

Author Interview: Mickey Brent

Welcome to the 2018 Author Interview Series at *The Writing Life*, one of my favorite features on the blog. Instead of hosting one author per week as we've done for the past two years, I will share one interview per month to allow me to focus on finishing my second book, *The Laments*. The distraction quotient is real over here! I hope you enjoy the new author interviews. Thank you for your visit!
- Eleanor

This month, I'm happy to welcome my friend, **Mickey Brent**. We met in Brussels, Belgium through a shared love of and a deep appreciation for *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron, when we both lived in the fascinating city.

Mickey Brent is a multicultural author and creative writing teacher who lives in Southern California with her partner and two kitties. She is also an active member of the LGBTQ community. Mickey spent nearly two decades living in Europe and loves writing quirky stories about Europeans, their diverse cultures, languages, and lifestyles. Mickey has written numerous travel articles, book chapters, poems, and screenplays, publishing various genres of fiction and non-fiction under other *noms de plume*. Mickey's aim is to offer readers a more fun, light-hearted, and romantic view of life. She has created this vivid reality with *Underwater Vibes*, a well-crafted, contemporary novel showcasing a unique cast of characters thriving in the multicultural city of Brussels, Belgium, the capital of Europe. Its sequel, *Broad Awakening*, will be published by Bold Strokes Books in October, 2018.

Please describe what *Underwater Vibes* is about.

Hélène Dupont, a French-speaking scientific translator in Brussels, Belgium, cherishes two things: flowers and Chaussette, her cat. Hélène writes bad poetry to help her survive her painful existence with Marc, her husband, until she collapses at work and her doctor proposes a radical lifestyle change. She diets drastically and attempts sports for the first time, while Marc laughs at her efforts. Then Hélène meets Sylvie Routard, a carefree, young, amateur photographer from Greece. By chance, Sylvie becomes Hélène's private swim coach. During their daily lessons, Hélène's admiration towards Sylvie turns to attraction. As unsettling feelings hijack her mind and body, daydreams featuring Sylvie enter her life—even her poems. Hélène starts to question her relationship with Marc, and everything else in life.

How did you come up with the title?

Because Hélène and Sylvie spend so much time in the water, the attraction they feel can best be described as vibrations, hence the title, *Underwater Vibes*. I worked on my title for several weeks before I came up with one that was short, descriptive, and perfectly captured the essence of the story. These vibrations are underwater, just as underlying vibrations can translate to underlying meaning in our lives. As humans, we constantly *feel* things, whether we realize it or not. Believe me, Hélène and Sylvie are feeling things throughout the book. The fact that they are swimming underwater together adds to the intrigue, in my opinion.

What inspired you to write this book?

The idea for *Underwater Vibes* came as an assignment for an English composition course I took in college. The story was about a plump, shy girl—a loner—who learned to swim in a lake one summer. My writing teacher loved the story and urged me to keep writing. Twenty years later, while taking a creative writing course in Brussels, Belgium, I remembered that original essay. Each day, as I biked through Brussels, I jotted down new ideas for the story. Despite minor accidents with light poles and a parked car, I kept up my pace until I had birthed a unique, humorous tale. After thirteen years of tweaking, *Underwater Vibes* is, at last, ripe and ready to be devoured by readers who like quirky, character-driven stories.

Knowing you, humor will be evident in this book. Congratulations! What is your favorite part of writing?

Sitting with my cat early in the morning with a pot of steaming tea. Every day, my cat meows at the bedroom door until I get up—at an insane hour—as soon as the birds start chirping. I roll out of bed, splash cold water on my face, put on the tea kettle, and proceed to brush the cat. Then I settle on the sofa with my mug of tea, my cat, my pen, and my notebook, contemplating each empty page, wondering what’s going to fill it each day. Every story starts this way: in silence, with bird chirps, meows, a hissing kettle, then furious scribbling noises as I pen my incessant, rapid-fire thoughts. That’s my routine and my favorite part of writing. I also love teaching creative writing. Working with my students motivates me and fills me with deep joy.

Does your main character resemble you? If so, in what ways?

