

ALYSON RICHMAN

INTERVIEWS

Amazon.com Review

A Q&A with best-selling author John Lescroart and Alyson Richman about *The Lost Wife*

Lescroart: Say a few words about your extraordinary Prologue to this book and how it initiated the creative process of the novel.

Richman: I had been hoping to write a novel where I could explore an artist's experience during WWII and the Holocaust. So I started to do research about how certain real life artists were still able to create, even under these horrific and dangerous circumstances. But I didn't know how I was going to frame the novel. Then one day I was getting my hair cut at a local salon, and I overheard the stylist next to me telling a story he had recently heard from another client. It was about a woman who had recently attended a wedding where the bride's grandmother and the groom's grandfather had not met previously. At the rehearsal dinner the night before, the groom's grandfather insisted he knew the bride's grandmother "from somewhere." At the end of the evening, still convinced that he recognized her (despite her denials), he asked her to roll up her sleeve. There the six-number tattoo from Auschwitz was inked into her skin. He looked at her again, this time more closely. Studying her face one more time, he said: "You were my wife."

When I heard that story, I knew I had the beginning of my novel! I would begin and end it at the wedding scene, but invent this couple's journey in between: how they fell in love in romantic pre-war Prague, but then became separated as the Germans invaded, and later how they each begin new lives in America. I made Lenka--the "lost wife" of the book's title--a young art student at the beginning of the war, so I could weave in my historical research about various artists who had survived Terezin and Auschwitz by using their artistic skills. It was my hope that my readers would learn and appreciate the history of these artists, while also becoming swept away into Josef and Lenka's love story that I created.

Lescroart: I have rarely come across a novel where the visual arts have played such an important role, in both the personal and political realm. What is your own background, if any, in visual art? To what extent did your creation of Lenka the artist help you deal with the themes in the book?

Richman: I am the daughter of an abstract oil painter and a painter myself. I actually went to college thinking I was going to major in studio art, but then fell in love with art history. What I love about it was uncovering the story within the painting. My mother taught me, early on in my childhood, the "gift of seeing." If you're going to paint, you need to look at the clues of your subject, the traces of life--whether it's the bruise on a pear or a wrinkle on a face. I try to bring that to my writing and to also incorporate texture and color into my words, so that the reader has a full, sensory experience.

To that end, the reader will experience a marked change in Lenka as the novel progresses. She starts off as a naïve, young art student, who is often more of an observer than a participant. Then becomes an artist willing to steal supplies for the young children in Terezin and anxious to become part of a secret resistance of artists trying to get their art work to the outside world. By the end of the war, she has wholly changed – both as a stronger woman and as a more risk-taking artist.

Lescroart: Josef and Lenka both go on to have lengthy married lives to other people after the war ends. Josef, particularly, builds a life with Amalia that is just heart-rending. How did you envision these people coming together? What kept them together? How was Lenka's marriage similar, if at all, to Josef's, and what does your answer say about the nature of marriage itself?

Amazon.com Review (CONTINUED)

Richman: Many people who have read this novel have said that they've never read a book where there are so many different types of love depicted. There a "first love" between the young Lenka and Josef; the love between a parent and child, as well as between sisters; then the love among all the friends Lenka makes in the Terezin ghetto; and finally the loves that both Josef and Lenka experience within their second marriages later in their lives.

The first love between Josef and Lenka is the most beautiful, the most romantic, but I think it's the subtler shades of love within their respective second marriages that are more complex and perhaps more interesting. On the surface, Josef's and Amalia's appears to be loveless. Lifeless. But it is a marriage that exists from a shared pact of silence and respect for their mutual pasts and survivor's guilt over their lost families. I wanted to create Amalia as an almost "living ghost" because I wanted to explore how Josef would react: his heart is still attached to Lenka, who is truly a ghost of his past, but who still lives deeply within his memory.

Lenka's post-war marriage to Carl is perhaps the biggest surprise to the reader. At the end of their lengthy marriage, they share a deep love that has transformed over time, built on family and her gratitude for his saving her after the war. But it is a very different kind of love compared to the one Lenka experienced as a young girl with Josef.

Lescroart: The central conceit of this book, and indeed the genesis of the title, strongly relies on the reader's suspension of disbelief that these two lovers could not only have lost track of one another, but have entirely given up on each other's survival. In this high wire act, you were completely successful, and I was left in awe by the technical virtuosity of your plotting. Can you describe your plotting/outlining process and some of the problems--both this and others--you found most difficult to solve?

Richman: Well, that's a very good question. I knew I wanted to involve the Nazi's sinking of the S.S. Athenia in 1939 into the novel. So I interviewed a survivor of that ship, whose family had mistakenly believed that their father had drowned but then later learned he had in fact survived. So I knew there was, in actuality, a great deal of confusion with casualty reports at that time. Then there is the issue of how inundated the Red Cross was right after the war, with so many refugees and other people trying to locate their loved ones but the information was coming so slowly over from Europe. One has to remember there was no computers or internet at that time.

