


September 2017

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## Recommended Citation

Gage, Carolyn (2017) "The Orpheus of Incest, Book Review of Nickels and Interview with the Author Christine Stark," *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 7.

DOI: 10.23860/dignity.2017.02.04.07

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## Keywords

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**THE ORPHEUS OF INCEST  
BOOK REVIEW OF *NICKELS* AND  
INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR CHRISTINE STARK**

**Carolyn Gage**

*Independent Playwright, Performer, and Activist*

**KEYWORDS**

*Nickels*, children, fiction, novel, child abuse, incest, complex post-traumatic stress disorder, victim, survivor, maternal abandonment, dissociation, lesbian

“**T**rust children. Nothing could be more simple, or more difficult. Difficult because to trust children, we must first learn to trust ourselves, and most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted.”

These are the words of educational pioneer John Holt. They came to my mind when I sat down to write a review of Christine Stark’s ambitious first novel, *Nickels*.

*Nickels* is the story, told in a first-person narrative, of a survivor of paternal incest and maternal abandonment. The chapters are named for the age of the protagonist, and they advance in five-year increments, beginning when “Little Miss So and So” is five and ending when she is twenty-five. Although Stark makes clear in her introduction that the story is not autobiographical, the authenticity of the heroine’s voices at these various ages and stages of development indicates—at least to this reader—that Stark has a remarkable recall for the voices of childhood.

This is no small feat. Early childhood is a landscape of disconnected perceptions, whose causal links and contexts are not yet understood by the developing brain. It is a world of limited language and limited concepts... or perhaps the better word would be “restricted,” because the child must make sense of her world using templates handed to her and imposed upon her by the adult world. Childhood is a paradox. For all the confusion and intentional obfuscation, children manifest astounding clarity about the beauties of the natural world as well as the hypocrisies of the adult one. Sadly, most of us lose both the sense of wonder and of horror as we mature. It goes without saying—literally—that the child’s perspective is a challenge for most writers. When the child is a survivor, it becomes nearly impossible to retrieve that voice, because of the dissociation, amnesia, and denial associated with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), which is the legacy of child sexual abuse.

Stark has done something in *Nickels* that deserves our attention. She has not only remembered, but she has resisted the impulse to editorialize. Instead, she has given us the pure voice of the survivor, and in doing that, she compels her readers

to experience the world—fragmented, distorted, with fragile islands of comfort and familiarity—through the eyes and limited context of the child. And then she enables us to grow up along with that survivor, collecting and integrating the fragments of self along with her protagonist.

Thank you, Ms. Stark, for what must have been a descent into some kind of personal hell to recover this fictional Eurydice, this survivor with no name, whom you have led back up into the light of publication—an indictment and a torch-bearer.

Forgetting childhood sometimes appears to be the primary goal of socialization, even as civilization promulgates ever more clever incentives for amnesia and evermore diabolical penalties for remembering.

Nickels is a tough read, like other novels about incest (*Push* by Sapphire, which was made into the film *Precious*, or *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison). Historically, the culture has preferred perpetrator-identified or apologist books like *Lolita*, depicting the survivor of child sexual abuse as a sexually precocious predator, or a shadowy figure around which the rest of the plot revolves. The trope of the survivor of incest in a father-knows-best world, like the 19th-century trope of the “tragic octoroon” in a world of racial apartheid, is that of a lamentable anomaly in a system that otherwise works just fine for everybody. The incest survivor is a reminder of inconvenient truths, and writers and artists historically either pretend she does not exist or they—regretfully—kill her off (suicide, of course, being a form of death by remote control).

Stark does neither. Her protagonist survives. She comes to an understanding of what has been done to her, and as importantly, by whom it has been done. She has been victimized by her father and her mother, by a criminal justice system that fails her, by misguided social workers and foster parents, by mental health professionals, and institutions. But she finds a community. She finds feminism. She recognizes her own lesbianism, a lesbianism that enabled her to form a powerful and passionate alliance with another girl at the age of ten. She begins to write and she finds her voice.