Hélène resembles me a little bit. I was a translator for many years in Brussels, and she’s a translator. Yet she’s much shyer than I am, and not very athletic, although she gains confidence and becomes an athlete as the story evolves. The other main character, Sylvie, is an amateur photographer, and so am I. She also loves food, and so do I. We’re total foodies. They both adore cats and flowers, and so do I. They also appreciate poetry, although Hélène isn’t very talented in that department. I like to think that I’m a better poet than her. But Sylvie is a much stronger swimmer than me.

What do you find is the most challenging aspect of writing?

The most challenging aspect of writing is keeping myself, and my voice, out of my characters’ heads. As a writer, it’s difficult to keep their viewpoints authentic, and it’s hard to not be influenced by their words and actions. I constantly have to ask myself, “What would she do in this situation?” or “What would he say if that happened to him?” It’s important to keep myself separate from their lives, yet it’s challenging because I’m attached to each of my characters. They are all living in my head. To make sure I’m writing from their unique points of view, I fill out at least four pages of a character sketch worksheet for each individual. I keep the worksheets next to my desk, so when I’m writing dialogue or action or plotting out a scene, I can refer to each character sketch, which includes the character’s history, voice, habits, attitudes, preferences, etc. Sometimes, I even stand up and act out a scene, to make sure I’m writing it from their perspective instead of my own.

I love character sketches and use them, as well. What was the last book you read? What did you think of it?

I just finished reading “The Paris Wife” by Paula McLain. It’s a New York Times Bestseller and I thought it was amazing. It’s a story about a couple living in Paris in the 1920s and it particularly caught my eye because I used to live in Paris myself. It’s about Ernest Hemingway and his first wife during the period when Hemingway finds his voice as a writer, which particularly intrigued me. It’s very well written, with powerful dialogue and colorful, dramatic scenes. As a reader, I was drawn into the story on each and every page.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Isabel Allende, Julia Cameron, Mark Nepo, Paolo Coelho, Eckhart Tolle, Sarah Waters, Radclyffe... These are a few of my favorites.

Great list. What authors or person(s) have influenced you as a writer and why?

Julia Cameron opens her readers’ eyes to all expressions of creativity and beauty in the most intriguing way. For example, through her own experiences, she introduced me to screenwriting and songwriting. And I learned to love Taos, New Mexico—without ever visiting the place—because of the way she describes its scenery. In her books, she helps readers find their special place in life. She teaches them to learn to trust their intuition, the Universe, and all the pleasures and pains that come with being fully human. Her words are truly a gift to this

planet. I am surely not the only reader who feels lucky to have picked up “The Artist’s Way” so long ago. I truly cherish this book and am thankful that Julia has been guided all these years to put her talents and insight to paper.

Along similar lines, Mark Nepo is a philosopher, poet, teacher and well-published author whose words and inspiration have made a positive difference in my life. In fact, I often begin teaching my creative writing classes by reciting one of Mark’s daily entries in “The Book of Awakening.” His exquisitely penned words set a calm, reflective atmosphere in the classroom. As his sentences unfold, my students and I contemplate his literary mastery—the delicate way he illustrates the simplest acts of life. Not unlike famous Japanese haiku poets, Mark offers his readers an opportunity to pause and reflect. By exposing the raw beauty of everyday happenings, he incites readers to appreciate the most insignificant details of life surrounding us: leaves falling in a mossy forest, a lone daisy, thoughtful glances, random acts of kindness by strangers. These are the kinds of insignificant details—that aren’t so insignificant, actually—that make stories real. Mark writes non-fiction and poetry, while I mainly write fiction. But my hope is to transform my characters, and readers, through carefully selected words, plot, and mindful presence—like Mark—to bring everyone to a better place in life.

I will check out *The Book of Awakening*. Do you have a favorite place to write? To read?

As I mentioned earlier, I love to sit on my living room sofa with a big mug of tea, my cat, my pen, and my notebook. Surrounded by soft pillows, I contemplate the scenery outside—palm trees, a lush potato tree with its purple flowers, my statue of Buddha—wondering what’s going to fill my notebook each day. I use an aromatherapy diffuser, so there’s lemongrass, lavender, or some other calming, purifying scent in the room. I keep the large windows open to let in fresh air; their frames are lined with shells and stones from the local beach, colorful candles, postcards, and photos of loved ones. This is also my favorite place to read. I must admit, however, in the evenings I read lying down because I’m exhausted after getting up at dawn to write.

