



**WHAT YOU DON'T  
KNOW ABOUT**

# LEAH STEWART

**The accomplished writer, with six popular novels and another on the way, champions new writers in her role as head of UC's English department.**

**BY Alyssa Konermann**

**ILLUSTRATION BY Butcher Billy**





## Notes on Leah Stewart as a character

in a novel would go something like this: Grew up military (*Father was in the Air Force*). Early childhood in England (*Still unconsciously employs Briticisms*). High school in Clovis, New Mexico (*Not near much of anything, played clarinet in the state championship marching band*). College at Vanderbilt (*Editor of student paper, planned to pursue journalism, found a mentor in novelist Manette Ansay*). Master's in fine arts at the University of Michigan (*Learned to make a life writing fiction*). Roving writer marries and has two kids (*Wrote first novel in her office as a secretary at Harvard, calls it the "period of procreation"*). Professor and former director of creative writing program, now head of UC's Department of English (*Gets shit done*). Newly appointed director of the esteemed Sewanee Writers' Conference (*Worked for years there as a summer staffer starting in her twenties*). Active novelist with sixth book now out in paperback (*Each novel reinvents itself from the last*). Took an acting class in French at the Alliance Française (*Improvisational language practice with native speakers*). Unabashedly politically active (*2016 hit us all*). Et cetera (*Etc., etc., etc.*).

To which most any editor or reader would likely say, *OK, I see where you're going, but that much in one character?*

No doubt about it, Leah Stewart is a force. The word gets thrown around a lot—driving force, force of nature, tour de force, force for good—but she's all of that and more, according to those who know her best.

She also has a habit of connecting deeply with those who don't know her well personally, from her newest UC students to the general reading population. Her most recent novel, *What You Don't Know About Charlie Outlaw*, was released in paperback in June after

receiving glowing reviews, including from *The New York Times*.

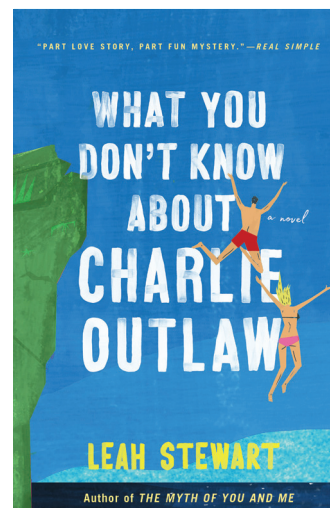
What don't you know about Leah Stewart? Like any good story, let's start at the beginning.

## Stewart inked lit-

tle notebooks of poems at the ripe age of 4 or 5, crossing genres at age 11 with a fairly elaborate fantasy novel scrawled in her Strawberry Shortcake notebook. In other words, she has always been a writer. "There's something compulsive or innate about it, my interest in language and in story," she says. That compulsion has helped her find long-term, consistent success in fiction, a field not exactly known for its stability.

"She has my heart as a writer and represents why I do this," says Sally Kim, editor in chief of G. P. Putnam's Sons, an imprint of Penguin Random House, and Stewart's editor for 15 years and five books. As she was promoted between publishing houses, Kim actually stated in job interviews that Leah Stewart had to come with her. "She writes books that tackle big ideas, big thoughts, things that happen to us in real life, on such an intimate and relatable level," says Kim. "What fuels me as an editor is to be able to work on books I love and want to champion to the grave. Leah has always represented that writer to me."

Before she became a novelist, Stewart planned to pursue journalism—at the time, she knew of no other clear path to writing for a living. After working as a newspaper reporter in Memphis one sum-



BOOK COVER COURTESY G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS



LEAH STEWART, PHOTOGRAPHED ON MAY 31, 2019.

mer, though, she quickly knew it wasn't for her, and she went into her senior year at Vanderbilt thinking *Oh god, I have no idea what I'm going to do now*. Enter novelist Manette Ansay, who came to teach at Vanderbilt that year.

Stewart's prior fiction training had mostly entailed reading a classic short story or two, bringing in work of her own, and being told whether the story was good or bad—no instruction on shaping narrative, just an old-school thumbs up or down.

That was not Ansay's style. She was young, had published a best-selling novel, and gave astute feedback on Stewart's work, with specific direction. "She was the one who was like, *Have you read Alice Munro? Have you read Lorrie Moore? And I said, Who?*" says Stewart. "I already read vociferously, but a lot of it was genre fiction as a kid or the classics. I wasn't looking at *The New Yorker*, and I had no idea what was going on in terms of contemporary literary fiction."

That summer of reporting in Mem-

phis ended up providing raw material for a setting-focused story Ansay encouraged Stewart to write, and ultimately became the basis for her first novel, *Body of a Girl*, published in 2000.

Writer Kevin Wilson met Stewart that same year at the Sewanee Writers' Conference in Tennessee, where she was on staff and he helped with the young writers program. They worked together for many subsequent summers doing the marvelously unglamorous work of bartending events and making sure the catering was in place, a situation in which true colors certainly can't

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—Sally Kim, editor in chief of *G.P. Putnam's Sons*





hide for long. Stewart returned there last month to learn the ropes for her new role as conference director.

