

# Straight shooter

By Ronald Kovach

## Anne Lamott succeeds with honest writing

It is a chilly November night at a temple in suburban Minneapolis and Anne Lamott, bestselling writer and unabashed Christian, rather incongruously is keeping a synagogue full of 900 listeners in the palm of her hand for nearly two hours. Self-assured and witty, with a fine sense of comedic timing and perfectly pitched sarcasm, this dreadlocked woman in blue jeans, sweater and clogs speaks of things close to her heart, or just on her mind.

"The theme of my life," she says, "is the *insistence* on knowing what happened, and saying it out loud." She throws some darts at Republicans, tells of the wounds of a difficult childhood and her love for her friends, touches on her twin demons, alcohol and drug abuse. "Everything I've let go of," she says, "has claw marks on it." She describes the pleasures and challenges of her writing life, deplors society's insistence on quickie-grieving, does a riff on the American obsession with body image. "When you get to heaven and see what really matters," she says to laughter, "what your *butt* looks like

is about number 180."

What makes Lamott's address so entertaining are the same qualities that explain her writing success: blunt honesty, a sometimes painful vulnerability, and no-holds-barred humor (though at the synagogue, she does clean up the profanity that can hilariously spew out in her writing). Other writers may wear their heart on their sleeve; Lamott sometimes puts her heart in your face.

At 48, she is riding a big wave as a bestselling author of both memoirs and novels; as the author of the hugely popular how-to book for writers, *Bird by Bird*; as a columnist for the online magazine *Salon*, whose first stint *Newsweek* voted "Best of the Web"; and as a speaker who commands lucrative lecture fees. And who can begrudge her her success? This is a determined woman, after all, who has only built herself up after coming from a long way down.

Indeed, Lamott's life pre-sobriety, pre-motherhood and pre-religion is a checklist of emotional turmoil. Reflecting on her feeling of aloneness during pregnancy in

*Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* (1993), Lamott sums up, "For the last twenty-some years I have tried everything in sometimes suicidally vast quantities—alcohol, drugs, work, food, excitement, good deeds, popularity, men, exercise, and just rampant compulsion and obsession—to avoid having to be in the same room with that sense of total aloneness." Her 20s and early 30s, she says, were "lost and debauched," full of sickness and anxiety; she used to snort cocaine "like an anteater." Add to this list Lamott's upbringing in an unstable bohemian family, a very trying mother, a beloved father who died young, and her rebirth as a devout Christian and loving mom, and you have the terrain of much of her writing.

She grew up in Tiburon, a suburban enclave in Northern California, in a time and place she depicts as Cheever country—a sun-kissed land of parties and cocktails and jazz and affairs. The counterculture arrived in full force, bringing with it considerable quantities of alcohol, drugs and infidelity. Three children Lamott





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knew well died of drug overdoses.

Her father, Kenneth Lamott, the son of Presbyterian missionaries who raised their children in Japan, was a writer who despised Christianity. He died at age 56 of a brain tumor, and Lamott has written movingly about him in her essay “Dad.” Her mother, Dorothy, whom Anne describes as destructively “needy, dependent and angry,” eventually divorced Kenneth and began the first women’s law firm in Honolulu when she was

nearly 50. She died of Alzheimer’s disease in 2001. The profound ambivalence Lamott appears to feel about her mother she summed up in Minneapolis this way: “I’ve spent 16 years in therapy trying to exorcise her . . . I loved her more than life itself.”

Young Anne was, she tells her audience, “a terrified little kid.” But even as a kid, she was a “movie camera” who noticed a lot and saw plenty. She was very insecure about her looks and her frizzy hair. She

won poetry prizes as a young child, did well in school and earned high state rankings as a tennis player from age 10 to 16. Against all odds, given the fashionable atheism of her environment, she clung to a religious faith. She attended Goucher College near Baltimore but dropped out after her sophomore year. “I really had *The Bug*. I *had* to write,” Lamott says.

Her first novel, *Hard Laughter*, about a father’s battle with brain cancer, was published in 1980, followed by *Rosie* (1983), a coming-of-age story; *Joe Jones* (1985), about a group of characters who gather at a cafe; *All New People* (1989), an unsentimental look at a family over two decades; and *Crooked Little Heart* (1997), a novel of family and adolescence in which the same Rosie is now 13 and a championship tennis player.

But it has been Lamott’s nonfiction books that have proved most popular. Her first was *Operating Instructions*, a ruthlessly honest diary of her exhausting experience as a first-time mother and her son Sam’s first year of life. For Lamott, motherhood came at age 35 and without the help of the father, who bolted after she became pregnant. (He has since become a part of Sam’s life.) *Operating Instructions* was the debut of a vivid new voice in personal narrative—a crabby, funny, irreverent writer with edges and issues who seemed hell-bent on shredding Hallmark-card notions of life and family. If this was a born-again Christian, it wasn’t one you had ever run into before. Here’s one of Anne’s really bad days in the parenting trenches:

“I was just hating Sam there for a while. I’m so . . . tired, so burnt beyond recognition that I didn’t know how I was going to get through to the morning. The baby was

really colicky, kvetching, fart-ing, weeping, and I couldn't get him back to sleep. Then the *kitty* starts in, choking like mad and barfing for a while and continuing to make retching sounds for a while longer, but curiously enough it all seemed to soothe Sam, who fell back to sleep."

Lamott's next foray into nonfiction, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994), has become a classic amid the mountain of books on writing. In it, she encourages developing writers to stop trying to scale a glacier and work instead from a one-inch picture frame—telling only a one-inch piece of their story at a time. *Bird by Bird's* devoted fans also know the book's other mantras: Give yourself short assignments and write lousy first drafts.

Lamott's next nonfiction book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (1999), an adaptation of her columns for *Salon* describing her religious odyssey, was also a great success.

Her latest novel is the bestselling *Blue Shoe* (2002), a tale about a woman, Mattie, trying to keep her life and her children's lives together amid divorce, a mother in failing health, a rotting house and her



## Some quotable Anne Lamott

### Family

"There is nothing more touching to me than a family picture where everyone is trying to look his or her best, but you can see what a mess they all really are. Frozen in the amber of the photograph, you can see all the connections and disconnections, the stress and the yearning."

—from *Traveling Mercies*

### Getting published

"But I still encourage anyone who feels at all compelled to write to do so. I just try to warn people who hope to get published that publication is not all that it is cracked up to be. But writing is. Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. That thing you had to force yourself to do—the actual act of writing—turns out to be the best part."

—from *Bird by Bird*

attraction to a married man. When a little blue shoe is discovered, it functions as both a key to unlocking family secrets and a pass-around symbol.

Lamott discussed the origins of *Blue Shoe* and much more during an interview in Minneapolis, where she appeared as part of the Pen Pals author-lecture series. More serious in person than she is before audiences and very passionate, she bore down hard on questions and took them for quite a spin.