I want to give an example of Stark’s brilliant stream-of-consciousness, literary and spot-on accurate portrayal of PTSD. This is an excerpt from the chapter titled “Age Twenty-five.” A little backstory: When the heroine was ten her father made her wear a purse, where he would put the nickels he gave her after sexually abusing her. Now, she is in a women’s bookstore attempting to purchase a feminist novel:

Sarah rings me up That’ll be 1.95 with tax I give her two dollars five cents is your change she drops a nickel so shiny and bright into my hand I freeze the nickel rolls off my hand onto the counter I stare at it I want to tell someone something the nickel circles itself on the counter looking for a place to settle I don’t move What’s going on Tara says somewhere over my shoulder I stare at the nickel spinning in a spot next to the pile of bright pink A Room of One’s Own bookmarks I shake my head I don’t want them to think I’m crazy don’t want them to know a nickel dropped out of the sky into my hand made me want to die Keep the change I grab the book walk under the shimmering crystal into the street.

This is how it happens, integration of trauma: moment-by-moment, association-by-association, synaptic-connection-by-synaptic-connection, by constant negotiation between past and present, telling and not-telling, despairing and hoping, heaven and hell.

Thank you, Christine, for the gift.

Carolyn Gage (CG): In this review, I refer to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. I want to ask you about your journey back into your own history when you wrote *Nickels*. How much of this is autobiographical?

Christine Stark (CS): The protagonist is not me. When I sat down to write, I had a vivid mental image of “catching” a tow rope (her voice) and then I’d take off with her. The novel is set in areas of Minnesota and Wisconsin where I have lived, which was important because I had to go a long way psychologically to find this character and her voice(s). As a writer, I needed to be grounded in place to bring forward her story. While I share basic identities with the protagonist, the characters and events are composites of stories I have heard, bits and pieces of my own life and imagination. For example, there is a section where she ends up in the system as her father is investigated for child abuse. Throughout the investigation her back is examined at school, which functions as a motif for that section. Other than that, nurses did examine my spine in elementary school every year, along with all the children, I never experienced any of that. So, it is a mistake to assume that the protagonist’s story is mine. Many, if not most, fiction writers write about what they know and create characters with similar social identities as the writer’s. I have never heard someone ask a white, heterosexual author who writes fiction about straight, white characters how much of the story is actually about the author. I think one reason people may wonder how much of *Nickels* is autobiographical is because I am writing about a character that is almost entirely invisible in literature. And, although the character is not “me,” I am writing as an insider to those communities, which is new and unusual.

CG: Some of us with traumatic childhoods have dissociated memories that are difficult to access. Was that true for you? What was the process like in retrieving the affect that you express so powerfully in this book? What were some of the circumstances that led up to your writing *Nickels*?

CS: Generally, it is not difficult for me to access my past. Some memories are further away, and harder to bring forward, but that is primarily because I cannot find individuals living in close proximity or community that support and makes it safer and easier for me to deal with those traumas. Having been profoundly abused as a child and teenager, the pain, shame, and terror can ring up quickly on a daily basis. I lived, for many years, in virtually a constant state of extreme anxiety because I was “triggered” to my past daily. I have had to learn how to control the ease with which I can access my past and the emotions the past flies in on.

The process of writing *Nickels* involved eight to twelve hours of writing a day, with my dog lying about in the backyard until midnight or one in the morning. A Tacoma truck side swiped my car a few months earlier and I was fortunate enough to have it deemed the other driver’s fault, thereby allowing me to receive enough money to pay my bills. Having this free time is what made writing *Nickels* possible. I had to have enormous chunks of time to immerse myself in this character, in particular “catching” her voice(s). The material is intense, and at times I would jump up to play with my dog to give myself a break, but overall the writing process

and becoming attuned to the character's style of speaking and thinking was freeing and energizing. The writing process also involved figuring out how to get her style down onto the page. How do you get someone who thinks in "multiplicity" and, in a matter of a few seconds, has contradictory thoughts and experiences of an event on a sheet of paper? Ultimately, I settled on using very little punctuation, allowing the reader to move with the protagonist's shifting thoughts and perceptions. As a writer, that was fun.

