

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

BOOKS

The Tuesday Essay

Every book a chapter



Lori Lansens traces the path of her life as a writer, wife and mother through her first three novels

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Having just completed my third novel, *The Wife's Tale*, to be launched by Knopf Canada in August, I find myself remembering my first novel, *Rush Home Road*, which I tapped out at a blistering pace in the final year of the last century when I was expecting my first child.

Y2K a few months away, 9-11 unimagined, I was living with my husband in a rented house in Toronto's Little Italy neighbourhood, working in a third-floor bedroom that the forced-air furnace didn't reach in winter, and where in summer I bloated from heat and pregnancy. I was in my thirties, a long-married wife, soon-to-be mother and hopeful novelist.

The story of aged Addy Shadd and five-year-old Sharla Cody was one I'd been planning to write for many years, the characters and structure so familiar that it felt more remembered than created. *Rush Home Road* is set in a fictional version of my hometown in southwestern Ontario, near the border to Detroit.

From my desk in Toronto I was close enough to touch the landscape of my youth, the strawberry fields and high summer corn, the fishy lake, the people I'd studied since I was a child. I told no one, not even my husband, what I was writing about, and felt bliss in my utter possession of it. I was aware that it was statistically likely the story would never be published but that didn't matter. I had no expectations beyond its completion. I hadn't dared to imagine there could readers.

Our baby was born, a son, and the story of Addy and Sharla, hundreds of typed manuscript pages, was eclipsed by my rapture over his birth. The days passed in a blur of nursing and diapers and trips to the grocery store with my stroller because I didn't drive back then.

One day, an unexpected call came from literary agent Denise Bukowski offering representation. Soon followed calls about interest in New York and the offer from Knopf to publish *Rush Home Road* in its New Faces of Fiction program, the series that launched the careers of Anne-Marie MacDonald, Gail Anderson Dargatz, and Timothy Taylor, among others. I felt as if I'd won the lottery. My story would become a book.

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I remember my first glimpse of our newborn son, holding his weight, feeling certain that I could never experience such wonder and awe with subsequent children, if I should be so blessed. Opening the first bound galleys of *Rush Home Road*, I'd felt similarly sure that I would never again feel such a particular thrill as I would with this, my first novel. I was humbled by the opportunity to introduce readers to my intimate fictional world.

During the writing of my second novel, *The Girls*, we were still in Toronto, living in a renovated Victorian house on Queen West with a second baby now, a daughter. I worked in a basement office without a view, one that was root-cellar-cold in the winter, but mercifully cool, if dank smelling, in the summer.

Where I'd been secretive about *Rush Home Road*, I had already sold the rights to my second book and outlined the story of conjoined twins Rose and Ruby before I'd written it. I was restricted by my circumstances then to writing about five hours a day, after and before which I was Mommy, or more often “Mommy” My husband was frequently out of town working and I was alone with my babies, one on my breast, the other on my lap. I felt physically attached to my children and saw a way through fiction to explore the edges of that bond with the conjoined girls in the cornfields of Baldoon County. I wrote *The Girls* on a deadline, which became a driving force behind the story.

I remember holding my newborn daughter in the seconds after her birth, flushing with awe and wonder, just as I had with my son. The delirious thrill of her birth was the same, but I was different. I wasn't a first-time mother. I was a mother, and I'd learned a thing or two. Looking at jacket designs for *The Girls*, and holding the bound galleys of that second book, I felt the same stomach-dropping excitement that I had with *Rush Home Road*, but I was different. I'd written the second book as a novelist, daring enough to hope for success.

Shortly after the launch of *The Girls* in Canada my husband and I made the decision to leave Toronto, our home of 25 years, for his career in the television industry in Los Angeles. We sold our old downtown Victorian and said goodbye to our families and friends. Although it was the right decision, my grief at leaving was absolute. In my new surrounding, in a suburban town in the northern San Fernando Valley, I felt confused and lonely. I kept losing things, and getting lost. Every road was one I'd never been on. Every person was a stranger. We couldn't find families in the parks, or friends in the neighbourhood. We sought refuge at the ocean. I reminded myself to be grateful for our bounty, but longed to belong. My weight plummeted and my health suffered.

During those first months in California I watched the strangers around me and thought of the conversations I've had with women (not all of them wives) over the years, about happiness and fulfilment, divorce and betrayal, food, longing, body image, husbands, sex. I thought a lot about the concept of change. The idea of transformation, the way we recreate and redefine ourselves through our losses and gains, our shifting partnerships, our changing scenery.

And so Mary Gooch, the wife of *The Wife's Tale*, was born, residing in the familiar landscape of Baldoon County with her husband of nearly 25 years. When her husband disappears on the eve of their silver anniversary, Mary decides to leave her small town to go in search of him, a journey that leads her to a small suburban town in the northern San Fernando Valley. I shared the journey from there to here with Mary Gooch, in ways that would not appear obvious.

I live in a rural canyon in the Santa Monica mountains now. I wrote *The Wife's Tale* in a large, bright loft over the garage with a view of horses across the road and the high rocky hills beyond. The heat in my office is on the fritz and from November to March I wear my winter coat in the mornings. In the summer our valley temperatures often reach triple digits. We still seek refuge at the ocean. I am a wife, the mother of an eight-year-old son and six-year-old daughter, a novelist, a transplanted Canadian. Sitting here under the a cloudless blue sky, anticipating the launch of *The Wife's Tale*, I'm reminded of the thrill of seeing *Rush Home Road* become a book, and the privilege of penning *The Girls*, and I'm humbled and hopeful, just like the first time, to think of readers meeting Mary Gooch.

Lori Lansen was a Knopf New Face of Fiction author in 2002, when she published Rush Home Road. New Face of Fiction authors this year were Elizabeth Kelly (Apologize, Apologize), Andrea Gunraj (The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha) and Jessica Grant (Come, Thou Tortoise).