photo credit: Jane Bernard

Carol Moldaw is the author of four books of poetry, including *The Lightning Field*, which won the 2002 *Field* Poetry Prize. She is the recipient of a Lannan Foundation Marfa Writer's Residency, a Pushcart Prize, and a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. She lives in Pojoaque, New Mexico, and this summer will be teaching at The Taos Summer Writers' Conference. Her first novel, *The Widening*, published by Etruscan Press last year, is the subject of *Sou'wester's* interview with her, conducted by Co-Editor Allison Funk.

An Interview With Carol Moldaw

Sou'wester: You are the author of four books of poetry. In 2008, Etruscan Press published your first novel, *The Widening*. What prompted you to write a novel?

Carol Moldaw: I didn't consciously intend to write a novel when I started *The Widening*. I was preoccupied with the character of the young woman, half introverted, half reckless, but wasn't sure where it would go, especially as I had little experience with fiction. But I could feel from the beginning that I couldn't contain the character's voice, her point of view, or her experiences, in my poetry. It would be wonderful to be able to write poetry that could contain it. But as I wrote, I knew I needed a larger canvas, and also thought that the balance between interior and exterior description, as well as the narration and action, were more conducive to prose. I didn't want to get tangled up in technical poetic issues, such as the pacing of the line, and the way the sentence moves through lines. The form—discrete paragraph-length chapters—came out of doing what I knew how to do and discovering something new and necessary to the storytelling. In some ways, I ended up treating the way sentences move through the paragraph the way I treat lines and sentences in a poem. I liked creating this hybrid form, and I think it serves the book well.

SW: The novel is divided into two sections: Part One concerns your character before she graduates from her high school boarding school, including her spring semester, which she spends in Spain. Part Two of the novel describes the character in her first year of college. I was very moved by Chapter 26 in Part Two of the novel in which you describe your character's in-between stage of development, no longer a girl, not yet the adult woman she will become: "The cotton raincoat she had borrowed from a girl in her dorm had a flannel lining. She liked the way, two sizes too big, it wrapped around her like a cocoon; with a bulky sweater under it, she could stay warm enough to pupate through winter. No one, not even she, could tell what would emerge, moth or butterfly." Would it be accurate to describe your novel as a coming of age story? Could you talk about your main character's development and the relationship of her sexual experiences to that development?

CM: Yes, I think it's fair to call it a coming of age story. The book starts just before the character turns 17 and ends when she is 18. In those years, she gains quite a bit of experience, at least sexual experience, and through those experiences she begins to have a sense of herself, her own limits, her own vulnerabilities, and her own capacity to harm. Although I hoped to give a sense of the character in ways beyond the sexual, it is largely through the sexual that we know her, and the book dwells with a microscopic closeness

on her sexuality, it is the lens through which we see her development. I think that sexuality is a good lens for many reasons: it is intimate, but reveals the cultural norms it either reflects or resists; it is often secret; and often a testing ground. The implications of sexuality for woman are so charged in our society, perhaps to a lesser extent today, but the time in which *The Widening* is set is the moment when everything began to change. What *kind* of woman you are going to be at one time seemed to hang on whether you kept your virginity or not. And then, once virginity was deemed less crucial, whether you only gave it up for romantic, as opposed to libidinal, reasons became a defining litmus. But with all this pressure on a girl's sexual choices, the issues of her actual experience, of herself and her relations with men, were often lost: What if she worked within the assumptions of a certain kind of framework and that framework fell apart? What if she had no framework?

This character is relatively protected: she is on the pill, she is financially protected by her parents, she is in school. None of that is threatened in the course of the book: she does not get pregnant, expelled, exposed, ostracized. Although her parents become aware of her behavior and strongly disapprove, they do not kick her out. I wanted to explore the inner territory of her experience, without the sort of dastardly repercussions that would have been part and parcel with even one misstep in a previous age.

SW: I wonder further about the relationship of *the times* to your character's experiences as a young woman. I assume that the novel is set in the 1970's. For the first time, the pill was readily available; women could more safely choose to have sexual relationships than any time before. How does this freedom affect your character? In your view, did many young women in that generation have similar experiences?

