



# Chaudiere Books

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## A short interview with Amanda Earl

conducted by rob mcLennan

Q: What was the original impulse for *Kiki*?

A: Way back in the 1990s, I watched a CBC TV documentary about the Roaring Twenties. Kiki was mentioned. I had never heard of her and I was curious. I'd like to say I began to research her and fastidiously read all the books I could about the era she lived in; however, that would be a lie. Instead I completely forgot about her until the 21st century.

In 2007, after I finished working on *Eleanor*, my first chapbook with above/ground press, inspired by Eleanor of Aquitaine, a strong, bold woman mostly neglected by history, I realized that I had enjoyed the process of researching obscure and unsung wayward women, and celebrating their sexuality. I remembered Kiki. I read her memoirs, which contained an introduction by Ernest Hemingway along with Man Ray's photos of her voluptuousness and I became intrigued.

I have always been fascinated by places and periods in history where creativity and sexual freedoms are given free reign. Montparnasse in the 20s and 30s represents such an era. Lots has been written about Montparnasse but often Kiki is mentioned only briefly with a passing line or two. I wanted to learn about her for myself but also to pique people's interest about her and about the era. Ideally I would like to see the return of the spirit of Montparnasse: in other words, unbridled creativity and sexual abandon.

Q: Far too often, poetry collections that work around historical characters (or even imagined characters) are bogged down with so many facts, and simply replicate biographical information, making for terribly dull poems. How did you approach the character Kiki against the real person? How does one approach poetry based on actual events without falling into pure biography?

A: At the end of the book, I quote Jean Cocteau from *Opium, Diary of a Cure*: "Writers of epics are no more concerned about wigs and wrong dates than Homer with geography and metamorphoses." I wasn't writing an epic per se, but I let that idea guide me throughout my research and writing. What I wanted to do was to extrapolate from Kiki's memoirs and from the books I read from others. These books are more concerned with fact than feeling. I focused on the feeling, the emotion. For a biography, facts would be the point around which the text would pivot. For poetry, I'm not sure that is needed. Also, various biographies set in Montparnasse during that period, John Glasgow's *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, Morley Callaghan's *That Summer Place*, have been called into question as inaccurate, embellished, biased etc at one time or another. Each one contradicts the other about what actually happened. How much about what we remember is true and how much is based on our emotional state at the time? When I look at other poetry books that deal with historical figures, such as Rob Winger with *Muybridge's Horse*, Carolyn Smart with *Hooked*, Susan Elmslie's *I Nadja, and Other Poems*, I see that they have found a way in to the work that is unique; their main avenue seems to be the creation of voice. That voice cannot come simply from the facts of a person's history. That's what I've tried to do with Kiki.

Q: While you very much work through, as you say, “the feeling, the emotion” of *Kiki*, you also work through quite a variety of structural and formal considerations, from the traditional lyric to the visual to the more experimental lyric. What was it about the variety of structure that appealed, and how were you able to turn that variety into a single, coherent work?

A: One of the things I admire about Montparnasse during the Crazy Years was the variety and extreme nature of the creative work undertaken, all of it stretching artistic boundaries or attempting some bizarre method to create something unusual, whether it was Man Ray’s Rayographs, Cocteau’s films, the sculpture of Alexander Calder, Breton’s surrealist manifesto, the writing of Ernest Hemingway, etc. It was all so wild & uninhibited. Or as Chagall puts it, “I aspired to see with my own eyes what I had heard of from so far away: this revolution of the eye, this rotation of colours, which spontaneously and astutely merge with one another in a flow of conceived lines. That could not be seen in my town. The sun of Art then shone only on Paris.” I tried to recreate that spirit in *Kiki*.

Q: How does *Kiki* fit with other literary projects you’ve been working on? How do you see your work progressing or developing, especially now, with *Kiki* now existing as a complete, published work?

A: I’m never really trying to fit one work with any other work I do. But I have worked on long poems about historical women before (*Eleanor* – above/ground press; *Ursula* – AngelHousePress; *St. Ursula’s Commonplace Book* – WIP; *All the Catharines* – unpublished). I guess that’s a way that it fits in. I’ve played around a bit with cut ups as well (*Me, Medusa* – Red Ceiling Press; *Sessions from the Dream House Aria* – a portion of which was published in *seventeen seconds*). I never really want to do anything the same way. To me the fun is in exploring and trying new things. There’s a section of *Kiki*: “In Which K Meets B in a Dream,” a bit of dialogue that could be a scene from a play. It was particularly fun to write. I’m working on a play right now, a kind of poetic play in that it is in rhyme. I progress by changing.

Q: There’s also a very open sexuality that runs through the length and breadth of your work, which ties in very much with the life and times of the real-life Kiki. Was this a consideration in how you originally came to the subject matter? Is this something that enters your work deliberately, or more organically? Is this something you see as lacking in contemporary poetry?

A: *Kiki*’s sexuality certainly was one of the characteristics that drew me toward her. Since I’m very open sexually myself and fascinated with the sex lives of others, I guess I do tend to be drawn to fellow perverts, which leads to the need to find out more about them and often leads to poems or erotic fiction. I was really excited to read Sarah de Leeuw’s *Geographies of a Lover*, a sexually explicit long poem, which holds up poetically too. I can’t say I’ve read much contemporary poetry that includes sex except euphemistically. But if anyone wants to recommend some filthy poems that aren’t limericks from the Victorian era, I’d love to read them. I am drawn to the erotic and the sexual. I have heard writing poetry gets you laid...

Q: Finally, what authors have you been reading lately that you would recommend? What works can’t you help but return to?

A: With funding assistance from the City of Ottawa, I’m working on *St. Ursula’s Commonplace Book*, about a homeless woman who has visions and paints, which has me going to the National Gallery of Canada a lot and looking at art instead of doing a lot of reading, but for the same manuscript, I’m reading, *Hidden Lives: Coming Out on Mental Illness* where a bunch of Canadian authors talk about living with mental illness. Thanks to the Coach House Books sale this summer, I’ve purchased the entire bpNichol long poem, *The Martyrology*. I’m on book 2 and intend to read all 9 books in the next few months as part of the inspiration for my work in progress. I return often to works that blur genre boundaries, all of Anne Carson’s work, *Je Nathanaël* by Nathalie Stephens (Nathanaël), *Completed Field Notes* and the *Hornbooks of Rita K* by Robert Kroetsch, Dennis Cooley’s poetry, especially *The Bentleys*.