“I remember we were at a Waffle House or something the first time I met her,” says Wilson. “We are very close in age, but I remember feeling at that moment that I was in the presence of someone who was genuine and real, an actual writer and a tangible person whose life experiences were connected to my own.” He cites Stewart as a guide for how to be a writer and a literary

## “SHE HAD A VERY STRAIGHTFORWARD, DOWN-TO-EARTH DEMEANOR ABOUT FICTION AND THE WAY YOU CAN WRITE IT AND APPROACH IT,” SAYS FORMER STUDENT LIV STRATMAN.

citizen—the person he looks to for how he wants to conduct himself and think about his career. “When she had her first novel come out and it was such a success, it was really instructive to see how she handled it. And in each book since then she kind of reinvents herself. She’s always finding new stories to tell and new ways to tell them.”

The novel Stewart is working on now certainly upholds that trend. While *Charlie Outlaw* unraveled across Los Angeles and an unnamed island in the voice of a perfectly wry omniscient narrator, her current project is a complicated historical novel involving politics. “There’s a long tradition in other cultures of writing in uncertain times,” she says. “If you were a Russian dissident, if you lived under a repressive regime, you’ve always been writing out of an uncertain time. That’s given rise to a lot of very specific types of fiction, like magical realism in Latin America or the kind of absurdist strain that’s in Kafka.”

The nation’s current political insta-

bility presents Stewart with a formidable challenge. “Everything feels so uncertain right now,” she says. “My last novel was omniscient. I just do not feel omniscient now. I can’t predict what’s going to happen tomorrow.” As it stands, her protagonist is a politician who, in the wake of a loss, researches a French ancestor who spent time in Cincinnati during the steamboat era, a time when the city was an international curiosity.

Kim marvels at Stewart’s innate capacity to take the ups and downs in stride and move on. “I can’t tell you how rare that is,” she says. “I think part of it is her being an empathetic, open person, but I also think she’s just very well-adjusted.”

Kim notes that, while Stewart has certainly achieved commercial success—“I know booksellers for whom a Leah Stewart book is a cause for celebration”—it doesn’t consume her, which Kim sees as

critical to her longevity. Stewart understands the pressures on the business side of publishing, which is also refreshing. “I think some of the covers of her books have kind of pigeon-holed each book in a certain way,” says Kim. “And I always want to be the one in the corner of the store saying, *But it’s also so many other things!* And I think that’s the gift of her books. There are so many layers.”

→ **STEWART IS BROWSING THE LONG** wall of bookshelves in her office at UC, plucking titles that handle narration in a particular way in order to answer a student inquiry. Her memory for plot and characters is encyclopedic; both here and in the classroom she can on-the-fly pull germane examples from a seemingly infinite set of mental files, be they French literature or an interview with the writing staff of *Parks and Recreation*. It’s a Tuesday afternoon, and she’s just transitioned without pause from class to a quick meeting of the press-

ing “Hey department head, please help” variety to a student conference in a way only superheroes can manage. Which, frankly, she might be.

Stewart recalls the influence Ansay had on her own teaching style. The novelist had noted that Stewart never wrote setting—something Stewart attributes to frequently moving as a child—and that feedback changed her writing a great deal. Specific guidance is present in the feedback Stewart provides today, with which she aims to help students skip a few steps. “If I’m going to talk to you about plot, I’m going to say, *Here are three things you can think about*,” Stewart says of her teaching approach, which is pragmatic in a field often treated as something ethereal. “I want to give you something you can take away and apply. Part of that is telling you things like *Here’s how certain things work*. But how certain things work for me are not how they’re going to work for you. So part of it is trying to teach you to do that for yourself.”

Stewart has started bringing in agents and editors to meet with graduate students and offer manuscript reviews, an invaluable resource to anyone seeking to publish fiction. “If you’re going into a PhD program and wanting to write a novel, you need access to the marketplace and to understand how it works,” says Stewart. “We care about art, but nobody in my class doesn’t want to publish a book. Nobody in my class wants to write the most beautiful sentence and put it away so no one ever sees it again.”

Former UC undergraduate and master’s student Liv Stratman, whose novel *Cheat Day* is forthcoming from Scribner and whose day job is managing the Brooklyn bookstore Books Are Magic, says there’s a lovely echo between Ansay arriving at Vanderbilt for Stewart and Stewart coming to UC for her. “I remember the first day of Leah’s class,” says Stratman. “She had a very straightforward, down-to-earth demeanor about fiction and the way you can write it and approach it. I just felt immediately drawn to that and felt like, *OK, this is someone who is speaking exactly to my specific ambitions as a woman writer*. I don’t mean a writer of women’s fiction, I mean as a person who exists as a writer in the world and also as a woman. When I think about

my experience with Leah, I think back on coaches I had as a young athlete, how it was very much about *This is a daily thing you have to foster*.”