CM: I think the times, the 1970s, are crucial to the story. In a sense, the protagonist is formed by having been a wide-eyed spectator to the sixties, to the "summer of love"—her interpersonal values are formed by ideas floating in the air, by her imagination really. As you mention, the pill was available, there was no sense of dire consequences. It was a window of time, before AIDS, before STDs were widely known. I think another aspect of this time that is hinted at in the book is how the girl's parents have no connection to her sense of freedom, no way to understand it or to guide her. They are creatures of a much more restricted environment and mass culture hasn't yet put them at ease with what, for her, is in the air. The freedom she has, along with her lack of preparation for it, is one of the main themes of the book. It is her testing ground, the rocky path along which she ultimately grows. From anecdotal evidence, I would say many women in that generation, my generation, had similar experiences—maybe not as extreme as hers, but variations on the same theme. It may be a minority of women, but a sizeable minority. I already knew this from talking with my friends and contemporaries, and now that I've

begun to hear from women who've read the book, it's been confirmed. It's fascinating how women relate to this character. Most of us were more adventurous in our youth, and with time it takes on a certain patina, a nostalgic aura. I think *The Widening* reasserts the actual grittiness of some of those experiences. Realizing how little has been written from the point of view of women coming of age, and coming of age in an unconventional way, was one of my motivations for writing this.

I also want to add that though this is set in the 70s, and obviously many things have changed since then, I think similar issues confront women growing up in every generation now. The pill has not gone away; our culture is more sexually explicit than ever. There is still no obvious balance, no right note struck, between abstinence and abandon. Of course the right balance would be different for each person, but there is no widely accepted cultural norm. A couple of years ago, the papers were full of stories about 'hook-ups.' From what I read, the attitude of many young women interviewed was more full of bravado and more knowing than that of this character, but the issues and dilemmas underneath the surface—what do I do with my freedom? What do I do with my desire? Does sexual intimacy have ramifications? Can a woman in our culture have the same sexual freedoms men have traditionally had?—are the same.

SW: Reading your novel, I noticed how frequently you describe the experiences of the main character in figurative language. Similes are everywhere, wonderful, evocative ones. Just a sampling would include your description of the main character in her college cafeteria, protecting herself from the looks of others by holding "her tray in front of her, not like a shield, but like a chalice, full to the brim, requiring balance in every step." Or this passage a few pages further: "The past, she thought, was like malaria: inside you always, able without warning to reduce your entire self to shivers and shakes, to delirium." Another example I admire occurs when you are describing the dormitory bunk bed of one of the young men she's slept with: "She liked the close quarters, the containment of the bunk bed: it reminded her of those stars whose energy became denser as they compacted." I wonder if, being a poet writing in prose, you ever found yourself having to resist the poet's tendency to see the world through the lens of metaphor? Or did you feel your skill in using figurative language a great asset when writing prose?

CM: Well, thank you, I'm glad you found the figurative language evocative. I didn't fight against it as I was writing; it is natural to me as well as part of my training and I found it a great resource to be able to incorporate poetic strategies into my prose, to dip into metaphor and simile to get at the character's experience, in particular her experience of herself. I think that as poets go, in terms of my use of figurative language, I fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum —it is one of many poetic tools and not the one I rely on most. So I didn't feel it as a temptation, or tic, I had to fight. As a poet I've

always been interested in syntax, in the curve and bend of a sentence, and I think that also served me well as I made a foray into prose. It was a bit of a revelation to me to see, as I would read over what I'd written, how much figurative language I had incorporated: it made me understand my own writing differently. I've always thought I was a bit more analytic than poets are supposed to be.

SW: I'm very interested in other ways in which your novel reminds me of poetry. Although you employ paragraphs, not poetic lines, your narrative is very brief, compacted in short chapters that are rarely longer than a single page in length. Using the third person point of view, you render a single consciousness—that of your main character—we see everything through her. Reading her very private thoughts reminds me of my experience in reading lyric poems—there is an intimacy to the voice. Other people, her parents, lovers, come and go, but when we hear them their voices seem to me filtered through the consciousness of the main character: their brief speech appears in italics. We're hearing them speak *inside* her mind. I don't think you include conventional narrative dialogue anywhere in the book, do you?

