

More on Lauren Groff – from an interview

Delicate Edible Birds started with her obsession over a story by Guy de Maupassant called “Boule de Suif,” about an event in the Prussian war I think when a group of evacuees—businessman, nuns, clerics, and a prostitute named Boule de Suif—fleeing the Hessians were stopped by soldiers who would not let them pass until they’d been “serviced” and this origin story explored the hypocrisy of the religious people who were so. Roti al of the prostitute but whose fate now rested on her compliance.

At the same time Lauren was learning about the life of Martha Gellhorn—the famous correspondent and Hemingway’s wife—and what began as a homage to this French classic morphed into its own modern form the classic Morality tale.

Lauren writes a first draft in a big burst, in longhand, immersed in the idea of it—and then throws it away. She might do this several times before she gets to the real work, the work she actually loves most, which is crafting sentences. She will work months—years even—on a story, no different a process than a novel.

She often reads her dialogue aloud to get the real taste of it. To hear how it plays in her mind. She cites other writers (Dickens, among them) for whom this was standard practice.

Author: If at first you don’t succeed, fail, fail again

Author and Radcliffe fellow Lauren Groff admits she too struggles when faced with the blank page, and often wonders, “How is it that people come up with ideas for books again?”

In Radcliffe talk, Lauren Groff says her success is based on defeat. As any writer will tell you, the process of writing is riddled with anguish, angst, and the ever-popular procrastination. For the best-selling author Lauren Groff, it’s also filled with failure. Groff, the Suzanne Young Murray Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, spoke about her process, read from her current work, and told her listeners on Wednesday that the only way she succeeds with her writing is by failing multiple times. “Failure,” Groff assured her audience, “is your friend.

“I know some of you have never heard this before and never failed at anything in your lives,” she said, “but when you are creating a work of art, or trying to create a work of art, what you want to do is fail, I think, because what happens is you come up against

the boundaries of what you can and cannot do, the boundaries of what you understand and what you don't understand. And understanding that, you are either able to skirt it, or to move the borders.

"Moving the walls is hard work and it's beautiful," she concluded. "It's difficult, but that is what art is."

For Groff, the work of a novel starts with months of reading, researching, and studying her chosen topic, typically a blend of ideas that have "crashed into each other." The author said she spends "an absurd amount of time" writing her first draft in longhand, and that her inability to read her own scrawl forces her to scrap it and begin again. Then she repeats the process. Obsessed with William Shakespeare and aware that the Bard "was contemporaneous" with the characters she herself was creating, Groff even wrote an entire draft of her latest book in iambic pentameter. And true to form, she promptly discarded it.

As an undergraduate at Amherst College, Groff submitted poems to all the literary magazines on campus and was rejected every time. "Out of desperation and sadness I took a creative-writing class."

— Lauren Groff

But like a literary Marie Kondo, Groff is "happy to throw things out," because she knows her ruthless disposal method works. Writing multiple drafts, abandoning them, and starting over brings her closer to her "Platonic ideal," she said, and allows her to ultimately turn to the writing she loves best: perfecting her sentences. "That's the joy ... and the beauty for me," she said. Even the Shakespeare experiment inspired her to find a kind of language for her current prose that feels both reminiscent of the 17th century and "as fresh now as it was then."

Groff's creative failures are preceded by months or more of meticulous research and followed by feedback from a range of early readers who review the draft that doesn't land in the trash to help ensure her work remains morally grounded. One of those people is her husband, Clay Kallman, a real estate manager and developer; another is her editor, Sarah McGrath '96, the vice president and editor-in-chief of Riverhead Books — or, as Groff calls her, "the best human on the planet." Finding the right editor can bring failure in the form of trial and error, said Groff, but she called connecting with a person who understands who you are, what you want to do, and how to push you "invaluable."

Literary failure came surprisingly early for Groff. As an undergraduate at Amherst College she submitted poems to all the literary magazines on campus and was rejected every time.

