

**Dave Dempsey Interviewing Alison Swan**  
**(A shorter version appeared in the Michigan Environmental Council's newsletter)**

**March 6, 2006**



1. What gave you the idea for *Fresh Water: Women Writing on the Great Lakes*? How long ago did you conceive of it?

Swan: *Fresh Water* was inspired by several things almost at once, but the very first nudge was supplied by a beautiful book about the Colorado River called *Writing Down the River* which I found at the Elliot Bay Book Company in downtown Seattle. I remember standing in that book lover's paradise on a rainy April day and reading the contributors' names: Annick Smith, Susan Zwinger, Teresa Jordan . . . Gretel Ehrlich wrote the forward. These Westerners are some of my literary heroes. "What we need is a book like this on the Great Lakes," I said to my husband David. This was 2000 when there were few books on the lakes. (There still are not enough!) David was probably occupying our not-yet-one-year-old daughter Sophia as he often did when she was still so small so I could read or write (or, just as often, sleep). Sophia was the next nudge. *Writing Down the River* is a book by women. Especially while I was immersed in mothering, I liked the idea of working with mothers and other women on a book that paid homage to our home landscape: the Great Lakes basin. I began to research the idea immediately.

2. Why do you think someone should read *Fresh Water* and want to read it? What audience are you targeting?

Swan: *Fresh Water* is full of great writing, almost all of it written or reimagined for this book. Anyone with love for or curiosity about the Great Lakes and their shorelines will be captivated. There is so much variety in this book!

The Great Lakes region is very large—eight states and two provinces border the lakes--10% of the US's population gets its water from the Great Lakes and 25% of Canada's. The shores of Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario hold boreal forests, concrete cities and everything in between. Everyone is familiar with the statistic that the Great Lakes hold almost 20% of the world's surface fresh water, but many people don't know, and I just learned, that they hold fully 95% of the US's surface fresh water. The diversity and complexity of the lakes' various ecosystems (and thus their health and well-being) is also widely unknown, too often unconsidered, especially outside the region. Every Great Lakes basin resident has their story: The person in Seattle who thought the whole region was "pretty much like Detroit, right, I mean, industrialized?" The person in New York who thought Lake Michigan was small enough to walk around in an afternoon.

From the beginning, I've shaped the book to represent a wide range of experiences. I hope that it will appeal to a wide range of readers. *Fresh Water* isn't exhaustive, but as an introduction to this part of the world in these times, it is unrivaled.

3. Do you believe there's a unique female (or feminine) perspective on environmental issues generally and the Great Lakes specifically? If so, what is that?

I think the differences between men and women, whether they are nature or nurture, or a blend of both, are overemphasized in ways that are simply not useful and probably harmful. However, a person's perspective on anything will be informed by their life experiences and let's face it, many women's lives are still very different from their male peer's. I will say that in the process of editing this collection I was struck by two themes, and this was true for the pieces I didn't include as well as for those I did. First, the authors, almost to a one, express a comfortable connectedness to whatever landscape they are writing about (thought that comfort level is often called into question), even a frigid and windswept Chicago beach. Second, human relationships play a key role in this collection, with children of course but also with friends, lovers, family, even enemies.

There were times in the process of editing *Fresh Water* when I wished I'd solicited the writings of men, too—there are many men writers I admire!-- but in the end I'm glad the book has been a project by women. In the 1960s a Great Lakes reader appeared which contained 58 men authors and 7 women. Even a decade ago, something like 88% of books published were written by men—I don't know if the balance has shifted--and we all, men and women alike, for so many reasons, need to hear about the experiences of women. Great Lakes scholar Victoria Brehm has observed, "[the writings of women] tell us less about mastering a landscape and more about adjusting to it, a lesson we may find necessary for the future." My reading of writing about place from all over the world has borne out this observation, including submissions to *Fresh Water*.

4. How did you go about recruiting the individual essayists? What kind of reactions did they give and what are some of

the more interesting and unusual essays in the book?

