





Danny Masterson and Helnwein at an art exhibit in Santa Monica

MERCEDES HELNWEIN is a fine artist and novelist who was born in Austria, lived in Ireland, and wound up in Los Angeles in her late teens. When she got here, she fell into a career almost like one falls off a cliff.

I came across her art before she had ever had an exhibit and have been a collector of her work ever since. I think she's one of the most exciting artists in LA right now. And not just in LA—her work is being exhibited in solo shows in Berlin, New York and Dublin as well. A true creative soul, Helnwein has also been writing since she was 14 years old and last year saw the publication of her debut novel, *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day*.

DANNY MASTERSON: Your novel *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day*, blew me away. Being born in Austria and raised in Ireland, how did you write a book about a middle-class family in Florida?

MERCEDES HELNWEIN: The way I grew up was the complete opposite of the way [the main character] Hester Day grew up, but I've always been attracted to the extreme mediocrity and banality of the middle class as material to use in any aesthetic form, whether in writing or drawing. For me, it's such a pliable subject matter. I get excited writing about the claustrophobic circumstances of that world.

DM: As an early fan of your drawings, I've been asking you to paint for almost a decade. What took you so long to unleash your Austrian fury with brush and canvas?

MH: I think it has to do with a deep-rooted obsession I have for drawings. There is a raw energy in good drawings that is really exciting and oddly satisfying. I feel like someone's talents are squeezed through a more primitive filter—there's less to hide behind and more to do in order to prove yourself.

DM: Is there another book on your horizon, and if so, is it about me? If not, what's it about?

MH: It's not about you. It's about a guy called Donny Meesterson. [She laughs.] Actually, [my next book] takes place in LA. This city is a great backdrop for almost any kind of story you could think up. It has pretty much everything—comedy, tragedy, every kind of culture, every kind of person. There's lots of drama to choose from.

DM: What do you think about LA's art scene?

MH: I feel LA is kind of the Wild West of the art world. It's dangling at the edge of the time zone, embedded in the middle of the movie industry and often overlooked by the other art centers of the world—but somehow that works to its advantage. Things are less rigidly structured here; there are no rules, and this kind of chaotic freedom makes a fertile ground where artists are allowed to exist without being forced into the boring clichés and hip fads dictated by the art world.

DM: What are some of the things in LA that inspire you?

MH: I think Los Angeles is a great town for inspiration. Not only because it's big, weird and diverse enough to include a million scenarios for visuals or stories, but also because it has an atmosphere where you believe everything is possible. I feel like you can think up strange ideas, and no matter how big or awkward, if you work out the angles, you can always figure out a way to get it off the ground here.

DM: What about me do you find so attractive?

MH: Your art collection.