"Out of desperation and sadness I took a creative-writing class," she said. In it she found her voice. The syllabus was filled with writers from diverse backgrounds and differing perspectives who were "talking about things I cared about," said Groff. "The clouds parted ... I haven't looked back. I don't write poetry anymore, just out of shame."

Subterranean Conversation: An Interview with Lauren Groff

By [Polly Rosenwaike](#)

*Lauren Groff is a two-time National Book Award finalist and The New York Times–bestselling author of three novels, *The Monsters of Templeton*, *Arcadia*, and *Fates and Furies*, and the celebrated short story collections *Delicate Edible Birds* and *Florida*. She has won The Story Prize and the PEN/O. Henry Award and been a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her work regularly appears in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and elsewhere, and she was named one of *Granta*'s 2017 Best Young American Novelists. She lives in Gainesville, Florida, with her husband and sons. You can read a craft lecture by Groff in MQR's [Summer 2021 issue](#).*

Polly Rosenwaike (PR): I saw an event you did with Laura van den Berg for her new book of short stories, and somebody asked you about how to put a short story collection together, how to think about the arc of a collection. You said that you feel the first story should pose a question that gets revised throughout the book. I love this construct. Can you elaborate on it and talk about how this idea of an evolving thread of questions helped you develop *Florida*?

Lauren Groff (LG): I came to writing through poetry; I loved writing formal poetry because it unlocked ideas that I don't think I would have had if I had the freedom to do anything I wanted to do on the page. Paying attention to architecture makes a lot of sense to me. I think a good story collection should have a fundamental, if somewhat buried, architecture.

In terms of building out a short story collection, to create a sense of this buried structure, the writer has to ask their stories multiple questions on multiple levels, some explored more intimately than others. I do think that, out of the ideas or worries or anxiety or images in the first story of a collection, a writer tries to create a pattern in the book, to pose a question that will recur in the next story in perhaps a twisted or modified way. I like to build a collection like this so that the last story takes all of these layers of ideas, questions, images, patterns, which have been developing through the collection as a whole, and then does something unexpected with it. The last story is as important as the first because it explodes everything and turns some of the questions around, back to the beginning or back to the middle.

When I read Laura's manuscript, I spent some time asking her stories what their secret patterns were. I have so much fun playing with order—I think it's the most joyous time in writing or thinking about a story collection because you've finished the stories, and now you're just trying to find a way to have a subterranean conversation. A really good reader would possibly pick up on the structure of the collection as a whole, but often they don't need to see it to feel the sturdiness and strength of the architecture. I'm not going to be specific about how this works in my book, though, because I don't believe that it's up to the writer to impose their ideas about their books upon the reader.

PR: Did you write the last story, “Yport,” last?

LG: I did write that one last, not necessarily because of the order of the collection, but because it was the most difficult story to write. I had been trying to write a story about Guy de Maupassant for about a decade, first a novel about him, then a story about the writing of a novel about him that failed. When I was putting this collection together, I was obsessed with certain things, as writers are, returning to them over and over again. I made my way to the end, and I thought, oh, aha, what I’d been struggling with and trying to write could actually speak backward to a lot of stories in the collection.

PR: I love the idea of digging up a story you’d been trying to write and couldn’t figure out how to do it. In “Yport,” the central character is in France to work on a project she’s long been struggling with about Guy de Maupassant. Finally, she acknowledges that she now hates this classic writer whose work is “filled with white male arrogance and anti-Semitism and misogyny and flat-out celebrations of rape.” Is de Maupassant a writer you loved before coming to terms with these disturbing qualities of the man and his work? Did you want this character’s realizations to speak to a larger reckoning with canonical artists whose lives and works have come under contemporary scrutiny?

