



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Linda Lightsey Rice on her New Novel *AGAINST THE RUINS*

For Immediate Release

WHAT DREW YOU TO CREATE THE KIND OF STORY IN *AGAINST THE RUINS*?

My childhood namely. I was born many years after World War II ended and it was many years after that before I even understood what a war was, but in my family and in my South Carolina neighborhood were many men who were suffering from what we now call PTSD. At that time there was little help for them, and so the aftereffects of wartime combat sometimes ruined their lives, as it still can today, despite more understanding about it. The husband of a good friend of my mother's, in particular, was repeatedly suicidal and hospitalized during my childhood as he struggled to overcome with what was then referred to as shell shock.

The mental illness themes also come from my own experience of doing long-term battle with manic depression. And from the psychiatric difficulties in various members of my extended family and in friends. I've seen up close how mental illness can destroy lives, and I've seen the demeaning ways in which the mentally ill have sometimes been treated. And I did really grow up only a few blocks from an overcrowded state mental institution, about which horrifying rumors circulated.

And finally—most interesting of all to me—was the question: What if you had to commit a spouse you loved to such a place? What would happen after that? And what happens to children who grow up in that circumstance? I felt this was a mental illness story that had never been told. I was interested in how PTSD and mental illness can alter the lives of family members who don't themselves have either.

DO YOU SEE A CONNECTION BETWEEN YOUR FIRST BOOK, ABOUT A MURDER IN A SMALL TOWN, AND THIS BOOK ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS SET IN A CITY?

I do. *Southern Exposure* is really the story of losing a sense of external safety, safety in the environment around you (because this was the first murder in this sleepy little town). *Against the Ruins* is about losing internal safety—safety within the family and safety within one’s own psyche. Both are about not knowing what you can depend on, a paradigm of the modern world, I think. Governments we’ve always thought would stand forever and don’t, banks we think we can trust and find out we can’t, etc. But, to me, the devastating sense that you cannot trust your own mind—and so often earn nothing but scorn for being *ill*—is maybe the worst loss of a sense of well being.

When I was diagnosed with manic depression, I felt I’d never quite existed as I’d thought. Who was I really, a person or a diagnosis, an individual or a clinical example? I went through a terrible time of trying to put together who I was again.

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE CHARACTER IN *AGAINST THE RUINS*?

That’s like asking a parent who her favorite child is! I love all the six major characters for different reasons. Each in some way represents something I believe in, and occasionally a few things I don’t believe in. Some are more fun than others (I’m thinking of Rosa Truesdale), some more dear (Max), and some are people whose lives hopefully tell us something about what it means to be human.

DESPITE BEING ESSENTIALLY A TRAGEDY, THERE’S A LOT OF HUMOR IN THIS BOOK. HOW DID YOU GET THOSE TWO TO WORK TOGETHER?

There’s definite suffering in this story, but also a subtle redemption by the end. At least to me. Sometimes things that seem so tragic at the time feel far less so later, and even downright funny. I wanted to capture that paradox. That I approach writing this way may also have to do with being bipolar. Nothing is ever just one way to me. And as with all writers, my aesthetic vision is inescapably tied to my internal experience.

DO YOU CONSIDER *AGAINST THE RUINS* A “SOUTHERN NOVEL”?

It is less so than *Southern Exposure*, which made use of more traditional Southern imagery and situations. But everything I write is inescapably Southern in one way or another, despite my having lived outside the South for a third of my life. The things that obsess you in adulthood, the things you wonder about, things you care about and those you don't, all these take root in childhood. They may be modified by adult experience, but an essential kernel of youth remains in the psyche. The sense of history in this book, the adoration (and destruction) of literal historic ruins, the iconoclastic characters amid the very traditional, the emphasis on the entangled and the sensual, these are all hallmarks of Southern writing.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

I have a two-thirds complete memoir about the more subtle effects of manic depression, particularly about how the foreign climate of Minnesota, where I now live for most of every year, has affected a bipolar Southerner. The book is about discovering a different landscape, literally and within the self, and includes black and white photographs of snowstorms that I took while living in the country for several years.

Also in the rewriting stage are a novel set in New Orleans and a memoir based on a time that I lived in Ireland.

A longer interview and other interview topics available:

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Book Club Discussion Questions on *AGAINST THE RUINS*

1. *AGAINST THE RUINS* is basically a story of a family tragedy occurring during the 1950s, and how those events affect the wife Louise, the father William, and the daughter Lyra. Which of these characters seems to have suffered the greatest loss? How would these events have played out differently in the present era?
2. Louise elects to stay with her husband William throughout his illness and beyond. Why does she do so? Do you think she should have stayed or left? Would Lyra have been better off if Louise had left? How do we judge what we need to do to take care of ourselves versus what we might need to do to take good care of our children? How have attitudes about this changed since the 1950s?
3. The author uses two narrative voices to tell the story, Lyra's voice in the present, and Louise's voice to tell the past story. Louise's story obviously ends with a great deal of sadness, but the author has said she feels Lyra's future will be different, more hopeful. Do you feel that's true and in what ways might Lyra's life be different? What scene at the end of the book might be interpreted as being hopeful and why?
4. What characters did you find most engaging?
5. Which moments seem the most tragic, gut-wrenching?
6. The relationship between mother and daughter in the book--does it seem similar or very different from most relationships between mother and daughter? How does it compare with your relationship with your mother? With your daughter?
7. One point of the book is that wartime PTSD and/or mental illness affects not just the person who has it but an entire family. Do you know of other cases where that has been true?



Linda Lightsey Rice

Author of AGAINST THE RUINS

Biographical Statement: The How and the Why, Mostly Why

It's mostly about pictures to me, writing is, about *seeing*, noticing the feel of images, and what images can imply. I attribute this to the influence of my great-grandmother, who died in the Spanish flu epidemic thirty-two years before my birth. She left behind dozens of oil paintings—she had been an art teacher before marrying—and they remained in my step-grandmother's house (which was once the painter's home) even after my grandfather, whom I also never knew, died. I was sent to stay with my step-grandmother every summer, would play on the floor with the cat surrounded by tongue-and-groove walls upon which hung massive, often dark, professional-quality landscape paintings. I studied them for hours. The story of my grandmother's early death (she was pregnant when she died at age 30) was mysterious, as was the fact that this almost-mythical woman had left behind an artistic record of her short life. While staring at them one day, it came to me that pictures, on a wall or inside your head, made life more interesting, better. And that women could make them.

Later I learned that reading created images too—a sentence can be an incarnation of a picture. At that time my mother the high school English teacher made a point to give me books to read which she privately thought were too hard for me. Her challenge paid off, wise woman that she was—I read them all, and after a while few were really “too hard” anymore.

The third thing that made me a writer was bipolar disorder, which when it worsened would also take 15 years out of my writing life. It began (though not diagnosed for thirty years) in my twenties, and made me constantly aware of being “different” (thus a child often retreating into her private world). I was told repeatedly that I “felt too much” and so I began to write those things down rather than voicing them, a habit that stuck. And I was a bipolar raised in a land that, whatever its other difficulties, has produced great writers and values both them and the power of the imagination. As with most writers from the South, of my generation anyway, I spent my childhood listening to people tell stories. I also roamed far and wide to see what I could see, and finally, after a teacher pointed it out to me, I knew I could put those two together—the storytelling and the seeing—and make a life. A dead artist, a mother with challenge on her mind, and mental illness. It was a pretty good start

