

1) How did this novel come about?

My novels are born of characters more than ideas and so it was with *Rush Home Road*. The old woman, Addy Shadd, was a compilation of many different people I'd known and observed as I was growing up. The young girl, Sharla Cody, represented the abandoned and disenfranchised, also an amalgam of characters I'd observed in my youth. I'd been thinking about the characters and imagining scenarios for 15 years before I sat down to write the book. I felt, as I was writing, that the story was more remembered than created and I sensed a kind of truth in the telling that came from my having worked out the beats over such a long period.

2) Your hometown Chatham, Ontario has continued to inspire you – how did you draw on that in *Rush Home Road*?

Chatham, Ontario, Canada was a terminus on the Underground Railroad where fugitive slaves from the American south found freedom. There is a small settlement a few miles from Chatham called Buxton (inspiring my fictitious 'Rusholme') which was settled entirely by fugitive slaves in the mid 1800's. Some of the ancestors of those slaves still live there and farm the land. There is an important museum in Buxton devoted to the town's origins. I absorbed my homeland's history through osmosis and was both moved by the struggles of the fugitive slaves and proud that my country offered freedom to an oppressed people. Writing the novel I felt possessed by the characters, inhabited by them. The land of my youth spoke to me too and brought me back to those summer days in the strawberry fields and the trips over the border to Detroit, Michigan, the wide stretch of the Detroit river where the fugitive slaves stole the night, and where the rum runners ran their illicit alcohol. My uncle is an amateur historian who helped me cultivate my interest in the native Indian history of my homeland, something I wrote about in my second novel, *The Girls*.

3) Why do you think *Rush Home Road* was such a huge success?

Although the history is specific to a particular geography, and although the present day story of *Rush Home Road* focuses on a specific socio-economic group of characters, I think that the character's struggles are universal. Addy Shadd, a woman who endures more than her share of hardship, looks for redemption in her final years. She has been hardened and embittered by tragedy but finds in Sharla Cody, the 5 year-old bi-racial child abandoned to her care, a profound sense of purpose. (Isn't that a common longing - for a singular and profound sense of purpose?) She opens herself for the first time in years to the purest kind of love between adult and child. The story, perhaps because of what readers find a moving relationship between the two, seems to resonate thematically in many different languages.

4) Do you think your former job as a screen writer has influenced your way of writing?

When I was writing screenplays producers used to tell me that my scripts read like novels. (I'm laughing here!) They did not mean that in a good way! There's no doubt that the many years I spent crafting scenes visually has had an impact on my writing. I think in pictures but I also try to write with a sense of suspense. I'm flattered when readers tell me they felt like they could "see" the whole book.

5) You wrote this novel while you were pregnant with your first child - did the pregnancy influence your writing?

I wrote most of the novel in long - sometimes - 10 hour days - while I was pregnant with my son Max. I rarely took weekends off and my husband, a director, was often on set or out of town on a job. I tend to be a little reclusive, a biological imperative of many authors, and at a certain point, very early on in the process I realized that my son in utero was seldom hearing human voices! He was not hearing me, not his father and well, I wasn't very social back then. In fact, more than anything he was hearing and feeling the rhythm of my fingers on the computer keyboard. Yikes!!! I became utterly panicked that he would grow up to be neurotic (I may have just revealed myself there) and so I began to recite the story out loud. I read out loud as I composed and as I edited and that very act, I know, had a huge impact on the way that I write and the way that I think about writing. It was like holding an auditory mirror to my work, and the rhythm of the piece became clear and flowed, at least for me, like a piece of music. Interestingly, my little Max is a gifted writer, even at his tender age, with an advanced vocabulary and innate sense of rhythm!

6) Has living in California influenced your recent novels?

When I wrote my first two books, *Rush Home Road* and *The Girls*, set in the fictional landscape of my youth, I was living in the very urban setting of downtown Toronto, several hundred miles away from Rusholme and Leaford. Now that I live in California, thousands of miles away, I can still close my eyes and see the cornfields and the flat farm land. Oddly, I think of my three novels as a trilogy, somehow representing my own journey. *Rush Home Road* was about coming home. *The Girls* was about being at home and *The Wife's Tale*, about an obese woman in search of her lost husband, is about leaving home. Now I live in a rural canyon near the ocean in Southern California and last year we had a mountain lion in my back yard! We frequently encounter coyotes and rattlesnakes. We have to drive slowly on the road because I live in a horse community and the neighbours often take rides in their horse and buggies. (A far cry from the bustling metropolis of Toronto!) It has taken some time for me to adjust to the distinctly different geography and to the American people who are so similar and yet completely different from the Canadians. Now I feel at sense of propriety about this place, my adopted home. I have been fascinated by the rich local history and my next book will reflect my preoccupation with my new 'home.'

7) The publisher and bookstore sellers compare you to authors such as Dickens, Steinbeck, Munroe and Morrisson. How do you feel about that?

First, I am enormously humbled by such comparisons. Perhaps in the stories of those great authors mentioned there are characters that embody a full range of humanity and an epic quality to the story telling that compels a reader to turn the page? Perhaps readers experience a similar feeling when reading a book like *Rush Home Road*?