

The Girls

by Lori Lansens

About the Book

Rarely has the experience of being a sister been so poignantly and memorably captured as in Lori Lansens's triumphant novel. *The Girls* celebrates life's fundamental joys and trials as it presents Rose and Ruby, sisters destined to live inseparably but blessed with distinct sensibilities that enrich and complicate their shared experiences — of growing up, of finding their way in the world, of saying good-bye. Readers who encounter the girls will find it hard to resist falling under their spell.

Praise for the Book

“Haunting.”

— *USA Today*

“Extraordinarily moving.”

— *Vogue*

“Utterly compelling.”

— *Newsday*

“Heartbreaking.”

— *Chicago Tribune*

“Pure joy. . . . What wonderful writing! What glorious characters!”

— **Jane Hamilton, author of *A Map of the World***

“A remarkable novel.”

— **Arthur Golden, author of *Memoirs of a Geisha***

“I promise: you will never forget this extraordinary story.”

— **Isabel Allende, author of *The House of the Spirits***

“Reader, I loved it. From the first paragraph you know you’ve begun something very special.”

— **Nancy Pearl, author of *Book Lust***

Courtesy of Hachette Book Group

About the Author

Lori Lansens

Canadian Writer (1962–)

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Personal Information: Born in Chatham, Ontario, Canada; married; children: one.

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Career: Writer. Producer of films, including *He Ain't Heavy*, 1990, *Tessa*, 1992, *Jimmy's Coming*, 1992, *The Night I Was Wed*, 1994, and *Under My Skin*, 1995. Director of films, including *Tessa*, 1992, and *The Night I Was Wed*, 1994.

WRITINGS

SCREENPLAYS

- *He Ain't Heavy*, 1990.
- *South of Wawa*, 1991.
- *Jimmy's Coming*, 1992.
- *The Night I Was Wed*, 1994.
- *Under My Skin*, 1995.
- *Marine Life*, 2000.
- *Wolf Girl* (also titled *Blood Moon*), 2001.

NOVELS

- *Rush Home Road*, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 2002.
- *The Girls*, Alfred A. Knopf Canada (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2005, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2006.

Media Adaptations: *The Girls* has been recorded as an audiobook by Time Warner Audiobooks, 2006.

Sidelights

Lori Lansens established herself as a screenwriter before publishing her first novel, *Rush Home Road*. This historical drama is set in the author's native region, southern Ontario. During the days of slavery in the United States, this area was populated by many runaway slaves who escaped by means of the Underground Railroad. Lansens's book focuses on Sharla Cody, a five-year-old girl, and Addy Shadd, her seventy-year-old neighbor in the trailer park where they live, in a town that was first settled by fugitive slaves. When Sharla's mother deserts her, the girl is raised by Addy, who was also deserted in childhood. The story flashes forward and back throughout Addy's life, and her deterioration is gradually revealed throughout the narrative. *Rush Home Road* is "a poignant novel about the power of love and forgiveness," stated Vanessa Bush in

Booklist. Another reviewer, Maria Stanborough, stated in *Herizons*: “Lansens manages to compress the magnitude of an epic into one woman’s life. In doing so, she reveals the possibility for epic in all our lives.”

The Girls, Lansens’s second novel, is also set in southern Ontario. The title characters are Rose and Ruby Darlen, twin sisters who are conjoined at the head. Lansens has stated that the story was inspired by the real-life Iranian sisters, Ladan and Laleh Bijani, who had lived conjoined at the head for twenty-nine years before insisting on surgery to separate them. The two girls both died shortly after the surgery due to massive loss of blood. In *The Girls*, although they are physically linked, Rose and Ruby Darlen have very different personalities and abilities, and they express a great deal of independence. Rose is stronger, more direct, but at times more perceptive than Ruby, who is poetic and fragile. Ruby is anxious to have their life story set down in both their voices, and it is at her urging that they each record their own memoir. The result is “extraordinarily moving: joyous, heartbreaking, and shot through with moments of dark humor as we follow the girls through childhood and adolescence, with its attendant mishaps, and into maturity and self-awareness,” stated Eve MacSweeney in *Vogue*. Natasha Tripney, a reviewer for the *New Statesman*, called it “an immensely readable novel, compelling and convincing. *The Girls* is an enchanting blend of the extraordinary and the everyday.”