CG: Why did you choose the form of a novel instead of a memoir?

CS: I did not want a memoir to be my first book because I wanted to have more reflection and more experience as a writer than I had when I wrote this in my early thirties. The protagonist in *Nickels* is not me, some of me is in her, but at best she is a slant me, if you will. I guess that is why it is easier to write the truth in fiction. It's not your story. You're not risking "you", and whatever parts of "you" end up in fiction obliquely, "you" are more protected.

CG: Who were your literary role models for this project? If you were putting together a reading list for survivors beginning the journey, which titles would you choose?

CS: If I had to choose one model I used for *Nickels* it would be *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. I read that as a teenager and was captivated by the girl's voice. Remembering a child-like perspective interests me because it is such a creative way of being in the world, before the mundane or cynical takes over, cutting off the joy of everyday existence. Beyond *House on Mango Street* is *Push*, by Sapphire. Someone once said that *Push* was the best portrayal of dissociation they'd ever seen and I thought I can write an even more in-depth portrayal of dissociation and so I did. Also, Reinaldo Arenas's fiction is fantastic. He created such a lyrical, sensory-driven, and imaginative portrayal of a young, gay Cuban boy surviving violence and oppression. At times, while I am reading his fiction, I don't logically know what is going on. It is a different way of reading—as if his work impacts my other senses. Perhaps I enter a dissociative state to read his work, or it takes me to a dissociative state. I also like Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. One of the characters is in effect dissociative. An African American girl emerges as a lone survivor of a shipwreck during legalized slavery with a "twin self." I think that genocide and slavery and other forms of oppression can create these splits in people. I think this should be explored more. I knew a lesbian in the 1990s, and due to homophobia, she was "Kristy" at work where she was closeted, while everyone else who knew her authentic self as an out lesbian, called her Kris. Those are forms of splitting or compartmentalizing to survive oppression.

CG: What are you working on now?

CS: I'm in the final editing stages of my second novel, *Carnival Lights*, which is quite different stylistically from *Nickels*. Set in 1969 and written in the third person with a (mostly) omniscient narrator, the forward motion of the story follows two teenage, Indian cousins from a fictitious northern Minnesota reservation who leave home. One of the girls is a butchy lesbian. Her cousin was sexually abused by her white father. The backstory is a mix of factual and historical information about Minnesota and its founders. The themes are heavy (racism, attempted genocide, boarding schools, rape, trafficking, dissociation, abduction of Indian women and girls) but the overarching message centers on the strength and courage of the girls, Native cultures and people, and the love and cultural knowledge that survived from

generation to generation despite the violence and assimilation. Two years ago, I thought I was done with the story line, and suddenly a character from the late 1800s popped up, and in about an hour or two, I had his story. It was so real to me, and sad, that I cried for the rest of the week. It is very apparent to me that this book, this "story" belongs to the characters and I had to wait it out for a couple of years for them to emerge. It could not be hurried. I love the process of getting the story down, and then honing it through the editing process which is more about me listening to the characters than it is about me having control and "creating" them. Writing is like life, it's a mystery. Not everything needs to or can be "understood" logically. In *Carnival Lights*, the central image is trees; trees as witnesses, as protectors, as strength. And then, how stories and life are like trees--they rise up out of place and grow outward and upward, sprouting off the trunk. *Carnival Lights* also contains little side stories about European people who came to this land, this place, and are now part of the tree as well.

CG: Do you have anything you would like to say to survivors who are considering telling their story, either through fiction or in a memoir? I'm thinking especially of tips about self-care during the process.