CM: I was interested in having this book recreate the character's frame of mind while not being completely from her point of view—I wanted the narration subtly to convey some wisdom that she herself didn't have yet. I didn't want the narration to draw conclusions for the reader, but to have an objectivity, the distance to describe, the wisdom to see ramifications that the character wasn't yet aware of. I wanted it to be able to put into words feelings that were inchoate to the character, and to have an intensity; therefore, the descriptions needed to be condensed. I'm sure this comes out of my training as a poet—the desire to distil things to their essence, to capture the most intense experience in as few words as possible. I wasn't interested in transitions at all, which is probably why I ended up using the one paragraph short chapter form that I did. In some ways, I handled transitions the way I tend to handle narration in poems: I try to embed them, so that they are implicit and don't need to be separately stated. I'm glad that the intimacy reminds you of the experience of reading lyric poetry; I take that as a high compliment.

You are right that there is no conventional dialogue in the sense that none of it is in quotation marks. All the dialogue is italicized. You could see this as another hold-over from poetry, where italics often are used for something in another voice, but yes, the implication is that of it is all filtered through her—we are hearing it through her ears, hearing how it resounds in her head.

SW: When one reads a conventional piece of fiction, one comes to expect a heightening of conflicts leading to a climax and a resolution. Your character has many painful experiences; there are crises, but they don't seem to me to *rise* or culminate in a narrative

climax. Nor do I read the ending as a resolution. Could you discuss the role of *plot* in your writing of your novel?

CM: Although the ending doesn't resolve anything, and won't be read as a traditional Aristotelian resolution, I do feel that the crises the girl experiences in the last chapters of the book culminate, with increasing significance and intensity, until at the very end she has a kind of catharsis of consciousness, the glimmering of a different kind of self-awareness that leads to change. On an interpersonal level, really everything has gone wrong and she is left pretty much alone. In the last chapters, she manages to alienate her only real friend (and role model) by sleeping with that friend's ex-boyfriend; she has left her high school boyfriend, who has mistreated her; she comes to the painful realization that the one boy she has a real attachment to will never be sexually interested in her; she is confronted with the way in which her own lack of judgment, used as a model, has damaged another girl. I think all these things peak at the end and give her pause. That pause—the stillness at the center of the storm—isn't a traditional resolution, but rather an opening.

In writing, I felt that at her age, 18, there was nothing definitive that could happen to her that wouldn't be melodramatic, false, or pat. So much has already happened. Should the ending punish her for what she's been through? Should her parents send her to an institution? Should she fail her exams? Should she acquire a better boyfriend? I didn't see how any of these kind of endings would resolve her internal struggles. The social context in which the book takes place is not the day and age where young women were overtly ostracized for behavior like hers—they might be judged, or the object of gossip, as she was, but that is hardly a resolution. With the pill, with abortion, even an accidental pregnancy seemed an evasion of the focus on her internal state.

I did toy with having something happen to the character that actually happened to me. I was socked in the eye one night by a stranger as I walked down a large but fairly deserted commercial street on the way to my boyfriend's house. The stranger kept going in the direction he was headed and I ran the rest of the way to my boyfriend's. But even that seemed too random and punitive, and brings up the possibility of further violence. Why stop with just being socked? In many ways, the character is an ordinary 18-year-old, who got carried away, or in over her head, as they say. She just needs some consciousness to pull back, to think about what she wants. The most interesting thing I learned from being socked had to do with the response of the other women I was working with in the library's accounting office that summer. When they saw my black eye, they all assumed that my boyfriend, a nice mild-mannered college student, had hit me. It didn't surprise them.
One element integral to the novel's structure is the way the two halves of the book

mirror each other in many small ways but have different arcs. The first half primarily has the trajectory of travel; it is almost picaresque, although the girl lacks the canniness of most picaresque protagonists. It has that forward momentum that occurs when you keep moving in space as well as time. In the second half, when she is attempting to settle into her first semester of college, there is an intricate weave of recurrent figures. I tried to create a sense of the difficulty she would experience in coming to terms with not being able to just move on; the sense of deepenings and consequences.

SW: Could you say a little about why you chose the title of *The Widening* for your novel?