Discussing *The Girls* in an interview for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Lansens commented on the unique perspective of those living in southern Ontario: “You don’t really feel Canadian. You watch American television and root for American teams. When I moved to Toronto, it felt like I had finally moved to Canada. So for me, the setting resonated with Rose and Ruby’s experience. Two sister countries, alike but not, dependent on one another. Even the way Rose and Ruby are joined, at the side of the head — they have a panoramic view, but they are never looking at the same thing at the same time. To me, that feels a lot like the relationship between Canada and the U.S.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 1, 2002, Vanessa Bush, review of *Rush Home Road*, p. 1507; February 15, 2006, Kristine Huntley, review of *The Girls*, p. 42.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, May 12, 2006, Jennifer Reese, review of *The Girls*, p. 86.
- *Herizons*, spring, 2004, Maria Stanborough, review of *Rush Home Road*, p. 35.
- *Hollywood Reporter*, October 15, 2001, Ray Richmond, review of *Wolf Girl*, p. 31.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, March 1, 2002, review of *Rush Home Road*, p. 281; March 1, 2006, review of *The Girls*, p. 200.
- *Maclean’s*, May 20, 2002, “Lansens’ Literary Lullaby,” p. 66; October 17, 2005, Shanda Deziel, interview with Lori Lansens, p. 73.
- *New Statesman*, July 24, 2006, Natasha Tripney, review of *The Girls*, p. 59.
- *Variety*, September 25, 2000, Emanuel Levy, review of *Marine Life*, p. 65.
- *Vogue*, June, 2006, Ebe MacSweeney, review of *The Girls*, p. 128

ONLINE

- *Canadian Living*, <http://www.canadianliving.ca/> (September 15, 2006), interview with Lori Lansens.
- *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Web site*, <http://www.cbc.ca/> (November 1, 2005), Rachel Giese, interview with Lori Lansens.
- *Guardian Online*, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/> (September 15, 2006), review of *The Girls*.
- *International Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/> (September 15, 2006), biographical information about Lori Lansens.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Author Interview

Q: What inspired you to write this particular book? Is there a story about the writing of this novel that begs to be told?

Lori Lansens: Like many people I'm interested in twins. I became fascinated with the subject of conjoined twins when I was doing research for an unrelated writing project (a screenplay) a few years ago. I became even more intrigued when I was following the story of Iranian craniopagus twins, the Bijani girls, who, nearly thirty years old, decided upon risky surgery to separate them. Both women died on the operating table, after expressing how they longed to look into each other's eyes. (They were joined at the side of the head and could only see each other in mirrors.) There's no question that I was inspired reading about real-life conjoined twins but the more personal connection to the story came from an unusual source — my two very young children. There was a time, not so long ago, shortly before and during the writing of Rose and Ruby's story, that I had an intense physical attachment to my children. It seemed as though I had a child attached to my hip, my breast, or my lap at all times. I thought a great deal about the nature of connection and intimacy and the way people share their lives. My deep connection to my children was a jumping off place for the writing of *The Girls*.

Q: What is it that you're exploring in this book?

LL: *The Girls* is a story about a most profound kind of intimacy, an exploration of love in all its many forms. It's also an examination of story-telling and narrative perspective.

Q: Any favourite characters?

LL: Naturally Rose and Ruby are my favourite characters but I love Aunt Lovey and Uncle Stash too. I wanted to give the girls the best parents possible and I think I found them in Lovey and Stash. Aunt Lovey, in particular, who raises the girls to shun pity in themselves and others, and who wants more for Rose and Ruby than mere survival. There are obvious parallels in the Darlen's marital relationship and the girls' sibling relationship. Neither pair can live with the other.

Q: What type of research did you do before you started writing?

LL: I did a great deal of research before and while I was writing including research on conjoined twins in history, medical research, details about the Neutral Indians in Southwestern Ontario, sports trivia. The incidence of conjoinment is rarer than most people think. There are very few conjoined twins in history or currently living (together) in the world, so there was little I could read in the way of biography or testimony. I felt a responsibility to stay away from learning too much about any living conjoined twins so there would be no risk of confusing fact with fiction and no fear of exploiting any living

person. (That is also why I chose not to contact or interview any conjoined twins.) What I did discover from all I read was that every pair of twins was completely different. The twins were different both as individuals and in their situation of conjoinment, depending on the nature of their anatomies, their particular restrictions, their culture and geography, and even their personalities. Realizing early on in the process that there was no typical experience for any pair of conjoined twins was liberating to me as a writer. I felt confident to approach *The Girls* as a work of imagination.

Q: Are there any tips you would give a book club to better navigate their discussion of your book?

LL: I think the book is unusual because of the narrative structure and it's been wonderful to hear from readers the many interpretations of Rose and Ruby and the different perspectives on their lives. I think it's interesting to look at their lives in terms of the discrepancies and contradictions in the telling of their individual stories. Rose and Ruby define themselves by what they've written about themselves and each other. Or, maybe more by what they haven't written.

Q: Do you have a favourite story to tell about being interviewed about your book?

LL: My favourite interview, and I remember each moment of it, was my first interview for the book with Susan G. Cole from *NOW* magazine. She asked such thoughtful questions, and I loved the way she talked about the characters and the story. It was a pleasure for me to answer questions that were then so fresh and new.

