



AN INTERVIEW WITH Lauren Cobb

AUTHOR OF

Boulevard Women

by Grace Stansbery



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In “Writing on the Wall” Layla and her family live with two other families in a “commune” which ends up apparently doing more harm than good. In what ways do you think living on Boulevard accomplishes what Layla’s mother, Janice, was working toward that the first living situation did not?

Janice is an idealist and incurable romantic, so she tends to see the world as she wants to see it, rather than as it is. But she reveals a pragmatic streak when she and two friends set up a communal household to share parenting responsibilities and cover the mortgage on a house in the suburbs. To the kids, however, the “commune house” feels like an overcrowded foster home, and they suffer from lack of privacy, lack of individual attention, and lack of affection from Toni, who takes care of them while the other two moms are at work. When Janice marries Paul, it’s not for her daughters or to gain financial security but because she’s in love with him. But in the house on Boulevard, Paul proves himself a loving, responsible stepdad who provides Janice’s daughters with a sense of belonging and security they’ve never known. And because Janice realizes that her daughters have come to love and depend on Paul, she tries to resist her restless romantic demons.

The ten stories move through the lives of three women of varying ages and experiences. How does that perspective affect or effect the narrative as a whole? Could any of these three narratives exist effectively in a vacuum from the others?

The braided narrative perspectives quickly became a way for me to interrogate my own understanding of what growing up—and growing old—entail for contemporary American women, and how gender shapes personal identity. But I think that the ways in which the main characters grow and change—and change each other—creates the energy that directs the narrative arc. I didn’t know in advance how the characters

would interact, so writing these stories was like conducting a chemistry experiment: combining different molecules in a vial and watching them fizz, change colors. For example, Layla’s youthful idealism and Leona’s blunt honesty help Thalia to become more courageous, and Thalia helps Leona to stop living in the past. Each character’s narrative would be different, and probably less interesting, if they weren’t involved in one another’s lives.

In one of your stories, Sterling takes Layla to visit The Tree that Owns Itself. It is clear that some of the characters (namely Summer and Miss Thalia) are trying to claim independence from their families, in order to own themselves. I noticed, however, that Sterling does not show Layla the original Tree that Owns Itself (which was destroyed long ago), but rather a descendent grown from an acorn of that tree. Are Summer and Thalia in some ways still defined as daughters of their families, as the tree’s lineage suggests?

I think that Summer is very much defined as a daughter through her adoration of her stepfather and her search for her biological father. And a daughter, especially a youngest daughter, is often the least powerful member of a family, which is why Summer becomes adept at the survival skills of subjugated people—eavesdropping, deceiving authority figures, and detecting other people’s mood shifts in order to avoid their wrath. Despite her age, Thalia also allows herself to be defined as a daughter, with her oldest brother filling the role of family patriarch. Brought up in a conservative religious household, she allows duty and respectability to dictate her life until it is almost too late. But as Thalia herself says, “It’s never too late to be what you might have been.”

How did your loyalty to the South play a role in the construction of this book? Were there times when you questioned any portrayal of

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Athens? Any times when a “bending of the rules” was used to write a more effective book?

I loved living in the South, and I took several trips back to Georgia as well as walking the streets of Athens on Google Maps in order to be faithful in my depiction of the place and its people. (Okay, I did turn a Huddle House into a Waffle House.) But the biggest challenge was writing the dialogue of the characters from the South, whose voices differ according to race, education, and socioeconomic class. There are about a thousand ways to screw that up, particularly for a writer from California whose native language is Valley Girl. I tried to use sentence structure and word choice to catch the flavor of the Southern voices of the people I’d come to love, and I hope that those voices spoke through me without too much static or distortion.

When Leona takes a writing course she finds that her instructor has been revealing the sensitive nature of her work to other people. As a writer, have you had any experiences like this? What kind of criticism did you face while writing this collection of stories? As a writing teacher, do you find that this sort of thing happens often enough to deter potential writers?

This incident is one of many betrayals in a story about betrayal—among friends, between lovers, between student and teacher. But I don’t think this sort of thing happens very often in real life. I have certainly never witnessed such a betrayal in the classroom—as a student or as a creative writing teacher. In my experience, potential writers are most often deterred by their own internal censors, their fear of upsetting or offending family, spouses and friends.

Because Boulevard Women is fiction, I didn’t face much internal censorship or external criticism about sensitive material, although my depictions of race relations and sexuality may yet engender some criticism. But because for many of us, writing is how we deepen our understanding of ourselves and our world, we need to write the truth even at the risk of giving offense. Ultimately, I believe all we can do is try to write so truthfully that readers will recognize themselves and the world in our work. I don’t mean truth in the sense of self-revelation (though of course we reveal ourselves in every word we write), but rather that our task is to depict the truths of human experience by being true to ourselves and to our work. But because for many of us, writing is how we deepen our understanding of ourselves and our world, we need to write the truth even at the risk of giving offense.

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