LG: Yes, yes to both. I spent a year after high school in France on a Rotary Youth exchange, which was the greatest experience an incredibly shy and bookish girl from a tiny village could have. It was also the worst experience of my life in some ways, possibly because I was so shy and bookish. I was seventeen, but I was put in a class with fourteen-year-olds, which was difficult, and I had thought that I knew French, but when I arrived in France, it was obvious I didn’t. My first host family was a disaster, which is better not discussed. My second family were caterers, which was amazing—and I love them still; they came to my wedding—but there was so much food and drink in their house that I gained fifty pounds. I felt very alienated and very sad, and the way that I deal with sadness is through reading, so I would go to these bookstores that sold canonical works for five francs, about one dollar at a time. I would skip school and take my cheap books down to the Japanese gardens. The first book that I felt some mastery in French while reading was a Guy de Maupassant collection. It was a magnificent book, and I felt at the time that he saved my life.

Later, between projects, I thought maybe I’d do a translation for myself of his short stories. I started reading all of them. There are so many, over three hundred. He would publish a short story a week in the newspapers at the time. To do that, you have to write fast and not really care about what you’re putting out. If you read his stories in sequence, you can begin to see the ravages of tertiary syphilis on his work and on his morality. He started to lose his basic human decency. The way that he talked about women, in particular, was so offensive that it soured me on him. I started trying to write a historical novel about Guy de Maupassant, and it was so bad. I don’t think I ever even gave it to my husband, my first reader, who reads everything.

I was fascinated in *Florida* with the idea of what masculinity means, what femininity means, what being a feminist raising two little boys means. How do you raise good men; how do you

take from the writers of the past who had these offensive ideas about the world? There were a lot of questions sizzling in me as I was writing the stories in the book.

PR: Going back to the first story in the collection, “Ghosts and Empties,” I read it when it first came out in *The New Yorker* in 2015, and I’ve kept it in mind since then because I feel like you accomplish something in this story that I’ve always wanted to do. With the utmost admiration, I will say that it doesn’t quite have a plot, doesn’t have the dramatic arc that we usually see in short fiction. The story details a woman’s nighttime walks in her neighborhood over a period of time, and it is full of fantastic imagery and emotional resonance. While so much is going on in the woman’s head and we get so many vivid observations about the neighborhood, nothing quite happens in terms of the present action. Do you see this as a story without a central plot, or does it have one to your mind?

LG: I’ve been trying to think about new ways of writing that have nothing to do with standard plotting, moving beyond things like Freytag’s Pyramid and a three-act structure. In this story, I was thinking about submerged plot, because there *is* a sort of plot in the story, but it’s not necessarily on the surface. There’s something weird happening between the protagonist and her husband, something strange happening in the neighborhood itself. The seasons are changing, and there’s a sort of temporal arc there, as well. But the story is highly dependent on both observation and a driving rhythm in the prose.

When I was thinking about “Ghosts and Empties,” I was taking incredibly lengthy walks at night, and I started thinking about how the physical rhythm I fell into corresponded to a sort of parataxis: *and then and then and then and then*. I had an underlying rhythm, and I had these images that come back and come back and come back, night after night, walk after walk, though they are slowly being modified over time. I don’t know if I could have sustained this rhythm over the course of a novel. It needed to be a piece of short fiction. In any event, the form for the story, when I finally found it, came out of the rhythm of walking.

PR: How much did those walks directly inform the images that came into play? Would you take notes when you came back home?

LG: My rule for that story was that if I couldn’t remember an image the next day, then it didn’t matter. I was building an internal subconscious repository where I would keep these images. They were sort of bouncing into each other, being swallowed up by each other, coming to light as important in juxtaposition. In times of anxiety and insomnia, I have a very hard time with my memory, it becomes extremely porous, so it took a while to build up enough images that felt strong enough to be alive in the world of the short story.

PR: The images are wonderful, and the skeleton plot of the troubled marriage feels like a great lesson in how the hint of personal conflict creates just enough of a chronology for the story.

LG: Without someone like W.G. Sebald or Rachel Cusk, I never would have thought of that kind of structure where there's not a lot of direct plot, but there's still an intimated plot.

PR: Are there other short story writers in particular who you think do that well?