Q: What question have you never been asked in an interview but wish you were?

LL: I can't think of a thing I haven't been asked. But the three questions that are almost always asked in interviews are 1. Have you interviewed any conjoined twins? 2. Are you a twin? 3. Do you have a sister? The answers, in short, are — no and no and no.

Q: What has the response been stateside to your novels? Do you have an interesting story about the difference in reader or media reaction to your work?

LL: As I write, the book has yet to be launched in America. That being said there has already been huge interest and lots of nice advance reviews. The book has been sold to 8 countries outside of North America and I'm pleased to think of people around the world getting to know Rose and Ruby. I think it will be interesting to see how people from different cultures respond to a story about very unusual twins.

Q: How did the experience of writing your second novel differ from your first?

LL: My first novel, *Rush Home Road*, was finished just days before I gave birth to my first child. I wrote most of it during the pregnancy. I was able to write for very long days and often wrote seven days a week. I had the sense of the story pouring out — that my fingers could barely keep up with the narrator.

The Girls was a greater challenge, practically speaking, because when I began to write it I had an infant and a toddler and a husband frequently working out of town. I approached the writing of the second story more methodically, and in a very workman-like way. Like *Rose Darlen*, I put aside a number of hours a day to write, then set daily, weekly, and monthly goals. Of course, like any working mom, I struggled with the balance of work and family.

Q: What are you working on now?

LL: I have yet to set pen to paper (or finger to key) but feel a story spinning involving two characters who face an enormous mid-life change. (I'm in the process of relocating my family to the suburbs of Los Angeles after having lived in downtown Toronto for the past 22 years.) I think that this move will be reflected somehow in my next book.

Courtesy of Random House Canada

Author Article

On Ideas, Inspiration, and the Origins of *The Girls*

by **Lori Lansens**

As a novelist, I'm frequently asked where I get my ideas. The question is a challenge for me because I don't really get *ideas*. I get *characters*. I have the odd sense there's a world beyond this one where my fictional characters reside, going about their dramatically rich lives until it's time for me to write their stories. When it's time (such as determined by them — not me), I invite the characters, though they sometimes come unbidden, to step through the curtain and sit with me at the desk. "Reveal yourself," I instruct, while my fingers beat a rhythm on the keyboard.

Rose and Ruby Darlen, the dual narrators of *The Girls*, didn't just step through the curtain, though. They charged through it in all their brilliant conjoined glory. But only *after* shouting at me from the window of their ramshackle farmhouse. And waving madly from their spot on the bridge over the creek. And screaming from Frankie's basement, where that unimaginable thing happens.

My first novel, *Rush Home Road*, was launched just a few weeks before I gave birth to my second child, a daughter. She came on the book tour with me, as did my son, two and a half years old at the time. My little boy (who couldn't pronounce "r") was confounded as to why I had to keep leaving him to talk about "*Lush Home Load*." I recall being in Ottawa, coming from an early-morning interview, publicist waiting in the car at my hotel as I ran up the stairs to nurse my newborn, watching the clock because I was due at a television station across town for a live broadcast in twenty minutes. (I made it.) The rest of the tour, and most of that time, is a lovely blur. The babies. The book. The questions.

I do remember this frequently asked question: "What's your next book?" It was a question I answered consistently and confidently with "My next book is called *The Wives*, and it's a story about a man with five wives." I never liked to talk about my work in progress, or the progress of my work. I was a screenwriter before I started writing novels and found, luckily, that people had little interest. I'd never discussed my work publicly and was caught off guard by the many interesting and provocative questions. I tried, because of how my mother raised me, to give good answers.

There was the question about inspiration. "What inspired you to write *Rush Home Road*?" An easy question to answer in a superficial way, but there are a thousand things that might inspire a single artistic act. "And what inspires you to write *The Wives*?" they asked. "The notion of the *charismatic man*," I answered. "A man so charismatic that, unburdened by culture or religion, intelligent and beautiful women are willing to be one of his many wives." I'd written about this man a number of times before, in different guises.

I began to write my story, slowly at first, then more slowly, and slower still. Like walking on a fractured bone, it didn't matter how slowly I was writing, it was *painful*. I blamed exhaustion, the demands of the children, my basement workspace, anything to explain why the process was so difficult, so unlike writing the first book. Nearly a year and one hundred and twenty-nine manuscript pages later, I wondered if I was only writing *The Wives* because I said I was going to write *The Wives*. It occurred to me that this charismatic character that I'd been so captivated by might be just a flirtation. Even then there was another story that had my heart. A pair of characters who seemed to sit patiently on the sidelines of my imagination, occasionally calling out, "When you're ready, we're here." They were Rose and Ruby Darlen, twins born joined at the head. *The Girls*.