**You're very frank about all the turmoil you've been through in your life, including alcoholism, drugs, bulimia, family issues. Some of our writing audience might wonder, "If I have not been through all *that*, where does that leave me? Do I have enough to write about?"**

I think that everybody has, if they've gotten to the age of reading your magazine, survived enough to write about for the rest of their lives. If they've survived childhood, they've got enough to write for the rest of their lives. I mean, the form of people's loss and pain and confusion and struggle has different biographical details, but I think we're all in the same boat.

I happen to have a very addictive personality, but other people have tried to cope in other ways, usually with a lot of mistakes made and a pretty high price paid for whatever wisdom or growth they've managed to eke out. So I don't think you have to have a lot of drama or outward destruction to have a lot to write about if you're trying to tell the truth, whether or not you're making up stories or relying a lot on your own life. But you need to have been paying attention, you need to probably have felt things very deeply. If people are funny and can just tell me stories about life or give me their version of things, and choose their words carefully, I'm in. I'm interested.

**Developing writers might also wonder how they could ever be as revealing as Anne Lamott.**

Well, there's no reason for other writers to be as "revealing," to use your word, as I have chosen to be. I happen to like really honest writing. I love it when people will tell me the truth and really take the lid off the soup pot and let me peer in. But by the same token, I don't talk about or write about the stuff that's really most intimate to me. The stuff that I talk about with my close friends is really much more intimate.

**In *Blue Shoe*, the little blue shoe and the paint-can opener are neat devices. How did the shoe find its way into the novel?**

The blue shoe was a real trinket

from about 20 years ago that I found in a gumball machine in Tiburon. I was in my late 20s and I had had a much older friend. I was staying with her for a while and when things got really bad, we would just pass this shoe back and forth. So it had been a really incredibly touching symbol of friendship and of really being there for one another over the course of time.

I had actually started this book that I knew certain things about. I knew that it took place in Marin [Calif.], I knew it took place in the same years that I've taken place, I knew that it involved family secrets, because I grew up in a really great-looking family with a lot of secrets. I met the character of Mattie and I started to meet her children, I met Daniel, and they just sort of came to me in the way that your characters just sort of tug on your sleeve.

I started writing and amassing information, and then I was just taking a walk one day and I thought about this blue shoe, which I still have, this really dumb blue shoe. I thought, that would be a great way to tell the story of a friendship. [The shoe] wasn't the seed of the book, I don't think, because I'd already had a lot of the book in progress by the time I realized it would be a great device.

**Did you use the Anne Lamott approach with this novel, following your own advice of terrible first drafts and short assignments?**

Yes. I keep a one-inch picture frame on my desk. I can really only see a little bit. I'll get a lot of ideas all at once. I have huge sheets of graph paper on my wall. I scribble notes to myself. I start to kind of mark out sort of a trajectory—I think of the plot as the path of lily pads across the pond—and I'll start to draw big circles from one end of the graph paper, which is most of a wall, to the other. So I'll sort of have

a vague sense of how things are going to unfold, but it will just be revealing itself to me little by little. Or I'll just get one good idea. Or I'll be somewhere and I'll see something and realize I really want to write about it. I'll make a note to myself—I always have paper and pencil—and then I'll write about it, really just a one-inch picture frame, and I'll do a really [lousy] job of it. And then I'll move on.

**And did you roughly know how this novel was going to end?**

No. I had no idea.

**Did the plot of *Blue Shoe* grow out of your characters, as you put it in *Bird by Bird*?**

Yeah. It's also sort of peeling away the onion skin of the characters. I didn't know the details of Mattie's life when I started. I knew that her world was up in flames, and it's autumn outside and the trees look like flames. I wanted everything that could be taken away from her to pretty much have been taken away, so that she has given up her husband, she's broke, her mother has just moved out of this house where she grew up. So she moves into the house and what you find is that everything about the house has been designed to cover up the rot and the mildew and the holes and the problems and the family's very poor solutions to its very human and universal problems. I just sort of knew who some of the people were, I knew enough about them to go on. I just took it one day at a time, and screwed up, you know. I believe in a lot of mistakes and false starts and messes.

**This is your sixth novel. Has it gotten any easier?**

I'm not sure it's easier. I think, like a pianist or something, you just definitely get better if you do it day after day and year after year. And

I'm better at editing; I'm more willing to take stuff out now, and that's helpful. I finally got to the point where I asked somebody to do a real intense edit for me who wasn't my editor, because the world of New York publishing has changed so much and editors can't really edit the way they did even 10 or 15 years ago. So I had a friend doing really hands-on editing with me, really week-to-week work with me, and that made a huge difference.

But it doesn't get easier for me. I don't really enjoy it all that much. I would much rather watch CNN, or I hike almost every day up on the mountain where I live. I'd rather do almost anything than write. I really love the third and fourth drafts. The first and second drafts are what I don't like. I don't have the kind of confidence you might assume [after this many books]. The difference between me and a lot of people who would want to write is that I do it anyway. I do it with fear and loathing and trembling and a lot of really bad thoughts about how it's going to be received.

**I have to ask you about the essay about your mother in *Traveling Mercies*. In fact, the back-to-back punch of the essays on your**

**The third draft is the dental draft. You go paragraph by paragraph and you jiggle each section, each tooth, and you floss. You see what's healthy and strong.**

**mother and father just leaped out at me. Was it painful to write?**

It was painful to have my mother for a mother. It was really so excruciating to have such a needy, dependent and angry mother that to write about it wasn't painful so much as it was so risky because she was still alive. I think I was probably 45 or 44 when I wrote it. I'd spent all of those years not writing about her because I was so desperate to make her happy, and to kind of rewrite history, which is why so many of my students have felt so stuck and voiceless, because they don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. They had mothers or fathers who held their hands over flame to punish them; they had mothers and fathers who very, very routinely sent them out to the yard to select the switch with which they were then going to be hit—and they don't want to hurt these people's feelings.

So with my mom, who didn't do anything overtly violent but had a very, very destructive effect on my soul and my sense of self, I had always either not written about her or made the mother [in my fiction] so, so different. Or I'd sugarcoated it, like in *Operating Instructions*, so as to make my mom happy. And I finally got too tired—it wasn't mak-

ing her happy, it was giving her a little hit. The hit was that we were all keeping the secret. And I finally decided I wasn't going to do it.

I didn't know how long she was going to live, and as it turns out, she died [in 2001]. And it was painful, because she read it and it hurt her, but I think a great deal more good came out of it, certainly for me as the daughter, and for all the daughters and many, many mothers out there. And my mother and I went through a bad patch for about a week and then it was, you know, good that I had written it, because it's good—it's a *miracle*, it's a *miracle*, for an old, black-belt codependent like me to tell the truth. ... And I think if you read the piece again, you would find that there's so much more love than you notice the first time, kind of radiant with tenderness. But it was hurtful, and I'd do it again in a hot second.