Stratman remembers the first time she went to Stewart’s office, trying to wrap her head around what revision really looks like as a writer and feeling trepidation about what she was in store for if she kept on this writing path. Stewart knew how to cut to the chase. “She did this awesome thing where she said people who are really good at writing and who really want to take it seriously often feel like they don’t want to do it because it’s such psychologically heady work,” she says. Then Stewart opened her filing cabinet and handed Stratman a stack of eight entirely different first pages of her second novel, *The Myth of You and Me* (2005). The book was a big success, but, as Stewart told her that day, it came together over several years.

“That’s what the process is,” recalls Stratman. “I’ll never forget that, actually being able to see that, being given that. It’s a very private thing to give someone. It really changed me in terms of how I understood work as a writer and what mentorship was.”

“I want to be useful,” Stewart says to sum up her guiding philosophy as a professor and a department head. By Jay Twomey’s account, in her first two years of the latter gig, she’s more than succeeded. As the department head preceding her, chairing from 2012 to 2017, and a professor of English on the literature (rather than creative writing) side, he knows something about what the role requires.

“Leah has been remarkably effective as head in a time of seriously fraught transition in the college,” says Twomey. “She really, really wants to ensure that our programs serve student needs, both generally and individually. She can be warm, caring, and friendly in person—and this is true of her when she’s leading a meeting, too—and yet quite direct in her ordinary and professional communication. If you only knew her by means of the latter, you’d have a very partial view of who she is.”

→ **BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER COMES UP** a lot in interviews, in reviews discussing the female protagonist of *Charlie Outlaw*,

and in the framed poster along the stairs to Stewart’s home office, where a large cut-out of Carrie Fisher as Princess Leia keeps watch in another corner. It’s an example of her impatience for cultural snobbery and her love for a good story with developed characters. It’s also about being a woman in the world.

“As many ways as sexism is still extremely prevalent, there’s been a huge shift in the types of characters that are available to women,” says Stewart. “There are still problems, but I mean, when I was a child, there was no Katniss Everdeen. In the ’90s, when *Buffy* came on, and *The X-Files* and *Veronica Mars*, these were shows that had a type of heroine that I recognized—a fighter, but also a full person like a man can be, too!”

There is a clarifying, grounding effect to Stewart’s presence. We’re sitting in her writing room on the attic level of her Northside home, veering from our conversation about her novel-in-progress to the current world order and the past season of *Sherlock*. Even when she’s talking about the uncertain times we face, being around her feels stabilizing.

She invites me along to the dance class she regularly attends. The crowd at Dancefix does not mess around when it comes to grabbing spots in the room, so on a Monday evening some weeks later we rush inside, meet up with her good friend Jodi Wyatt, an English professor at Xavier University, and stake out a place at the front of the line. Stewart preps me with candor: “It took me about three months to really get it. For your first class, if you don’t run into anyone, you did a great job.”

After class ends—a 10-song choreography of Latin, hip-hop, and other dance that moves throughout a large cement-floored practice room at the downtown Cincinnati Ballet studios—we talk on the way back to our cars. “It’s like a language,” Stewart says. “There’s a certain number of steps or moves. So once you can see those and figure those out, it becomes much easier to learn.”

It’s not novel writing, but still, she cuts to the core of it, and it all makes sense. Somehow Stewart figured out the steps that have allowed her to move seamlessly from raw student to published author to

English professor to university department head and, finally, to a new side gig as director of the Sewanee Writers’ Conference. And she’s constantly trying to pass her knowledge on to others.

“Years ago at Sewanee, I remember a writer saying, *Well, I don’t give blurbs anymore* [for book jackets],” she says. “And I said, *Someone gave them to you*. If you’ve succeeded as a writer—and by success I just mean managing to sustain a life as a writer—it’s not just because of your own special genius. People have helped you. You’ve had teachers who have helped you, you’ve had an agent and editor, you’ve had other writers who have provided a blurb of your work. You’ve had a bookstore employee who really pushed one of your titles. I think that, if you then don’t want to pay that back in some way, it’s egotistical and suggests that you somehow got there without that help.”

Sakinah Hofler, a fiction PhD student at UC, recalls two favorite moments with Stewart involving beloved authors Margaret Atwood and Zadie Smith speaking at the Mercantile Library’s annual Niehoff Lecture. Suffice it to say, these are not rooms (or ticket prices) that graduate students can typically access. But, says Hofler, “Thanks to the Schiff Foundation, we were able to share a table with Zadie Smith. Leah and I were the last two to arrive, and I said, ‘Leah, you sit there,’ and pointed to the seat next to Smith. She said, ‘No, you sit there, Sakinah.’ We went back and forth a few times until Leah plopped down in the other empty seat and left me with the seat next to Smith. I got to speak with one of my favorite authors for the entire night.”

Ditto last fall. At a meet-and-greet event beforehand, says Hofler, “Leah was like, ‘Margaret Atwood is over there,’ and we sidled, pardoned, and shimmied our way over from one side of the bar to the other to meet her. Atwood is one of my favorite authors ever, and I’m not sure if I would’ve done that had Leah not suggested it.”

Stated differently, says Wilson, who’s known Stewart since 2000, “Leah serves as this bridge for people. She isn’t content to be at that rarefied air that she’s in. She wants to bring people with her.”