I once wrote a screenplay about a teenage girl with hypertrichosis (an excess of body hair) who performs in a human rarities show under the name Wolf Girl. While doing research for that character I entered the world of conjoined twins. I was fascinated to read about famous conjoined twins in history — Chang and Eng Bunker (the Siamese twins), Millie and Christine McCoy (born into slavery in the southern U.S. and liberated by the celebrity their conjoinment brought them), Daisy and Violet Hilton (Hollywood starlets who met a bitter end). I didn't immediately consider conjoined twins as characters for a novel, at least not consciously.

When my son was just a baby, I saw a snippet of a documentary about American craniopagus twins Lori and Reba Schappell, who saw their conjoinment as a gift. I was struck by how normal they were. Normal girls who happened to be attached at the head.

Then, after *Rush Home Road* was launched, and my second baby had been born, I followed the story of the Iranian twins Laleh and Ladan Bijani, who were also born joined at the head, their faces side by side. The women, one a journalist, the other a lawyer, held different world views, had conflicting interests, and, although they loved each other deeply, wanted to lead independent lives and sought out surgical separation. They expressed how eager they were to look into each other's eyes, hours before they died on the operating table.

Of course I found inspiration in these stories of real-life conjoined twins, but very early in the conceptualization process I recognized, while both of my sweaty children were on my lap one deadly hot summer day, that a story of conjoinment was stirred first in my imagination by my new and profound intimacy with my son and daughter. I was sitting on the sofa, exhausted, nursing Natasha, who'd been fussy all day. Max, then three and a half, was on my left, briefly contented by a favorite storybook. When I finished the story, Max pressed his cheek to mine. I quietly enjoyed the warmth of his little face and soon felt the quickening of his cookie-breath. "I wish we could be glued like this, Mommy."

I got goose shivers.

"I wish we could be glued with our heads like this."

“Why, baby?” I asked. “Why do you want to be glued to Mommy?”

“Because then we would always be together.”

We were quiet for a moment.

“But,” Max realized suddenly, “we couldn’t see each other.” He strained with his eyes to prove it.

Then he sighed. I understood his longing. And felt it, too.

The early years of motherhood and a lifetime of being conjoined are obviously not the same thing. But my relationship with my children was a jumping-off place. A seed of understanding that I knew would grow as Rose and Ruby revealed themselves. And a truth I felt I could take to the edge.

Without delay (or regret) I said good-bye to *The Wives* and started writing *The Girls*. It felt different. Good. Right. These twin girls joined at the head were real to me in a way my charismatic man never was. By the end of the first few weeks I felt fully connected to *The Girls* and thanked *The Wives* for giving me a frame of reference. So it wasn’t an idea to write about twin sisters who were joined at the head that spawned *The Girls*. It was Rose and Ruby themselves. They actually pushed aside a whole town of characters whose story I was in the process of telling, and took their place at my desk.

Now the girls are out in the world, and I’m off on the book tour. My children aren’t coming with me this time. I’m looking forward to answering all those interesting and provocative questions about the novel and the process of writing. Except the one about my next book, of course. This time I’ll keep that to myself.

Courtesy of Hachette Book Group

Discussion Questions

1. *The Girls* is written as a fictional autobiography. Why do you think the author chose this format? Did you ever have to remind yourself while reading that *The Girls* is a novel rather than a memoir?
2. Rose and Ruby have spent every moment of their lives bound to each other, and yet they have forged two very distinct personalities and ways of looking at the world. What does this novel say about identity? How does each sister manifest individuality? In what ways do they borrow from each other?
3. The girls are accustomed to being stared at. But when they travel with Aunt Lovey and Uncle Stash to Slovakia, they find themselves in a situation where for the first time in their lives not one person stares. Why does Rose find this so unsettling?
4. A major theme of the novel is the challenge of being an outsider. Are there characters other than Rose and Ruby who could be considered outcasts? What do they add to the story, and to your understanding of the novel?
5. Throughout *The Girls* we are let in on information that Rose and Ruby don't tell each other. What role do secrets play in the story? Were you surprised by some of the things Rose and Ruby kept from each other? What about Aunt Lovey and Uncle Stash?
6. What function does the town of Leaford have in the narrative? Could this lonely corner of Canada be said to be a character in itself? How might the story have been different had it taken place somewhere else?
7. The novel is, at times, endearingly funny. Do you have a favorite comedic moment?
8. Aunt Lovey is portrayed by Rose and Ruby as a very wise woman. Is it possible that their perception of her is influenced by their deep gratitude for her sacrifices in raising them? Why do you think they never refer to her as their mother?
9. Did you find yourself forgetting that Rose and Ruby were joined at the head? In what way is the bond of sisterhood more important than their physical link?
10. The girls said that, if given the chance, they wouldn't want to be separated. Is this a sentiment you understand? How does the dynamic of the girls relate to real-life relationships you've been in or witnessed?

Courtesy of Hachette Book Group