CS: Writing is an act of healing for me. I can't think of any self-care tips specific to writing that are any different from what I do to get through the average day. Then again "self-care" lingo does not resonate with me. I actually feel somewhat confused when people ask about self-care since I don't view how I get through my life now as that much different from how I got through life as a young girl. The basic dynamics and activities are the same: writing, reading, being playful and joking, being in nature, being athletic, and finding positive and supportive people and communities. I also don't subscribe to the idea of a split between "survivor" and "thrivers," as if at some point you leave behind that pejorative "weak/hurt/survivor self" and become a "thrivers." I always wonder what it would mean to be a "thrivers." That I would have a 2014 Audi instead of a '95 Honda Civic held together by duct tape? That I would take bubble baths with an organic sea salt scrub? I don't view survival as negative, or something to overcome. Life is survival. Life is hard. Life is also joyous and fun at times. Being in balance emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically is my goal. I don't know if my perplexity when people talk about self-care is different because of the amount of abuse I experienced, or if it is just a different viewpoint.

The aspect of writing that is difficult for me is the anxiety I have about people reading and responding to my work. It is the space around the writing that causes issues for me, rather than the writing itself. What I do to alleviate that anxiety, and not allow it to stop me from publishing, is to view the writing as its own entity. I release my work once I publish it, like letting go of a balloon. I've done my work with it, I have done the best I could do, at least at that point in my life, and now it goes out into the world to impact people however it impacts people. In a way, I have no business getting in between the work and the people reading it. The story has a life of its own. I appreciate that you call *Nickels* a gift, because I do see stories as gifts, and that is how I view other survivors' stories.

I do want to say how important it is for survivors to get our stories out into the world, because we are invisible, talked about, talked down to. And yes, we are also respected at times. We need to own our lives, own our stories, and pass along our knowledge. First and foremost, I view myself as a writer. That may not be true of all survivors who write, but the best advice I can give is to take yourself seriously

as a writer. Learn the craft. Read all kinds of writing about all kinds of subjects. Be true to yourself and your story. No one else can do that for you. You survived for a reason, and that reason just may include sharing your insight with others through the written word. Survivors are silenced. Survivors can change that, but it is hard, hard work and we often get hurt again for speaking the truth about what men do to women and children. That is not right. It is not just that adult men (and sometimes women) made the choice to hurt us and we bear the inescapable burden of carrying that with us the rest of our lives, of having our lives limited and constrained by past abuse and present social stigma and society-wide collaboration to keep us silent. Not to mention the threat of further abuse for speaking the truth about our and other survivors' lives. However, we cannot let the fear of being hurt again for speaking stop us. The single, most important way I have survived my childhood has been to expose this sea of sexual exploitation through speaking and writing. That is how I transform my life--the chaos and despair of being treated as an object, of being treated as less than an object, of being treated as if I was born to be sexually abused--into a life with meaning.

CG: How does your lesbian identity interface with your identity as a survivor?

CS: I knew I was a lesbian, although I did not have a word for it, when I was quite young. I am certainly not the only lesbian who knew at a young age. I grew up interacting with people like "they knew," and "I knew they knew" and we just kind of ignored it such that knowing I was a lesbian as a girl was also a kind of dissociation. I was always looking for other lesbians, especially older lesbians to be role models. In the 70s and 80s, that was very difficult to find. After I left my house and "officially" came out as an older teenager, people from my past were like "Yep. I know." So being a lesbian is who I am, and have always been. Being a "survivor" is about the fight I had to put up to stay alive and be true and good to myself in a home and world hostile to my existence. Being a "survivor" encompasses the actions I had to take because people attacked me, people tried to destroy me. Being a lesbian and a survivor can both be classified as "identities" but they are very different in origin. I, and plenty of other lesbians who have been abused, have found it to be difficult to publicly discuss the abuse because of homophobia, and specifically the kind of myths directed at lesbians such as the abuse made us lesbians. That makes no sense, but plenty of heterosexuals believe that and many lesbians are wary of talking or writing about being abused because we do not want to face such homophobic contempt. For example, at a reading an audience member continued to ask me questions about my novel as if it were a memoir. Repeatedly, I told her it was fiction, yet she persisted until finally she yelled at me: *Are you a lesbian because you were sexually abused?* This is outrageous behavior, and most people would not yell that at a reading, but it underlies the social narrative about how or why some women are lesbians, and many wonder or believe this to be true. This myth is painful and maddening, so lesbians keep quiet. It says that the core of who lesbians and gays are (your sexual orientation—your love and sexual desire for someone) is because you were abused, which is incredibly shaming and inaccurate. Being abused by someone from one group (men) does not create love, romantic feelings, and sexual desire for another group of people (women). That does not make sense. If it did, there would be many more lesbians in the world, given the high rates of sexual abuse of women and girls.