Like so many writers, I've held a variety of jobs, including many that have directly led me to potential contributors to *Fresh Water*. (This would be a great place, by the way, to acknowledge the men writers who've been instrumental in spreading the word about this project, especially Dave Dempsey, Jack Ridl, and Keith Taylor.) I graduated from U of M's MFA program in 1991. For several years in the 1990s I directed events and publications at Shaman Drum Bookshop in Ann Arbor. Also, from 1997 till 2004 I lived in Saugatuck, a small town on Lake Michigan where I was a local leader in the environmental movement. I discovered and joined the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment at about the same time. Each of these communities has led me to many contacts and many of these contacts have led me to others. In a very real way, this book could not have happened without the existence of the internet. I networked almost exclusively via email. It was cheap and easy, and *Fresh Water* has been a labor of love for everyone involved. I also sent letters to a couple dozen well-published strangers and heard back, by the way, from every single one.

I heard from writers all over North America, and one from as far away as Norway. (Rasma Haidri's prose poem about making peace with the drowning of a son is one of the first submissions I received.) Those who couldn't send work, sent enthusiasm. Well-known Canadian novelist Alice Munro left a kind and encouraging message on my answering machine. Many, many writers sent work written especially for *Fresh Water*, and it was disappointing to me to not be able to include more of these pieces.

It's hard to single out anything because contributions were gleaned from such a large number of submissions that we really are left with the best of the best. There were several unexpected thrills: Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart enthusiastically sent work and support. Annick Smith, whose devotion to the wild nature of Montana grew out of her childhood sojourns in the sand dunes along Lake Michigan, allowed me to combine two essays about those experiences. Annick also helped me to shape my own essay for *Fresh Water*. Poet Diane Wakoski, one of my very first and most important mentors, sent a provocative unpublished essay about Americans at the beach. Judith Minty, who knows Lake Michigan as well as she knows poetry, sent a beautiful new essay and offered advice and support at various points along the way. I could go on and on. . . Laura Kasischke's ghost story, Heather Sellers's intimate memoirs, Thylis Moss's prose poem. . .

5. Would you call yourself optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the Great Lakes, and why?

Oh, one has to be optimistic! We owe this much to our children--which is not to say the situation is not dire. It *is* dire. There are many smart and good people working tirelessly to protect the lakes, but we need more so-called ordinary people to know what threatens the Great Lakes and be willing to vote, both in the polling places and with their pocketbooks, for the eradication of those threats. Anyone who cares about the lakes should be worried about our president's resistance to working with the rest of the world. Obviously the U.S. and Canada must coordinate their efforts to protect the Great Lakes or no effective protection will be possible. Most importantly, we need people to genuinely care, to refuse to look the other way when the lakes are abused. *Fresh Water* is definitely more literary than political or scientific; I think one of the values of art, especially literary art, is its ability to inspire commitment and action. If *Fresh Water* has any agenda at all, it is to encourage people to care. When you feel daunted, imagine your own childhood without access to those incredible bodies of water we call the Great Lakes, and then fight to make sure they endure. I've been reading about the draining of the Aral Sea. This ecological catastrophe has happened in my lifetime; it could happen here too.

7. Did you enjoy the work of editing *Fresh Water*?

Oh yes. My communication with authors has been only inspiring. I have made some new friends, and best of all, I've discovered some writers I was unaware of until they sent their work, Leigh Allison Wilson's lyrical appreciation of Lake Ontario, for one example, Aleta Karstad's Lake Huron journals for another. Linda Loomis, an Oswego, NY, professor and writer, and Michele Bergstrom, a Wisconsin writer, whom I still know only through their written voices, came aboard at the beginning and stayed enthusiastic through a number of ups and downs. Even when things got a little uneasy, as they inevitably do during a project of this size and scope, my experience was almost always positive.

I hope the existence of this book will encourage writers who love the Great Lakes to write about the region. We need the stories; they help us connect. When we connect, it's easier to care, and when we care, it's easier to act. Passivity is the most destructive, if understandable, habit of contemporary Americans.