**How many hours do you work in a day?**

I work about four a day now. Before I had a kid, I obviously worked a lot more, and a lot more efficiently. I get to work at about 9 in the morning and most days I set aside four hours, which is to say I get about three hours of work done. But in a different way I'm working a lot of the time, and I've got notes with me and paper with me and notebooks with me and I print out all the time. And so I'm always reading it later, and I might just stretch out on the couch with that day's work later and think about it or grab just a chunk of material and see how it's holding together. Like a random urinalysis, you know—just grab 50 pages and start reading and see, without preparing myself, if it reads fairly fluidly.

**Your nonfiction is written in a very conversational style.**

That's the illusion. I write three

and four and five drafts of everything. Most of the pieces in *Traveling Mercies* and many of the little pieces and bits in *Blue Shoe* were written at *Salon*, which has been a really great vehicle for me, because I'm comfortable writing five or six pages. So by the time I started putting them together for *Traveling Mercies*, for instance, I'd already written them three and four times for *Salon*. But then when I went to put it into the book, it still needed more rewriting, editing, taking stuff out, not agreeing with my editor about what should go in, what should stay, and a whole other rewrite. So if it comes out very conversational and fluid, it's because I've done it so many times.

**Spirituality is a very big part of who you are and a big part of your writing, and you also don't pull any punches in the area of politics. Do you give any consideration to turning off some percentage of your readers?**

No. I just can't think that way, or I'm going to start editing and censoring myself. I mean, I'm just a hard-core, born-to-die, left-wing activist, and I was raised by left-wing activists. I [actually] take out most of the diatribes, [but] I insist on the right to be who I am.

I think maybe the more interesting question is about religion and being a Christian. This friend Doug, who edited *Blue Shoe* for me, said, "A whole lot of people are gonna be turned off by the fact that Mattie is a Christian and that she is a believer and that when she's struggling, she prays, and when she's happy, she prays, and that she thinks in terms of her spiritual identity."

But I thought about it, because, God knows, I want people to read me. But most of the books I read don't even mention God or spirit or soul, but yet they're very, very much about soul and spirit. But they're

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mostly by other left-wing intellectuals, by well-known popular and sometimes slightly more esoteric writers. I read them, even though they don't talk about God and spirit, because they're great storytellers, and because I love how painstaking with language they are, and I don't hold it against *them*. So I thought, why am I going to censor myself so that I don't alienate people who don't care about God, since I read all their stuff when they don't write about the stuff I'm most passionate about? So I just can't think that way, I can't censor myself.

I think a lot more people care about God and goodness and good orderly direction—which is an acronym for God—and faith and soul and spirit than you would think. I mean, *Traveling Mercies* sold hundreds and hundreds of thousands of copies. The thing is, I'm not evangelical, I'm not trying to convert anyone. What I'm trying to do is sort of witness to the fact that I'm alive and I can just feel the miracle of my life.

**In recent years, there's been a tide of memoir writing, which has taken some critical hits. There are certainly some potential pitfalls to this genre. Some writers might wonder, "How do I make my life interesting? And what makes my own life interesting anyway?"**

Well, on the one hand, I think you probably shouldn't be reading the critics, because so many of them are just really angry, jealous people who haven't made it as writers. On the other hand, I think it's the pitfall of all writing. I *love* memoirs, and I just love personal essays—really, it's my favorite form of literature. I think you probably need somebody to work with [a reader] who can be strict but also very, very loving. I don't think writing about "me" or thinking about "me" or talking about "me-me-me" is the problem.

## The Lamott file

► Anne Lamott lives in Northern California with her son, Sam, now 13, about whom readers often ask. These days, she reports, Sam is tall, skinny, artistic and funny, with "gigantic brown eyes."

"We're a baggy-jeans kind of family," she says. "Sam told me, 'We're the only family I know that doesn't display its china.' And I said, 'We don't have any china.' "

► She is an elder and runs the church school at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City, Calif.

► Her favorite writers include Mary Oliver, Sharon Olds, Charles Portis, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Laurie Colwin, Michael Cunningham and Fran Leibowitz.

► She is the subject of a 1999 documentary by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Freida Mock titled *Bird by Bird with Annie*.

I think bad writing is the problem, and going on way too long about stuff that should maybe just be a sentence or a paragraph instead of a whole chapter or passage.

I don't think there's anything more interesting than one human telling the truth in the clearest, truest possible way. If somebody has a sense of humor, it's so fantastic. Everybody has been through something that no one else has seen, and he or she alone can be the tour guide for that time, that place, that house and that role in the family—I think it's all just inherently interesting.

You write a terrible draft, you get it all down. Like in *Bird by Bird*, it talks about the down draft. The first draft is the down draft—you just get it all down. The second draft is the up draft, and you clean it all up. The

third draft is the dental draft. You go paragraph by paragraph and you jiggle each section, each tooth, and you floss. You see what's healthy and strong. You see if the gums are good and holding on and you see what needs to be pulled. You see what needs to be cleaned up. But it's OK to have people help you.

**Anyone who has done any freelancing and reads *Operating Instructions* knows it was a tough road for you.**

I didn't make more than \$10,000 a year until the early '90s. I was always willing to be broke. I was always willing to make just enough money. I had half-time jobs. *Operating Instructions* came out in '93 and I made in the very low five figures and I didn't have any money, I didn't have any savings, I didn't have a car that worked with any efficiency. But I got to be a writer when I grew up. And so, it's only been the last five or six years that I've been making a really good living at it.

But I always just wanted to write and I thought, God, what a great gift to give your kid, to just say, "The money's not going to buy you much of anything that's going to hold up over time, and we're going to get by." It's pretty hard to feel any kind of self-pity when you get to be an artist, when you get to live out your artistic dream. You just don't care. I mean, I worked four hours a day making a living doing something, and I worked on my books four hours a day, you know, and I brought my kid to readings. I taught writing classes and I took my kid to these classes in a playpen with a big bag of Legos. We have just gotten my writing life to happen, because I wanted it so badly. #

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Benjamin Benschneider

**A** good writer is a good seducer, hooking the reader from the start with the promise of a rewarding adventure ahead. Writers of long narrative nonfiction, like Erik Larson, face the added challenge of captivating readers who may know little or nothing of the subject and justifiably ask, “Why should I care to read 400 pages about this?”

How Larson makes his readers care from the outset about the elements of his superb historical best-seller, *The Devil in the White City*, is masterful. The book is also a primer on how a good storyteller uses a sharp eye for color and detail, fictional tools and tight writing to keep a book-length narrative moving briskly.

Many readers probably open the book with limited interest in Chicago’s great fair—the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893—and no knowledge at all of Dr. Henry Holmes, reputedly the first American urban serial killer. Within a few pages, however, Larson has cast a spell as only a skilled writer can.

