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Multi-genre writer Shelley A. Leedah assuredly shifts her creative focus between critically acclaimed books of poetry, short fiction, novels, and children's literature. With *I Wasn't Always Like This*, the seasoned writer and popular presenter adds creative non-fiction to her literary repertoire. Her numerous titles include *Wretched Beast*; *Listen, Honey*; *Orchestra of the Lost Steps*; *The Bone Talker* (with illustrator Bill Slavin); *The House of the Easily Amused*; and *A Few Words For January*. Leedah's work has appeared in anthologies ranging from *The Best Canadian Poetry in English, 2013* to *Great Canadian Murder and Mystery Stories*; *Slice Me Some Truth: An Anthology of Canadian Creative Nonfiction*; *Country Roads: Memoirs from Rural Canada*; and *Outside of Ordinary: Women's Travel Stories*. Born and raised in Saskatchewan, Leedah has also lived in Calgary, Medicine Hat, Sechelt, and Edmonton. She now makes her home in Ladysmith, BC. In addition to literary writing, she works as a freelance writer, editor, and writing instructor.



**Have you ever fantasized about leaving your life? If so, where would you go, and how would you envision your new life?**

**Do you ever feel resentment?**

**Could you/do you ever imagine living alone?**

**If you could relive your life as you've experienced it, would you?**

**Do you ever experience loneliness?**

**What makes you truly happy?**

**If there is one major thing you could change in your life, what would it be?**

**Do you have relationship role models (a pair that inspire)? If so, who and why?**

**How do you define a life well-lived?**

**What are 10 things (physical characteristics, interests, values, experiences, etc.) you would include in your "want" list if you were looking for a partner online?**

**What are the five top traits you value/search for in a partner? I.e: generosity, sense of humour, passion.**

**How did you meet your boyfriend/husband/current partner?**

**Were your parents happy together, and do you think their marital relationship has in any way influenced your own?**

**Is there a book or movie that has influenced your "view" on relationships, either negatively or positively?**

**Do you think there really are "plenty of fish," and that with time and effort even people who are vastly different can form a wonderful and lasting romantic relationship?**

**Would you marry a man/woman without first knowing if you are sexually compatible?**

**Have you ever internet dated, and/or, if you ever found yourself single, would you try internet dating?**

**Do you know of anyone who has had a very positive or very negative internet dating experience?**

**Did you expect to become a parent, and if so, do you have the number of children you planned to have?**

**Do you find it challenging juggling career /home / children? How do you manage it (i.e: what do you do for yourself?)**

**Do you have creative, athletic or other outlets that help keep you balanced, and if so, what are they?**

**Do you feel the chores are equally shared in your household? Who does what?**

**If you are in a second (or more) marriage /longterm relationship that involves children, what has your experience been like re: blending families?**

**Have you mostly planned your life, or lived spontaneously?**

**Do you have a good friend whom with you can share anything/everything? Do you feel that having such a relationship is almost akin to having a therapist?**

**If you are in a relationship, do you have friends of the opposite sex you spend time with, i.e: go for coffee, chat on the phone, hike, etc? If the answer is no, why not? If yes, is your partner 100% "okay" with this?**

**What are your beliefs around men/women in committed relationships having friends of the opposite sex?**

**Do you find the major holidays (i.e: Christmas and Easter) to be a time of great joy and family togetherness, or does the stress of spending, hosting, making meals, etc. override the joy?**

**Were you "always Like this," or do you find that your world view, traditions, or values have changed significantly with the years?**

**Are you an "emotional" eater? I.e: you reach for sweet or salty treats regardless of whether you're celebrating or experiencing negative emotions.**

**Are you hyper-sensitive (i.e: experience both extreme highs and extreme lows)?**

**Do you keep your secrets to yourself? Or are you an open person, and if so, have you ever shared too much, and wish you had not been quite so forthcoming? Please explain.**

## QUESTIONS FOR SHELLEY A. LEEDAHL

*The essays in I Wasn't Always Like This all seem to be autobiographical. Given the controversies about truth in memoir over the number of years — James Frey's A Million Little Pieces comes to mind — how much of this book is true? How much of it is fiction?*

I'd say everything in this book is true. Emotionally true, at any rate. Memoir is based on that slippery fish — memory — and even if two people share the same experience or attend the same event, both will have a different recollection of it. So, there's that. There's also the fact that you have to pick and choose which experiences you'll include. In creative non-fiction one might incorporate poetry and/or fictional techniques to shape and move the story. If you included every little detail, both reader *and* writer would quickly get bored.

*What kind of fictional techniques do you use?*

I use imagistic or “snapshot” scenes, often begin with an accounting of place (geography figures significantly in all of my writing), and sometimes I recreate dialogue or e-mail conversations. In the second essay I parallel my family's real, lived experience with a fictional family's as they both cross Canada in a mini-van. Occasionally I merge the traits of two or more characters into one when they are accomplishing the same thing in the story. Often I change the name of a character to protect his or her actual identity — Donald in the piece “Plenty of Fish,” for example.

*That's interesting. Why wouldn't you just write this book as fiction?*

I have, quite frequently, mined my own life for my novels, short story collections, juvenile and children's literature, and I also write “confessional” poetry, but both the voice and content of these pieces insisted on the essay format. For me, as a multi-genre writer, creative non-fiction is the ultimate “vehicle” for exploring intimate subject matter. I feel it offers me the greatest freedom stylistically, and allows me to get to the heart of the matter quickly and efficiently. I very much enjoy *reading* essays, too. It's outrageous to generalize, but in my experience, nothing packs a punch like a well-written essay. One way to think about essays is to equate them to movies based on actual events. There's credulity in that. Hardcore realism. That's what I'm into.

*Do you find it more difficult to write about people when you know they are going to read what you've said about them? Are you ever afraid that someone is going to be hurt by what you've said about them?*

Yes, it is harder, but I'm conscious of not using information about people gratuitously. I'm certainly not out to hurt anyone — that's not how I walk through this world. I'm just trying to figure out my own life as I go, and I hope that when people read these essays they can relate via their own experiences. Who hasn't felt lonely, for example? And how was that loneliness managed? As for friends, family, neighbours and acquaintances appearing within these essays, anyone who's ever been an acquaintance or an intimate of a writer knows that's the ever-present possibility — you may show up in their next book.

*If you had your life to live over again, would you want to experience it in the same way?*

Ha! That's a question I ask participants to consider when I'm invited to present at a home salon. Honestly, I don't know. We can never know how things would have turned out had we made even one major life decision differently. I walked away from my life, again and again, and have had to build community among strangers in new landscapes. There is almost a kind of comfort in the experience of disorientation. Think about travel, especially global travel: it's exciting to have to make one's way in strange cities and countries, where everything — language, customs, food, climate, flora and fauna, currency and more — are different. Some folks find it's almost easier to connect (at a deep level) with strangers than with those they know. But it's also hard work, and it demands great energy to put oneself “out there” again and again. For some people I'm sure it would be terrifying. Although there have been times when I was desperately — and even *dangerously* — lonely, I've also met extraordinary people I would otherwise never have crossed paths with. I have the gift of time to do my own work; for me, writing requires a certain mental and physical space where I can think things through without interruption. I now live in perhaps the most beautiful place in Canada: Vancouver Island. The woods embrace me. I live very simply and alone, and often my rooms are “quiet as a tomb.” The silence is a kind of company in itself.

