



*The Only True Genius in the Family* by Jennie Nash, Interview by Queenie C

1. Have you ever had the opportunity to “watch a painting come to life over time?”

No, actually, I haven't, but it's one of the things in this world that most fascinates me. When I see a sketch that later becomes a painting, or see the stages of a painting posted on the web (a Hawaiian island scene that starts out as a wash of red, a portrait of a dog that begins as blocks of purple), I'm just dumbfounded at the transformation. It seems very close to magic. I live near the beach in Southern California, and I sometimes come across artists with their easels set up on the bluffs above the beach, or in the wildflower-dotted hills. I always stop and stare in amazement.

2. You talk about photography and painting with such insight, is this a passion of yours?

Thank you for the compliment – but no, again, not really! I mean I like to look at great paintings and photos, but I am not a painter or a photographer myself. When I made the decision to write a book about two photographers and a painter, I was incredibly nervous. I kept thinking, *What have I gotten myself into?* I really don't know a thing about either discipline, and I really didn't *want* to learn about the technical aspects of photography, in particular. I'm the type of person who leaves 99% of a cellphone's capabilities untapped. I ended doing a lot of research about painting and photography – a lot of reading, poking around on the web, and interviews. The man who teaches photography at my kid's high school helped me by showing me some old cameras, and by telling me some great stories. I stumbled across a website where people were talking about their first cameras, and learned a lot by following that thread. I spent a day on set with a well-known food photographer, and gained invaluable insight from her camera technicians, and from chatting with her about her career. As for the painting, I talked to gallery curators and museum people, and spent a day flipping through art magazines with a painter who helped me define my characters' painting styles. The really wonderful thing about doing research for a novel is that you don't have to go out and learn everything known to mankind; you only have to find out the key facts that will inform your story and move it forward. I had fun with it.

You may ask, so why did you decide to write about two photographers and a painter if you had to do so much work? The painter came first. I always knew I would be writing about a painting prodigy. And while I was trying to figure out who this character was and how she had come to be a painter, I kept thinking about her mother. I didn't want to have a “stage mother” who was totally invested in her child's success. I wanted her to have her own thing. And I thought it would be interesting if her own

thing was some kind of art, but a very closed-in, narrow, particular kind of art to contrast with the wide open commercial success her daughter would be experiencing. That's how I came upon the food photographer. The landscape photographer came last. I didn't know, in the beginning, that I was writing a book about three generations of artists. I was just trying to get these characters right – to understand why they were who they were. But the moment, I started thinking about the grandfather, he elbowed his way to the center of the story. I made him famous. I made him obnoxious. I made him have a deep connection to the granddaughter, and that allowed me to develop the antagonistic relationship he had with his own daughter. Making him a landscape photographer was an obvious solution.

One last thing I should say about all this, just so that I come totally clean: my dad is a well-known environmentalist, and I spent many years as a child out in the wilderness with him. I have been to all the grand places Paul Switzer photographs – the Tetons and Moab, Utah and the Sawtooth Mountains, and Santa Fe. Personal knowledge of place informed Paul's photographs far more than any knowledge about photography.

3. Although you were talking about photography in the book you say, “The computer was too public a place to keep such private musings.” How do you feel about all of the popular networking websites (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc.) and blogs that are online now?

Oh boy! What a question! I feel very conflicted, I guess. On the negative side, I feel pressure to be a part of the chatter, and I feel anxiety that the time I spend on networking sites is taking away from time I might otherwise spend writing or being with people in person. I also think that much of what is posted online on twitter and blogs, etc., is just blather – my own entries, included. There's nothing like writing that has been thought out and vetted and edited. But, on the positive side, it's kind of cool that there is no barrier to entry for writers on the web, that you can post your thoughts the second you have them, and it's kind of exciting to have this stream of ideas flowing all the time that you can tap into and “fish” from. Online networking is obviously not going away. It will be interesting to see how it evolves.

4. Writing is a definite art form. Do you believe that “the best art is always an emergency?” How long did it take you to write this book?

I do believe that good art comes when the artist has no choice but to make it. It's an emergency: you *have* to write the book or make the painting or take the picture. One of the biggest hurdles for any artist is the idea of permission – of feeling that you have a right to tell your story. That's really what The Only True Genius in the Family is about, in the end. Who has permission to make art? And who gives you that permission? Once someone feels that they have the right to create, nothing will stop them. At least that's what I've experienced, and what I've observed.

It took me a year to write this novel, but I did a lot of other things in that year, as well. I teach writing (at UCLA Extension Writers' Program, and privately) and I have two teenage girls who both play club sports. I love being a mother and a writer. I think they're very complimentary activities.

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5. In the book, picture stalking is compared to the act of a bird building its' nest. The birds don't stress about it, they just do it, they don't pick random twigs and materials, their actions are very deliberate. Do you think that this stalking technique can be applied to our everyday lives?

To be deliberate yet stress-free? I would love to live that way! I'm a long, long way from it, though! My character who makes the bird nest comparison is very Zen. I often have minor characters who are like that – shopkeepers who dispense wisdom, massage therapists who see through everything. I don't plan it that way, but it always seems to happen! Maybe that's the way my longing for peace manifests itself.

6. Which character is *The Only True Genius in the Family*?

I wanted it to be ambiguous – the daughter with natural talent? The grandfather with a talent for seeing and for shaping how he would be seen? The mother who struggled to give herself permission to create and finally broke through? I was never going to give a one-person answer – and then it was my own daughter who actually gave me the *real* answer. Her AP English class read my book and invited me to come speak to the class. On the night before I was scheduled to go, my daughter said something about how she considered the only true genius to be an *idea*, not a person. Light bulbs went off in my head because I was originally going to call the book *True Genius*. In that context, genius is an idea, a thing, a concept. I love thinking of the title that way -- that in this family, there wasn't one kind of talent, or one path to finding your voice. They each had a genius for finding their own voice, and *that* was the family's true genius.

7. Can you tell us anything about your current projects?

Of course! I just finished a rough draft of a new novel. I'm not sure what I'm going to call it – several titles are in the running, but at the moment, my favorite is *Love, After All*. There is a mother and a daughter at the center of the book who have been ambivalent towards each other for five decades, and who have very different ideas about love. During the course of the story, one of them loses her great love and the other gains hers. There is a lot of jealousy, anger, regret – and a lot of joy and celebration. It will be out sometimes in 2010.