylistically explosive and gender-defiant. And it's a mess, too, right, because that's what our lives are like.