CM: The title *The Widening* came to me quite early on. It is a phrase from the first chapter, where the girl loses her virginity: "Her body pounded and throbbed, with the widening had come a great unremitting pressure on her bones and she ached inside." So it is both, in a literal sense, about the loss of virginity, and in a more symbolic sense, the loss of innocence, the pressures of coming into the larger world. In the back of my mind I suppose was Yeats' "widening gyre." Someone recently pointed out to me that the title also suggests Widener Library, the main reference library at Harvard. Harvard, like all the characters, is never named in the book, but there are references, street names and terms, that allude to it as the college.

SW: Did you have other novels as models in mind in writing yours? Or could you talk about writers of poetic/lyric fiction whom you admire?

Regarding the structure of *The Widening,* I didn't have any models that I'm aware of; as I mentioned, the structure came out of my training as a poet, being drawn to writing an accumulation of discrete moments, and my lack of interest in scenic transitions. But there are many books, and authors, that informed my consciousness about the kind of fiction I was after. A kind of intimate gallery. I had read, with much admiration, Marguerite Duras' *The Lover,* which I think is an analogous book, though re-reading it recently, I realized how complex the voice of that novel is. I love writers with finely calibrated prose rhythms. I think of Jamaica Kincaid, of *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John,* in this regard, as well as Jeanette Winterson and *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit,* all of which I had read before I first started *The Widening* many years ago. Without thinking about it consciously, I've been intrigued by fiction that is both intimate, or immediate, and rather objective. I think of Jean Rhys in this regard, both *Wide Sargasso Sea,* and *Good Morning, Midnight.* I read all of her novels at one point: they are unique in their portrayal of the experience in being a woman—unsparing, pitiless. Of contemporary writers, Rikki Ducurnet's fiction, especially her short stories, have been important to me; Forrest Gander, a wonderful poet, just published a really interesting novel, *As A Friend,* with multiple points of view. Michael Ondaatjee's fiction,

experiments in a lyrical way with structure, voice and scene. *Coming Through Slaughter* was an important book to me, though I'm not sure when I first read it. Earliest of all, of course, I was steeped in Virginia Woolf and Colette; different as they are, I think both are indispensable in terms of writing from a female sensibility.

SW: Do you have plans to write more fiction? Or will your next project be another book of poems?

CM: I'm back to writing poems now, and very excited about my next book. Etruscan Press, that published *The Widening,* is going to do a 'new and selected,' called *So Late, So Soon.* That will be out in the first half of 2010. My first book, *Taken from the River,* is out of print, and there is a chapbook, *Through the Window,* that wasn't widely distributed, so I'm glad to have a volume that will give representation to my full body of poetic work.

I'm not sure whether I'll write more fiction or not. I have something brewing in the back of my mind, and if it comes forward then I will. I tend to put other writing aside when I'm able to write poetry. One reason *The Widening* got written was that I found it very difficult to write poetry when my daughter was younger—I didn't have the brooding time that I seem to need. But *The Widening* was something I had already started and put aside, and when I took it up again, I found that with the form and structure already there I was able to use what time I had; the short form of the chapters was conducive to that moment in my life. Though the subject matter was far removed from what I was experiencing, I liked being taken out of the world of mothers and young children into a phase of life with different risks and concerns.

Twenty-Six

The cotton raincoat she had borrowed from a girl in her dorm had a flannel lining. She liked the way, two sizes too big, it wrapped around her like a cocoon; with a bulky sweater under it, she could stay warm enough to pupate through winter. No one, not even she, could tell what would emerge, moth or butterfly. She wasn't used to the crunch of fresh snow under her boots, or the slog of melting slush. The stillness of snowfall, bare black branches crusted over with white, increased her melancholy like the tremor of a violin's last note, the curtain sweeping shut on a tableaux of dancers, tutus tilted up as they leaned into the circle with linked arms. The last time her mother had taken her and her sister to see *The Nutcracker* she had been bored. From where they sat in the balcony, the dancers below looked like porcelain figurines. When they scissored their legs and leapt through the air, their lightness of spirit could not cut away her heaviness of heart. Instead, she had wondered at their powderiness, their pinned hair; at the self-forgetfulness it would take to allow one to be onstage, in timed motion, in character. It was hard enough to stay in character as yourself, she had thought then. Now she wondered if she knew who that self was. *What did she want,* her therapist had asked last summer. From her window, she watched students scurrying in the cold below, snow catching on their coats, their bare heads, and knew they shared a secret that, lean in as she might, she could not fathom.

excerpt from *The Widening*