Consider how much Larson accomplishes before the book even officially begins, in this elegant excerpt from the author’s note, which refers to Holmes and the great architect Daniel Hudson Burnham, the fair’s director of works:

In Chicago at the end of the nineteenth century amid the smoke of industry and the clatter of trains there lived two men, both handsome, both blue-eyed, and both unusually adept at their chosen skills. Each embodied an element of the great dynamic that characterized the rush of America toward the twentieth century. One was an architect, the builder of many of America’s most important structures ...; the other was a murderer, one of the most prolific in history and harbinger of an American

# **A** By Ronald Kovach **DEVIL** OF A **GOOD** **WRITER**

Erik Larson on choosing the right topic,  
and making it compelling

archetype, the urban serial killer. Although the two never met, at least not formally, their fates were linked by a single, magical event, one largely fallen from modern recollection but that in its time was considered to possess a transformative power nearly equal to that of the Civil War ... . Beneath the gore and smoke and loam, this book is about the evanescence of life, and why some men choose to fill their brief allotment of time engaging the impossible, others in the manufacture of sorrow. In the end it is a story of the ineluctable conflict between good and evil, daylight and darkness, the White City and the Black.

By the time we finish his cinematic prologue, Larson has used well-chosen details to make us appreciate what a colossal undertaking the six-month fair was. Indomitable drive and ambition, great architecture and landscape design, and a monstrous feat of construction all came together to transform swampy wasteland into a “White City” of grandeur and beauty. The fair comprised more than 200 buildings. Entire villages were imported as displays from Egypt, Algeria and elsewhere. In a nation of 65 million people, the fair recorded 27 million visits. “Visitors wore their best clothes and most somber expressions, as if entering a great cathedral,” Larson writes. “Some wept at its beauty.” Visitors tasted new foods called Cracker Jack and Shredded Wheat. Larson also uses his prologue to signal the many interesting characters we’ll meet in his book, including Frederick Law Olmsted, Buffalo Bill, Theodore

Part of the architectural splendor of the “dream city” can be seen in this view of Chicago’s 1893 World’s Fair.

Dreiser, Susan B. Anthony, Thomas Edison and Jane Addams.

The other half of Larson’s story is a chilling depiction of Holmes, a con man of fiendish charm who lured his victims to his World’s Fair Hotel, which was designed for murder and even included a basement crematorium. To better understand Holmes, whom he calls “a textbook psychopath,” Larson gained vital insights from a forensic psychiatrist who read his first draft.

*The Devil in the White City* is not the first time Larson has performed the literary sleight of hand of conjuring up a compelling, best-selling narrative out of a relatively obscure historical event. His previous book was *Isaac’s Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History* (1999), a vivid depiction of a great storm that blasted Galveston, Texas, in 1900, killing 6,000 to 10,000 people. The two works marked Larson’s departure into historical narrative; his first two books had examined contemporary social issues: *Lethal Pas-*

*sage: How the Travels of a Single Handgun Expose the Roots of America’s Gun Crisis* (1994) and *The Naked Consumer: How Our Private Lives Become Public Commodities* (1992).

The training for Larson’s approach to historical narrative came earlier, at *The Wall Street Journal*, where as a reporter he crafted many of the newspaper’s front-page feature stories that became famous—and even anthologized—for their rich reporting and graceful writing. Another part of his approach to history writing came from being, as he puts it, a failed novelist. “The thing I learned in doing those novels,” he says, “was about suspense, how to move from character to character and place to place and so forth.”

Larson sees his role as being “an animator of lost stories,” adding, “I’m not a historian; I’m a writer who tries to find stories and bring them to life. I love trying to capture atmosphere, landscape, events, in prose. I love sinking into the past. What I’m trying to do for my read-



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ers is allow them to just fall into another time, and ideally not emerge until the book is done, with a changed sense of the past.”

Larson, 49, lives in Seattle. We spoke to him in Milwaukee, where his analytical comments yielded a wealth of advice for writers.

**Can you talk a little about great beginnings? I'd guess they're an essential part of your strategy.**

At *The Wall Street Journal*, one of the most important things you had to do was grab people. And something that I like in any book is that I want to be grabbed from the get-go. And so for me, it's very important to craft a beginning that will lure people into the book, get them over whatever hurdles they might be inclined to have placed in front of themselves in approaching a book. For example, a book about a world's fair? Make me want to read this. And so I was very keen to put those hooks in that opening section.

I have to say that I'm not a fan of anything called a prologue. And yet my book has a prologue, because I came to realize that for this book in particular, a prologue was necessary, a way of planting those hooks, because otherwise, why would you read something about a world's fair?

**Now in *Isaac's Storm*, you had a bit of an intro there, right?**

I had an opening scene that puts you in Galveston on the morning of the storm before it struck but just as the key character, Isaac Cline, is becoming aware that something very bad is about to happen. And then it cuts back to the past.

And there's really quite a similar structure in *Devil in the White City*. There's a prologue that is set, oddly enough, at a point just on the verge of the main character's death, but nonetheless takes you back in time to a place where you can sort of summarize all the things that happened at the fair. It's like a classic “nut graph,” but not. [A nut graph is the paragraph in a nonfiction article where the writer states what the article is about—in a nutshell.]

**Your prologue is like a five-page nut graph.**

Exactly. While I was at *The Wall Street Journal*, you could spend a month on one of those simple, funny, oblique stories. And that's where I honed a lot of things that actually went into this book. First of all, the idea of a nut graph—the idea of getting readers into the story and then stepping back and explaining why you should read this. And also the attention to little nuggets of detail.

**I came to your book with at best a moderate interest in the fair, and yet you hooked me.**

What may have seduced you into the book is the serial killer part. One of my deliberate schemes here was that I felt both stories [the fair and Holmes] had to be told together, because I didn't think either was worth it alone. I didn't want to do a lurid slasher book; I wanted to do something full of mood and manner. The whole point for me was the two things happening side by side. I started thinking, “Wow, here's this fair with a lot of fascinating stuff, here's this killer operating at the same time—how strange is that?”

It was irresistible.