When it’s time to work on my stories with a computer, I move upstairs into the bedroom. My desk there overlooks more palm trees—and a parking lot. One day, I’d like to look out at the ocean instead of the parking lot. But for now, I’m content with where I am.

Mickey, tell us something personal about you people may be surprised to know.

When I was young, I used to be a competitive athlete. I competed in several sports simultaneously and took winning very seriously. I was raised this way—my father was my coach. I was hard on myself, determined, a real overachiever, and perhaps not the kindest kid to others. Luckily, I grew out of this tough, self-focused phase and learned to be kind to others. I realized that winning is not everything in life. People and relationships are much more important. Looking back, I’m much happier as an adult to be in a more positive, open-minded, and caring place.

Did the writing process uncover surprises or learning experiences for you? What about the publishing process?

Yes, it did. The more I write, the more I learn about myself and my life. I have always had a passion for writing, even as a child. And when I started writing novels in addition to short stories, I realized that writing is a spectacular way to discover who I am and where I’m headed as a person. It unearths hidden passions, secrets, and, in my case, an imagination that seems to know no limits. I often get asked if I’ve experienced the things my characters go through in my stories. It’s a valid question. Some authors experience nearly everything they write about, even in fiction. But most of what I write comes from some other place—some hidden source from within. It just bubbles up and I put it down on paper.

As you might have guessed, I'm a pantsier (I write from the seat of my pants, rather than planning and plotting my stories). So I don't even know what's coming until it literally shows up on the page. For example, in *Underwater Vibes*, Sylvie's obnoxious ex, Lydia, showed up in my novel while I was rewriting my seventh version of the manuscript. A true perfectionist, I completely rewrote the manuscript thirteen times over a thirteen-year period. The fact that Lydia simply popped up on the page after seven years surprised me. I had never met anyone like Lydia before and I had no clue how she got there. Somehow, she hijacked my fertile imagination with her despicable charm. Surprises like these represent tremendous gifts to authors like me, who strive to tell meaningful stories with unexpected twists.

The publishing process is a whole different story. If you don't mind, I'll wait to answer that question in my next interview with you, after my sequel, *Broad Awakening*, is released in October.

What do you hope readers will gain from *Underwater Vibes*?

Hopefully, my book will offer readers a pleasant literary experience that will also transmit a strong message of human acceptance, so that LGBTQ issues will no longer be topics of overt—or hushed—conversations in boardrooms, school cafeterias, at dinner tables, etc. Because my novel explores a budding, yet awkward, lesbian romance, I hope it will open up the minds of readers in a positive way, especially those who have never bought a book or opted to watch a film featuring LGBTQ characters. Personally, I wish one's sexual orientation could be as insignificant to others as one's hair color or freckles. It shouldn't matter. Love is love.

Underwater Vibes is a contribution to the struggle for equality for all. Perhaps this might seem like a lofty aim, but I wrote my novel to help reduce the discrimination that still exists globally among humans on many levels: racial, ethnic, religious, socio-economic, etc. This discrimination also includes biases against peoples' sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, linguistic, regional and cultural differences, etc.

Without knowing these intentions, certain people have advised me to end the novel by having H el ene and Marc, her verbally abusive husband, get back together; but if that were the case, the essential meaning of this story would be lost. These two characters are obviously not meant for each other. Somehow, they ended up together, but once H el ene discovers that someone special exists out there, she needs to trust her heart and face the truth. I hope my book will help readers learn to trust their true feelings. Sometimes, this trust involves taking risks to get what they deserve in life.

I wholeheartedly agree with you. My editor and several advance readers encouraged me to change the original ending of *A Decent Woman*. I'm glad I listened. Looking back, what did you do right that helped you write and market this book?

I had a dream that I truly believed in. I wanted to be a writer so I wrote every day for many years. I didn't give up on my book, even when I felt like it. I worked weekends and evenings, early in the morning, and late at night. I followed my intuition every step of the way. I didn't listen to naysayers who told me two decades ago, "You're only a beginner. You'll never get published." Likewise, I ignored those who said, "You're not making any money on this. Why don't you just give it up and get a real career?" They didn't seem to notice that I was juggling several jobs while writing all these years.