At times, the protagonist in *Nickels* is targeted for abuse specifically because she is a lesbian. This is not uncommon, and I'd like to think *Nickels* breaks down the silence around sexual violence directed at lesbians. I have been doing anti-rape



writing and activism for nearly 30 years. Until *Nickels*, I have mostly been silent about abuse against lesbians. Heterosexism and homophobia are alive and well in anti-rape work. I have been in groups working against sexual violence only to figure out after months that nearly all of us were lesbians. But we don't "say it" even to each other in those settings because a clear pact has been established, even in much of this field, that lesbians keep quiet. In that group, none of us discussed the high rates of victimization of lesbian, gay, (and transgender) youth in prostitution. None of us brought up that so-called lesbian pornography, made by heterosexual men for heterosexual men is the biggest genre of heterosexual pornography. What kind of impact does that have on heterosexual men and their attitudes toward lesbians? Or their attitudes toward heterosexual women who are called "lesbian" as a threat, a put-down, and a way to control straight women? How does this impact lesbians? When I was twelve-years-old, my father began showing me "lesbian pornography." The so-called lesbian was a sexual predator, in the pornography, and I vividly remember "splitting." Up until that point I knew I was "getting away with being a lesbian" and I was quite happy about being who I was. But after seeing the "lesbian pornography" I developed a part of me that feared lesbians even as I knew I was a lesbian. I developed a part of me that hated myself for being a lesbian. It took me many years to even talk about that with anyone, that "spike" of self-hatred and fear in me was so great.

A few years ago, I was giving a training on sexual violence in rural South Dakota. The organizer read my bio, mispronounced "Lambda" (*Nickels* was a Lambda Literary finalist), and then nearly choked when she had to read the word "lesbian" in reference to another one of my publications. It felt like the room stopped for a moment, fear splashed through my mind and body, being among all straight people in a small, rural town froze me for a moment. Then I stepped forward and thought: they are going to have to listen to me for the next eight hours because I have the mic. It was like my childhood, my life: I know, you know, we all know. Except this time someone choked the word out loud. I pushed through years of being abused and treated as "less than" for being a lesbian, and then we all moved through it. I wrote *Nickels* for girls, including lesbian girls, who fight hard to stay alive, to stay true. I wrote *Nickels* for the lesbian girl I was, because she was hurt, she was shamed, she fought hard to live and to love, and because she, and all the other girl warriors have a story to tell. We need them.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Carolyn Gage is a playwright, performer, director, and activist. The author of nine books on lesbian theatre and 75 plays, musicals, and one-woman shows. She specializes in non-traditional roles for women, especially those reclaiming famous lesbians whose stories have been distorted or erased from history. Her work is widely produced, and in 2014 she was one of six featured playwrights at UNESCO's World Theater Day in Rome, where the subject was violence against women. She has won the national Lambda Literary Award in Drama and her play *Ugly Ducklings* was nominated by the American Theatre Critics Association for the prestigious American Theatre Critics Association—Steinberg New Play Award. She has also been awarded numerous grants and fellowships from the Maine Arts Commission, the Maine Women Writers' Collection at the University of New England, the Astraea Foundation, Lewis and Clark College, the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts, and the Oregon Arts Commission. Her papers are archived at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College.

### **RECOMMENDED CITATION**

Gage, Carolyn. (2017). The Orpheus of incest, Book Review of Nickels and interview with author Christine Stark. *Dignity: A Journal of Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 2, Issue 4, Article 7. DOI:10.23860/dignity.2017.02.04.07. Available at <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol2/iss4/7>.