But truly, the success of the novel's ringing true to me has to do with the exploration of memory and just how powerful it is. Josef, who was safe here during the war, clings to the memory of Lenka in order to survive, while Lenka must suppress hers of him in order to survive her far more physically traumatic experiences in Terezin and Auschwitz.

Lescroart: You portray life in the Czechoslovakian prison camp of Terezin as horrible of course, yet quite different--more filled with intrigue, politics, and passion--than most other books that deal with the Holocaust. How did this pivotal landscape evolve in your consciousness as you were creating this book?

Richman: I was lucky enough to be able to visit the Czech Republic and meet with survivors of Terezin, some of whom had been artists in the Technical Department there and knew many of the real-life characters depicted in the book. Their testimony really enhanced my writing of the novel and breathed life into it that would have been impossible without hearing about their actual experiences. When you think of the Holocaust, you immediately and rightfully imagine those haunting images of tragedy and death. But through my research, I learned another aspect--the ability of the human spirit to defy great odds just to live--as well as to still be able to love and to create, even under great duress. I remember listening to one survivor of Terezin who said: "We thought we were going to die... so what choice did we have. We still wanted to love and laugh. We still wanted to live."

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

A conversation with Alyson Richman

Author of "The Lost Wife," a historical novel that centers on the Jewish artists who were imprisoned in Terezin, and the love story of one of them that persists for more than 65 years

The amazing story of Terezin has for some time been a well-known chapter in Holocaust history. The Nazis turned the former Austro-Hungarian garrison town in Czechoslovakia into a "model" ghetto for Jews in order to fool the world about their genocidal plans. Because of the educated backgrounds of so many of the prisoners, and the relative autonomy the Nazis gave to Terezin's Jews, the town had a remarkably rich cultural life, and children especially were given the opportunity to participate in art, theater and music programs. But only some 17,000 of the 140,000 Jews who passed through Terezin survived the war - most ended their lives in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

In her new novel, "The Lost Wife" (Berkley paperback, 352 pages, \$15), Alyson Richman imagines the life of Lenka, an art student who is deported from Prague to Terezin with her middle-class parents and sister in 1942. Once there, she is employed in the ghetto's art and later its technical departments. Later, she and her family are deported to Auschwitz. At the start of the war, Lenka refuses the opportunity to accompany her new husband, Josef, to travel to the U.S., because he is unable to provide visas for her family as well. When they part, the young couple mistakenly expect to be reunited somehow soon. Both do survive the war, but they each receive mistaken information that the other has perished. Lenka and Josef go on to remarry and make new families for themselves in America, and only meet again when both are in their 80s and they attend the rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding of her granddaughter and his grandson. There, Josef insists that he recognizes Lenka and finally identifies her as his former wife when he sees the tattoo on her forearm.

The novel begins and ends with that scene, and what comes in between is, in alternating chapters, Lenka's and Josef's recounting of their life stories and of their undying love for one another. Richman says that she got the idea for the book's dramatic opening from a conversation she overheard at her hairdresser's one day, after she had already researched much of the book. The author of three previous novels, Richman, 39, says she always thought she'd become a painter like her mother, but ended up writing novels that gravitate toward the artist's experience. Haaretz spoke with Alyson Richman by phone from her home outside New York City.

Q At the time your last novel was published, in 2006, you told an interviewer that your next book would be about a Jewish family that loses a piece of art during World War II and struggles to get it back. Is that how "The Lost Wife" started

life?

A My initial inspiration was to write about a lost Egon Schiele painting. I had read about the story of the [looted] Klimt painting that had recently been purchased by Ronald Lauder. I wanted to do a book that was inspired by that. When I mentioned this to my agent, she told me that the reporter for The New York Times who covered the story was going to be writing a non-fiction book herself about that painting. So, I decided to go in another direction.

But I was still fascinated about art during the Holocaust, and how people created under such horrific circumstances. As I did more research, I came upon an article about a woman named Dina Gottlieb - she's a small character in the book - who survived Auschwitz because she did a mural of Snow White and Seven Dwarfs [on the children's barracks there]. One of the Nazi guards mentioned it to Mengele, and he approached her to see if she would do paintings of the Gypsies in his clinic. She said to him: I will do it for you, but you have to save not just me but my mother as well.

And so I went to the Holocaust Museum in D.C., and listened to her very lengthy oral history. She talks about her early days as an art student in Prague and about how she was sent to Terezin, where she worked in the Lautscher department [where prisoners made art reproductions and ornamental art], where she worked making postcards that were being sent to people in Germany. A lot of people know about the poems in "I Never Saw Another Butterfly," or about [the children's opera]

"Brundibar." But this small Lautscher department, and the technical department, these really haven't been written about.