I was stubborn and optimistic; I bought every worthy book on writing that I could get my hands on and devoured it with passion. Next, I joined a book club, then I joined a writing group, then a critique group. I kept taking classes on how to write short stories and screenplays. I wrote several of each, edited the stories until I was satisfied, then I sent them to publishers of anthologies, writing contests, magazines, etc. After quite a few rejections, several stories got published. That motivated me a lot. Next, I started teaching creative writing classes, which motivated me even more, especially when my students started publishing their work. I learned the craft of writing even better by researching it, then instructing others on what I had learned.

To conclude, what I did right was believing in my dream of becoming a published author and sustaining my intense determination to realize this dream. Working hard created a positive momentum that made it easier for me to write, edit, and submit my book several times until I found the right publisher. It has also helped me market *Underwater Vibes* now that my story is out in the world.

What didn't work as well as you'd hoped?

Waiting so long to submit my first book to agents and publishers slowed the process down. Like so many writers, I was afraid of rejection, and I was a perfectionist. Over the past few years, I've worked hard to overcome these two issues. In hindsight, I wish I had taken more initiative to get my first book published. As a published author now, I've learned my lesson and I'm much more confident. That is why I've promised my publisher that I will be devoting two years to write my third novel, instead of thirteen!

Any advice or tips for writers looking to get published?

If you have a dream to become a published writer, you must believe in yourself. Write something every day, even if it's just in your journal. That's still writing. Don't give up on your projects or ideas, even when things look bleak. If you can, work a little on weekends, evenings, early in the morning, and holidays. Every little bit counts and it fuels you with positive momentum. Follow your intuition—trust your gut—every step of the way. That person you feel compelled to contact on a hunch just might open the right door for you. Don't listen to naysayers, especially those who say they mean well or "it's for your own good." Know that writing is extremely hard work. It's pure dedication. But it's worth it to feel the satisfaction of finally having your name in print, or seeing your friends waiting in line for your autograph. Royalty checks are great too but don't count on receiving those right away.

In my opinion, your primary aspiration as a writer shouldn't be to rake in tons of money and become famous overnight. It should be to share your story with the world, and hopefully, transform people in a positive way. You'll only get discouraged if you strive for instant success and fame. That's extremely rare. Join a book club, a writing group, a critique group, take writing classes, find a skilled and experienced mentor or editor—and beta readers—who know how to critique your work in a gentle yet constructive manner. Write lots of different pieces, go outside your comfort zone, edit your stories multiple times until you're satisfied, let them rest, then edit them one final time. Read them aloud standing up, then send them out to potential agents, publishers, magazine contests, blogs, etc. When you finally get your publishing contract, read the fine lines carefully. Then hire a professional who is highly experienced with author contracts to help you negotiate your book/film deal. Good luck!

Great advice! Website and social media links?

I'm not yet on Facebook but I've promised my publisher that I will set up a Facebook page within the next few weeks. Until then, please visit me at www.mickeybrent.com

Let me know when your Facebook page goes live, so I can tag you. You might look into setting up accounts with Goodreads, Twitter, and Pinterest, as well. Where can we find *Underwater Vibes*?

There's a link to my publisher, Bold Strokes Books, listed on my website. <https://www.boldstrokesbooks.com/authors/mickey-brent-275> That's the best place to purchase *Underwater Vibes*, and pre-order my sequel, *Broad Awakening*. They are available in print and as ebooks. They can also be ordered at Barnes & Noble, Amazon, and at your local bookstore. As a public speaker on the craft of writing, multiculturalism, diversity and LGBTQ inclusion issues, I'm often invited to give author presentations at bookstores, libraries, book festivals, and book clubs. My book is available for purchase at these events, which are listed at www.mickeybrent.com.

Awesome. What's next for you, Mickey?

The sequel to *Underwater Vibes*, *Broad Awakening*, will be released by Bold Strokes Books in October 2018. It takes place in Brussels, Belgium, and in Santorini, Greece. Now, I'm working on my third novel, which will be set in San Francisco. It's also a multicultural, multilingual contemporary lesbian romance. I'm very excited about this new story. I lived in San Francisco for three years and I'm looking forward to heading back to this exciting, cosmopolitan city to do more research for my upcoming book.

Thanks for a great interview, Mickey. I wish you the very best with your books. We should plan a reunion with our fellow *The Artist's Way* group members soon!

Source: <https://thewritinglifeeparker.wordpress.com/2018/06/18/author-interview-mickey-brent/>