**You're clearly fond of foreshadowing. How would you describe its storytelling value?**

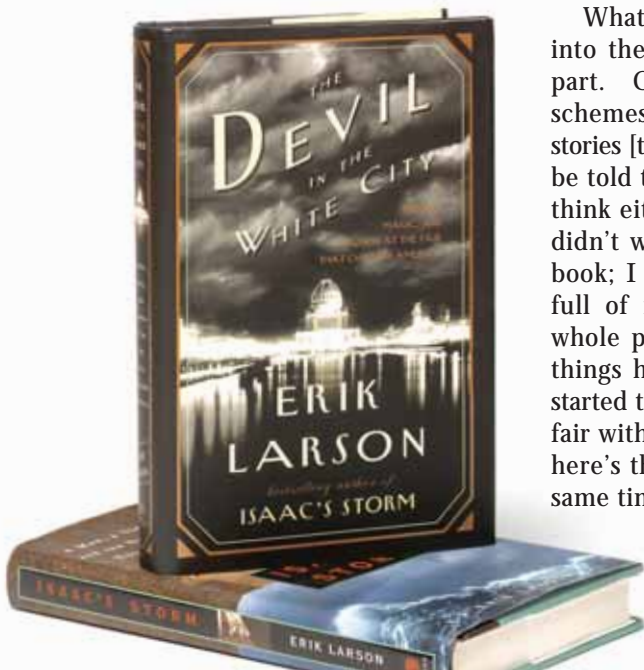
I think foreshadowing is a fundamental element of suspense. I think that if you can somehow hint—and the more obliquely you can hint, the better—that something bad is going to happen, no reader is going to leave you until he or she finds out what that thing was. It's like Chekhov said: If you show a revolver in the first act, you have to shoot it by the last act. People come to a work with a sense of unity in their minds, and if you tell them that something black is going to happen, they want to know what that black thing is and will stay with you to find out—provided it's not too far down the line, and provided that between the two points is not just a bland plateau of nothing. Foreshadowing is vital, I think, for any work.

**You really keep *Devil in the White City* rolling. What advice do you have for writers about keeping a narrative engaging and moving along?**

For one thing, the first piece of advice I would have is read John Irving, because he is one novelist who is very transparent in his use of technical maneuvers to keep you going. Cut-aways, foreshadowing and so forth.

One of the things that's very valuable in foreshadowing is, in a given chapter, instead of presenting the whole story to completion, [you] take it almost to completion and leave that lingering question. You withhold detail at a certain critical point, cut away to something else and then, when you come back, you have held the reader's attention, partly because you just said something's going to happen. The trick is when you cut away, you have to cut away to something good.

**You know how to get the gunk out and strip down your sentences. How do you achieve such a crisp prose style?**



I actually have certain concrete rules I use. One is, to paraphrase Shakespeare, first kill all the adjectives. Adjectives are a waste in most cases. In most cases, you can get by without an adjective; in most cases, you can get by without an adverb. And if you simply assign yourself to go through your prose when you're rewriting and cut out all adjectives, and then read it over first before reinserting adjectives, I think you will find that your prose will be far, far cleaner. When you try to write without adjectives, you say things in a very different way. You don't say, "He lived in a blue house"; you say, "He lived in a house that was the color of the lake on a summer day," or something like that. It forces you to come up with something vivid.

It's also important to remember that in most cases, it's a bad thing to call attention to yourself as a writer. That the most important thing is to let the story find its own voice and speak for itself. Prose should be simple, should not shout out, "Look at me, I'm a writer." And if you keep that always in mind, you'll be much better off.

**Your two histories have a way of making readers wonder how they ever missed learning about these great subjects. How do you come up with these obscure but compelling story ideas?**

First of all, I came across both by accident, by luck. However, I have worked out certain techniques to put myself in the way of luck. One of those is that when I am looking for an idea, I deliberately put myself into a regimen of just reading everything I possibly can. I'm lucky to have access to the University of Washington's Suzzallo Library, and I'll go in there, maybe into the section where the new science publications arrive, and I will just impressionistically go through a dozen magazines on things I know nothing about. I'll just sit there and read through them, looking for interesting things. It rarely does

anything for me, but you never know. It's putting yourself in the way of luck.

Then I will walk among the stacks and at random pull out books and take a look at them. In the process of that, I'm thinking about things, I'm seeing things, connections are made. It's like prospecting in a park with one of those metal detectors, because you just don't know what you are going to find.

So I allocate a lot of time to this process of finding an idea, because it can't be rushed.

Because one thing you don't want to do is get stuck with a lousy idea. I know from experience that only a small percentage of the ideas one comes across can live up to the requirements of a strong narrative line, of the kind of structure that will allow all the fictional tools to be deployed.

Always, as you go along, there are things that kind of intrigue you, and you should indulge those feelings. For example, World War II has always been an interest of mine. And when I was looking for ideas for the next book—I'm still in the process of looking—for the first time I read [William Shirer's] *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. No reason; just to read it. And there are half a dozen books that one could write based upon what you come across in that book.

And there are fascinating things in the footnotes—that's often where the best ideas lie, by the way. But professional historians are hamstrung—they *have* to do certain things. A professional historian doing a look at the world's fair would have to do "the deconstructionist feminist Marxist look at the fair" and put the best stuff in the



Paul V. Galvin Library/Illinois Institute of Technology

The fair's organizers wanted something to rival the Eiffel Tower. They got it: the first Ferris Wheel.

footnotes. So I always troll the footnotes; I always read the author's notes at the end of the book to find out what's going on. And I came close to having a few good ideas for this next book, whatever it will be, from *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Then suddenly I was thinking about U-boats, so I tapped into uboat.net on the Internet—fascinating site, everything you'd want to know about U-boats. Stumbled across something there—sort of "maybe, yeah, what about that?" So that's on the plate.

**After you've got your idea for a book, what comes next?**

You get your idea, you see possibilities, you get excited. Often when I get an idea, it's not something I am incredibly passionate about. It's that I can see somehow that somewhere down the line this is going to become very engaging. I don't wait for passion to happen; the passion will come later if it's a good idea.

Let's say I think Idea X has the

## THE ERIK LARSON FILE

- ▶ Erik Larson lives in Seattle with his physician wife, Christine Gleason, and three daughters, ages 9 to 15.
- ▶ He grew up in Freeport, Long Island, and earned a degree in Russian history and culture at the University of Pennsylvania (1976) and a degree from the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism (1978).
- ▶ In addition to two stints at *The Wall Street Journal*, his reporting work includes two years at *Time*. He has written for a variety of national magazines, including *Harper's Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*.
- ▶ Larson works out of an office in his house. When he is deeply into his writing, he writes from 4 a.m. to 7 a.m.; takes a break to attend to his family and walk the dog; then writes from about 8:30 a.m. to noon. "Ideally, I will stop the writing process in mid-sentence or mid-paragraph, knowing exactly where I will have to go the next day," he says. "I think that is the single most critical rule for a writer: Stop at a point where you know you can pick up the next day."
- ▶ He usually writes on a computer, but for tough passages brings out the legal pad and a soft No. 2 pencil. "There is something about the process of having to compose on paper that allows me to deal with complexity far better than with a word processor," he says. "It always works."
- ▶ Larson's writing influences include Hemingway, Steinbeck, Chandler, Ross MacDonal and Tolstoy's epic, *War and Peace*. ("I've read it three times," he says. "I love it because each time I read it, it's like I've lived somebody else's life.") He considers Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* and David McCullough's *Mornings on Horseback* and *The Path Between the Seas* some of the greatest nonfiction books ever written.

possibility to work. The next phase is to do the broad reading, go to the library and read, read, read. Read everything you possibly can. You want to find out what else has been done; you've got to add something new to it, otherwise what's the point?