Q When I visited Terezin recently, I could not believe the quantity and the quality of the artwork produced there.

A At Terezin, though, you see not only the artwork created in the Lautscher and technical departments, but you see the people who created the posters to promote the operas, you see how the children had a literary magazine, and they illustrated that - it was amazing. You really see how the creative spirit - to sing, to compose, to write - could not be extinguished.

Q Did you have any reservations about trying to represent the Holocaust in a novel?

A I heard Cynthia Ozick speak once, and she said how she regretted writing "The Shawl," because she didn't feel qualified to write something that she didn't experience firsthand. The truth is, because I haven't had a big [literary] success before now, I've been lucky enough to have an almost blithe freedom to write what I'm most curious and passionate about. I wasn't writing with the expectation that I had to sling out a best-seller, I was writing from a



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space - an almost void in my heart and soul - where I wanted to explore the question: how could an artist still manage to create during this dark period in history? I imagined the novel like a charcoal painting. My characters would fill the pages with their own shadow and light. I figured that if I was going to spend three years writing a novel, it had to be for myself.

Q Did you yourself have relatives who went through the Holocaust?

A My father said that my great-grandmother, whom I did know, and who came over [to the U.S.] during the 1920s, had lost her sisters and brothers. But we never talked about that when I was growing up. After he finished reading the book, he told me that he started weeping when he read the parts where Josef talks about how there were days on the bus when he thinks he sees Lenka in someone's face, or he thinks he sees the back of her head. He said he remembered times when his grandmother would come home crying because she thought she had seen her sister, her brother. She was haunted by these images. But I didn't know these stories. And he said, "How did you know?"

I know it sounds crazy, and totally overdramatic, but for three years, I tried to put myself into each character and to imagine their pain. I tried to imagine the journey of the transport, of coming to America and building different lives. I just did an interview in Albuquerque, and the woman e-

mailed me afterward and said, I wonder if you suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. I had told her that I felt as if I hadn't slept for two years, while writing this book. I was thinking about it morning and night. It's not hard to imagine that this could have been you, 70 years earlier.

Q You don't even need to be Jewish to picture yourself ending up in their place. Who could have imagined that such things could happen before they happened?

A Just to imagine that this evil could exist. It's unfathomable. When I interviewed a woman named Lisa Mikova, in Prague, she said: When we arrived in Auschwitz, and we saw the chimneys, we thought, oh, those are the factories where we'll be working. You would never have imagined what the smoke was coming from.

Q How were your three years of work on the book divided?

A I would say at least a good year, maybe a year and a half was spent on research ... So for a good year, I was reading and absorbing, so that the material was within me. When I started my first draft, and at this point I still didn't have the bit about - the hairdresser. I was just going to write about an artist. And my agent was like - hmm, you're not going to write another book that's not going to sell, are you? Why do you come up with these ideas that no one else is interested in? And then I overheard that story, and I got chills. So I began that way, with the wedding scene, and with that scene, of Lenka pulling up her sleeve for Josef. And from then on, it was as if - as if I was Lenka. I had all this research in my head, and I was going to write her story, and you know what? I was going to trick my readers into thinking it was a love story, but they were going to get a hell of a lot more than they had anticipated.

Q And was it a tough sell for your agent?

A My agent is very hard on me. She had a lot of trepidation about this material, because it was about the Holocaust. That word was very scary for her. I sent this manuscript to her twice before it was what it is. She pushed me so hard that I finally said to her: I'm either going to have to fire you or get a divorce, because I can't write anymore. And then she sent it out, and the editor (from my last book) bought it right away. I'm glad my agent pushed me so much, but it's often hard to be forced to go back to a book when you thought you had it right the second time, or the third time.

Q The frustration that you can feel at an editor who says, "not good enough," is only equaled by the joy that you feel when the editor says, "ok, it works for me."

A It's good to be pushed that hard as long as the end result is better. But you don't want to muddy it either. It's a delicate balance. There are things that I'm not willing to do. I remember, for example, my agent saying that felt that the part about Josef and Amalia [the woman, also a survivor, whom Josef marries and has children with in America] was so upsetting and disturbing that she hated reading it. And she wanted to know, would I consider having them go for [couples] therapy. I said, they're not going for therapy in 1956. That part may be hard to read, but for me I actually think that it's a marriage that works. There are many shades of gray in that relationship that are quite beautiful, and I didn't want to change it, so I didn't. Every survivor I spoke with told me: "I didn't talk about it with my husband. I didn't talk about it with my children." And that's realistic.

David B. Green