[At this point] I'm taking notes very impressionistically. What I do is I take those little yellow Post-It notes and, if I'm reading a library book, stick them in the margins and write on the Post-It notes, maybe a little arrow to something that's in the text, and then I photocopy all that, take the Post-Its off and return it to the library. [Larson sometimes returns from research trips with as many as 800 photocopies.]

And in the first phase, you want to make this as fun and easy as possible, so you don't burn yourself out by taking notes. At this point, you're being creative, trying to figure out the parameters of the story.

And then you start reading on a more focused level, find out what the nuances are. You develop an instinct

for the potential for a lot of interesting paths to be followed. If an idea is too proscribed, if there aren't enough channels to go down, it's not going to work. You're going to get bored, you're going to exhaust your material, and you're going to wind up with a very small book. But if, as you go, you find things swelling and going off in a million directions, that's good. You want to be intimidated by the material, because that means that there's heft.

When you're reading, you're just constantly thinking about, what's a great scene? That's what I look for most of all at this point. And you want to collect a lot of scenes, because those are your chapters in a work of narrative nonfiction. This guy gets sick here, or this child dies at this stage of the process — you want to keep track of those scenes. And once you've amassed a lot of scenes, you're just about ready to do a proposal, because you know just about everything. You can see in your mind a kind of structure

spreading before you because you've collected these scenes. If you're thinking cinematically as you're writing scenes, you are right away creating a world, rather than just doing expository graduate-student writing.

**Despite your success, do you still have to present a detailed proposal to your publisher?**

Very much so. My agent, David Black, is notorious throughout New York for being what I like to call a "proposal Nazi." Because he demands, even from people with a long track record, a very detailed proposal. My proposal for *The Devil* was about 80 pages, took about six months to do. It included a prologue; a body that sort of went through what I planned to, why it was important, what readers would take away, how I'd do the research; then a detailed chapter-by-chapter outline, showing exactly what the plan is for this book, what narrative outline it will follow. And so I give that to my agent and then he generally makes me go through about six to eight drafts. I have so much confidence in this process. It is vital, because you can so easily seduce yourself into thinking you have a great idea.

**And why is your agent so insistent on the book proposal?**

First, for tactical reasons. When that proposal goes to the editor, he wants to send the implicit message that if you don't offer up enough in an advance for this book, if you don't demonstrate your interest in a substantial way, tomorrow this will go elsewhere. But secondly, the most important value is to me as a writer. As he put it to me after I sold *Isaac's Storm* to Crown, "Now you have a book, not just an idea." And that's what it is; you know what you have to do. You have no anxiety. The publisher knows exactly what you're going to offer. And all you have to do is follow your outline. #

*Ronald Kovach is senior editor of The Writer.*

# Risky business

Sara Paretsky  
pushes the  
boundaries of her  
detective series

By Elfrieda Abbe

**I**mpeccable in a tailored black suit set off by a striking aquamarine silk scarf and a diamond and gold pin in the shape of a dagger on her lapel, Sara Paretsky eases into a lunch interview at a French cafe in Chicago.

The atmosphere is convivial and relaxed as the conversation about writing takes a not-totally-unrelated fashion turn. Paretsky's stylish flair is decidedly familiar.

V.I. Warshawski, the tough-minded, smart private investigator in Paretsky's popular series, has a penchant for designer clothes. She's always slipping into classic suits, creamy silk blouses and expensive shoes. "I can't bring myself to wear Comfort-Stride," she says in *Killing Orders*. Inevitably, her high-fashion finery is torn, stained or crushed beyond repair when she tangles with thugs and killers.

"Almost everything she wears is in my wardrobe," says Paretsky. "I have those Bruno Magli pumps. But she wears colors I can't wear because she's dark and I'm very fair. I keep wanting to deduct my clothes as research, but the accountant won't let me."



Paretsky wasn't thinking fashion when she created V.I. in *Indemnity Only* (1982), the first book in the series. Her working-class heroine grew up on Chicago's South Side, the daughter of a Polish cop and an Italian mother, whose promising career as an opera singer ended abruptly during the Second World War. With a law degree from the University of Chicago, V.I. rejected high-powered law firms and instead worked for a while as a public

defender before striking out as a private investigator.

"What I wanted was not Philip Marlowe in drag," Paretsky says. She wanted a strong professional woman who was doing a job that hadn't been available to women when Paretsky and her friends were in school. "V.I. doesn't worry about what people think about her. She doesn't worry about getting fired."

In essence, V.I. lives on the edge. She takes cases that aren't

necessarily in her best interest but nag at her conscience, because she doesn't like to see clients, especially the disenfranchised, pushed around by those in power. With each new book, the detective confronts mental and physical challenges that push her limits. She's been beaten, run off the road and imprisoned. Her home and her office have been ransacked and trashed—all while she was in pursuit of exposing fraud and murder in high places. She sometimes alienates friends and lovers who lack her taste for danger. But she's not so much fearless as resolute.

While the author makes no claim to being V.I.'s equal when it comes to physical bravery and prowess, she's every bit as gutsy when it comes to taking risks with her writing.

After writing 11 books in her popular bestselling series (the latest, *Blacklist*, was just released) and one novel outside the series, the author is anything but formulaic. Paretsky's writing has deepened, becoming more layered and complex with each book, and her no-holds-barred detective has grown wiser, more compassionate and emotionally stronger.

During a three-year break from the series to write *Ghost Country*, Paretsky, like an athlete taking on a new sport, exercised some different writing muscles. The rambling novel with multiple points of view offers a compelling cast, including a teenage runaway, a homeless opera singer and a mystical street person. Homelessness, mental illness and the dangers of religious zealotry are among the issues she addresses.

*Washington Post* reviewer Grace Lichtenstein wrote of the novel: "Even if it is not entirely successful, it represents a fascinating stretch."

In retrospect, Paretsky says the project may have been "too ambitious." But she learned from the experience and returned to the

series with renewed vigor, writing the intensely powerful *Hard Time*, in which V.I. investigates a prison where the female inmates are routinely abused. When the sleuth herself is imprisoned, the book cuts to the core of what it means to be utterly powerless and afraid.

While Paretsky dislikes novels that are preachy political tracts, social undercurrents flow throughout her work. When V.I. confronts domestic violence, sexual harassment, poverty, corporate greed and other issues, she expresses outrage on behalf of the victims.

In her 10th V.I. novel, *Total Recall*, Paretsky boldly breaks away from a traditional narrative structure to interject a second point of view—that of V.I.'s longtime friend, Lotty Herschel. She intersperses Lotty's story between chapters concerning V.I.'s investigation of Lotty's past.

Originally, Paretsky wanted to make it Lotty's story, but the publisher resisted. The book, which has a global reach, nevertheless reads like a stand-alone novel.

Paretsky writes about Lotty's escape from Nazi German during the Kindertransport in 1938, her grim life in wartime England and the loss of her family in the Holocaust. She delves into psychological questions, such as survivor guilt and false memory, and examines legal questions that frame the arguments for and against restitution for Jews and African-Americans. She even gets something in about Afghanistan (the book came out a few days before Sept. 11).

In lesser hands, the material might overwhelm the reader, but Paretsky's masterful storytelling keeps things moving.

Congenial and open, Paretsky talks about her writing experiences, her influences and interests, how she keeps her series fresh and what motivates her to keep working at her craft.

**"It doesn't trouble me to be an outsider. If you're going to be a writer, you have to have an outsider's eye."**

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**Before you wrote *Total Recall*, had you been thinking about Lotty's story?**

I had wanted to write this novel about Lotty for a long time. It was probably eight or nine years before I actually found a way of telling the story. I knew she had come to England before the war and that was where she met Max [Loewenthal] and some of the other characters. I discussed it a little in the beginning of *Guardian Angel*.

I had known that Lotty had this child who she had not seen since he was born, and that the father was this clarinet player, although the name kept changing as I was writing about it. I knew her family had not survived the war. She talks about that in *Killing Orders*.

**Is it common for a publisher to resist your writing a book that is outside the series?**

You better believe it. I mean, I had to fight to publish my nonseries book, and then the chains wouldn't carry it. Barnes & Noble, which might carry 50 copies of a V.I. book, would not carry *Ghost Country* at all or would carry only one copy. It was doomed from the get-go. I have to figure it out. I've got

to do more outside [writing]. Don't get me wrong; it's not that I don't want to write about V.I., but ... if the series is all I can do, I'm going to become bitter, and it will show up in the books.

**How much of your research is experiential?**

I rode a Great Lakes freighter from Thunder Bay [Ontario] to the Welland Canal for my second book, *Deadlock*. For *Burn Marks*, which is set in the construction industry and features arson, I went up on a high-rise under construction. I was up on the 36th floor, and the project manager was very much not wanting the assignment of taking a woman around the site. He actually took me to the edge of the enclosed deck 36 stories above Michigan Avenue. I turned green and wobbled, and he caught me before I fell over. Then, having turned me meek, frail and helpless, he was happy to spend an entire day walking me though the site. So I've done things like that.

**The international scope of *Total Recall* must have required a massive amount of research.**

I was a visiting scholar at Oxford in the winter of 1997. I gave some seminars on writing and on women

in fiction. Otherwise, I was free to do whatever I wanted to do.

The Imperial War Museum in London turns out to have an enormous sound archive of reminiscences of people who came to England with the Kindertransport. I started spending several days a week in London listening to these tapes and soaking up as much as I could of people's experiences. When people heard I was doing this, they introduced themselves.

The Kindertransport was so much the luck of the draw. First of all, no one over 16 could come. I met one man who was one of England's most distinguished legal scholars, an Oxford Fellow. He had been sent to a youth hostel; he didn't have a sponsor. It was like a large orphanage. Then the [wealthy owners of] a big chain of department stores ... adopted, financially, a bunch of boys and paid for their education. He was able to go to Eton and Oxford. Well, he had a brother who wasn't picked up in that group and he became a truck driver. [Children] would be taken in by relatives and be treated as unpaid servants. Or they would be taken in and have really warm and wonderful experiences. They had been wrenched from their families. The English took in 10,000 children before the war began and borders were sealed. Most of their parents were killed in the Holocaust. And so you want them to have had the experience of being taken in and looked after, but it often didn't happen that way.

**How did the issue of survivor guilt come up?**

That's something that has always been on my mind, because my father was born in this country, but his mother came here when she was 13. Her family centered near Vilna [Lithuania]. Her father had been

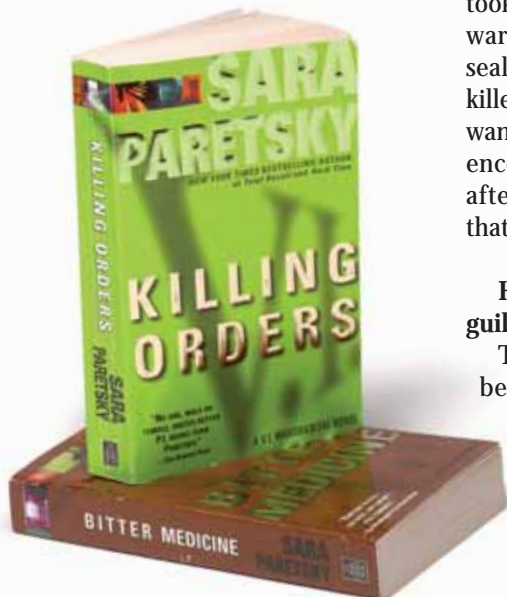
killed in a pogrom. She was the oldest child, and she was being educated in a very unusual way for a Jewish girl in Eastern Europe. She was getting a secular education, and she was an outstanding student. [Her family] thought that as a Jew, she was very vulnerable, so they sent her to New York.

Actually, I drew on her story in a different way for the story I gave V.I.'s mother, Gabriella. My grandmother was the only person then who survived out of her family. The rest of the family were all murdered in the Second World War. Even though my father was born in this country and never even met any of these people, he was really consumed by a sort of a vicarious survivor's guilt. It dominated our household. It was a very heavy weight on my brothers and me.

**Has your upbringing influenced your writing in other ways?**

I grew up in rural Kansas. I went to a three-room country school, but it would overstate the case to say I was a farm child. My dad taught microbiology at the University of Kansas [in Lawrence], where he was the first Jew hired in a tenured position. The town had these unwritten zoning laws about where Jews and blacks could live. My parents moved to the country to get away from that.

I think the influence is very indirect, and it's weird. I grew up in concentric circles of exclusion. Though my parents were both, at least in their younger days, very warm and outgoing, very involved in the community and had a lot of friends, there were ways in which they were perpetual outsiders. Then, I was one girl with four brothers, and my parents, though they had very advanced views on civil rights and social justice, were very negative about women's roles. They both wanted me home looking after the family. They both had a fantasy that I would



## The Sara Paretsky file

never marry and would just stay there taking care of them. They really made it hard to get a university education. So, I was within my own tiny circle of exclusion in my family. And I was in a family that was in a larger circle of exclusion.

I think when you grew up that way, you either have a desperate need to conform and be accepted, or you get used to being an outsider. Actually, I think both those things happened to me in odd ways.

Physically, I conform a lot. For example, I would never go downtown in blue jeans and a sweatshirt. But my views are pretty radical, and I'm very aware of being an outsider. If you're going to be a writer, you have to have an outsider's eye. Every writer comes to that eye. And the issue of power and powerlessness—voice and voicelessness—is the thing that I still haven't sorted out. It's still what I keep going back to and writing over and over again. These things don't figure directly in my work, but they are what make me write about the things that I write about.

### How do you decide where to begin telling a story?

It's not that easy. The only way I know how to write is by writing. That is to say, I can't outline—that kills the story for me. I tried outlining early on. Because I knew what was going to happen, it was boring. I had already told the story. The story unfolds and things take you by surprise. It's only when they are down on paper that you can actually see the implications that really alter the balance of relationships between the characters. I think the outline makes it hard to let the action or the characters unfold in response to the situations they're in.

### How do you create for the reader a sense of what it's like

► She's written one book of short stories, *Windy City Blues*, and edited three mystery anthologies: *Beastly Tales: The Mystery Writers of America Anthology*, *A Woman's Eye* and *Women on the Case*.

► She won the Silver Dagger Award from the British Crime Writers Association for *Blood Shot*. To acknowledge the award, Cartier gave her a gold diamond pin in the shape of a dagger.

► The author has a Ph.D. in history and an MBA from the University of Chicago. She was a visiting fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford.

► When she started writing *Indemnity Only*, the first V.I. book, she was working as a marketing manager with CNA Insurance in Chicago. "I found my experience in the financial world invaluable background for writing about the white-collar crimes that V.I. is uncovering," she says in an interview on her Web site ([www.saraparetsky.com](http://www.saraparetsky.com)).

► Paretsky and Courtenay Wright, a professor emeritus of physics at the University of Chicago, have been married 26 years.

► Paretsky's love of music is expressed through her characters. For relaxation, V.I. plays the piano and sings. Her mother, Gabriella, was an opera singer whose career was interrupted by World War II. Paretsky on the other hand, was kicked out of a church choir on Chicago's South Side. She can sing, but she can't keep time. As an adult, she tried piano lessons but froze when it was time for her recital and couldn't play a note.

► Along with her "sisters in crime," Sue Grafton and Marcia Muller, Paretsky is the subject of a documentary, *Women of Mystery*. The film charts women's roles in the genre and recognizes the authors for breaking new ground with female detectives.

### physically for characters to be in a dangerous place?

The more you treat your fiction as if you were a method actor, the better it will be. I try to imagine myself into V.I.'s situation in such a way that I feel it physically, and then I describe those physical sensations as best I can. Are my palms wet and tingling? Are my knees trembling? Am I dizzy? Then V.I. is feeling that, and the reader should experience what she is feeling.

### Do you have a method for keeping track of all the details of your characters' lives—for example when V.I. changes cars?

I don't apparently do a very good job. My Japanese translator keeps much closer track of these things than I do. He wrote me between two books—can't remember which two—to say Lotty's clinic had moved and to ask when had I described her moving. If I were a better Sara, I would keep a list of

all those things and go back and double-check, but I don't.

### Through your stories, you often give voice to working people who have little power and show the realities of their lives. Why is this representation important to you?

You know, I have been supporting myself since I was 17. I've always worked, and I really believe what Martin Luther King said—quoting John Ruskin—that there is value in all honest work.

I think people who don't have to work for a living, who never had to work for a living, are unable to really understand what most of human life is about.

Just as poverty doesn't ennoble you, working doesn't make you deep. But the absence of it makes you clueless about what ordinary life is about. I guess having grown up in the working middle class, I can't get away from that value.

I hate the fact that people in

America have to work as hard as they do. You know, I worked for a corporation for 10 years, where we got 12 days of vacation a year, and people were putting in 60- to 70-hour weeks. It defines our lives. Even now that I'm writing and occasionally teaching, I feel like I put on my track shoes in the morning and just run through the day.

It's a terrible way to live, yet it's how most people are living. I guess, in part, my books are my tribute to people who have to live like that. And, my father's parents met walking a picket line for the garment workers union, so there you have it. It's in my blood.

#### How did the V.I. series start?

The idea of the character really came to me when I was working at CNA [insurance company]. I wrote about 60 or 70 pages and I thought, "I can't do this."

One of my co-workers, who knew what I was trying to do, told me about this class that Stuart Kaminsky [author of numerous suspense novels, screenplays, textbooks and film biographies] was teaching at Northwestern University called "Writing Detective Fiction for Publication." He was incredibly supportive of what I was trying to do. He gave me some great advice on voice and things like that, but most

important of all, he gave me the sense that, yeah, I could write this to the end. And I did. Then he sent it to his agent, Dominick Abel, who has been my agent ever since. It took Dominick a year to find a publisher. Partly they thought the P.I. novel was dead, partly they weren't sure about a woman, but the biggest thing was that it was set in Chicago. They said books in the Midwest are not of national interest.

#### You've proved the publishers wrong about Chicago. The city is another character in your novels. What advice do you have for budding writers about the importance of place in telling a story?

Actually, the very first exercise that I had my writing class do was to pick a place and go to the same place every day for a week and write everything they see. Then, the end of it is to write a page of polished prose describing the place.

I had them read Mary Oliver—her essays on how to observe. Flannery O'Connor wrote a lot about the importance of detail. She talked about how important it is to get the concrete down. That if you're writing in abstractions, you're writing philosophy, you're not writing fiction. That fiction is about being human and that humans are made of dust, and you better be prepared to get your hands dusty. She said if you're not prepared to get your hands dusty, you're too grand to be writing fiction. I took that very much to heart ...

I said [to the students], "I don't want to know what you're thinking. I just want to know what you are seeing." Still, it's really hard to just see. And then to try to come up with language that's arresting and appropriate.

My studio is the third floor of my house in what used to be an unfinished attic. I stand at the window, especially in the winter, looking at the sky changing, and I try to describe it. It's really hard, but if

you looked at it every day and tried to write it down, you would see something different in that sky.

#### V.I. is a feminist, but she isn't stuck in a time warp or out of sync. How do you keep her current?

Some of it is dealing with the reality of the changed times. When I read books with women who are being told they can't do this job or that, that's so passe. I know that [the writers] aren't thinking through what's happened. There are certainly obstacles to women—more now than there were five years ago in different arenas—but the idea that a woman is not taken seriously on the job is so not true anymore. You have to be aware of the way those realities are changing. V.I. was a pioneer in the fictional world as well as in the real world. She's not a pioneer any more. She doesn't fight those wars anymore. Some things come up and there's certainly a way—like in *Hard Time*—that the fact that she's a woman can make her more physically vulnerable. It's much more likely at this stage that she'll be challenged as a solo practitioner; to be a small independent operator in a world of conglomerates is a real battle now.

There always has to be conflict because it's that kind of book—conflict-driven. But keeping the conflict based on the reality of the larger world—that's the main thing.

#### What sustains your writing?

I'm a storyteller. I'm always telling myself stories in my head. I can remember doing it at the age of 6. Long complicated narratives. I want to bring them to light. That's why I write. #

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**“The more you  
treat your  
fiction as if you  
were a method  
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it will be.”**

#### **writermag.com**

To learn more about Sara Paret-sky's writing habits, influences and her years in Chicago, go to Online Extra at [writermag.com](http://writermag.com).