LG: The first one who comes to mind is Grace Paley. I feel like she realized so much with voice that plot fades into shadow behind her. Lydia Davis has this incredible story called "The Center of the Story" written in an almost musical form. Not a lot happens, but images recur: an image of a red book, an image of a hurricane coming, an image of a train. You start to see, through the structure, that though she is never actually talking directly about God, it's very much a story about God in the shape of a hurricane, which has a place of absolute stillness at its center. I think Davis's entire body of work creates a plotless text that is not a novel, but it's also not *not* a novel. Her whole oeuvre can be read together as an inquiry on the self, essayistic and fascinating. You could play a game with it, like the one where you open the Bible and pick out a passage and try to think about how the passage reflects your current predicament back to you. I think people used to do this with Virgil and the *Aeneid*. When you read Lydia Davis like this, you begin to see points of light coming out of the work in unusual sideways ways. You know, I'm a reader before I'm a writer; being a reader is my deepest identity. Ninety-eight percent of my joy in this life is just getting to spend time inside the brains of someone like Lydia Davis or Grace Paley, or W.G. Sebald.

PR: One more question about "Ghosts and Empties." It starts with this great image: "I have somehow become a woman who yells, and because I do not want to be a woman who yells, whose little children walk around with frozen, watchful faces, I have taken to lacing on my running shoes after dinner and going out into the twilight streets for a walk, leaving the undressing and sluicing and reading and singing and tucking in of the boys to my husband, a man who does not yell."

The portrayal of motherhood in many of the stories is so wonderfully precise, such a nuanced representation of the near-simultaneous feelings of tenderness and frustration that I know I've experienced as a mother. Did it feel important to you to begin the book with these images of a fraught mother and a gentle, competent father that push against dominant cultural images and representations of mothers and fathers?

LG: Yes, I began the book with this story, which has this first line, because that is one of the central obsessions of this book; but also because I just assume that if someone picked this book up, read that first line, and hated it, they'll just put the book down and walk away and read something that they like more. It may not be obvious in one-to-one conversation because we're, you know, polite and genial, but I'm full of rage about the way that we are supposed to be mothers and artists and creative people in the world. It's a space of unbelievable ambivalence and anxiety and fury for me, to be perfectly honest. We have to write out of these dark places, or else we're not paying attention to what's most urgent in us.

Among the many obsessions of the book is the question of how to raise good children in this world, how to constantly resist and set one's own body in opposition to the incredibly harmful depictions of masculinity and femininity that we are required to swallow at times. It's all exhausting, particularly at this moment at the end of 2020, after so many women have fallen out of the workforce because of the pandemic and economic anxiety and social norms placing the heaviest burdens on women while also subverting their autonomy and power.

Perhaps there's some generational anger here, too. When I think of my mother, I wonder if her earnest swallowing of societal roles is the central tragedy of her life. She would never say any of this herself—this is me imposing these ideas on her, which is unfair—but I don't know how we can become a progressive country with the way that we treat women and how so many become complicit, out of exhaustion, with their own relegation to secondary status. I just read two incredible books in one night of horrible insomnia that speak to the idea of creation and motherhood and the imposition of roles: Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* and Celia Paul's *Self-Portrait*. Paul's memoir is possibly my favorite book of 2020. She's a painter who was in a relationship with Lucien Freud, and her whole life sort of spun out of that early entanglement. She's devoted herself to being an artist and is also a mother, and her writing is mind-blowingly good.

PR: Some reviewers of *Florida* describe the mother with two sons who appears throughout various stories as a recurring character, and I wonder if you saw her that way, if you wanted that group of stories to have its own arc within the collection.

LG: I'm ambivalent about this question because I feel as though that is an external imposition of autobiography upon the book; at the same time, I did intentionally put those stories into the book in the order that I put them in to create a sort of structure, so the answer is both yes and no. You can never really dictate what a critic is going to say about your work. It's always incredibly fraught to put things relatively close to your experience in and have people read them as autobiographical. After "Ghosts and Empties" was published, a woman in my neighborhood became terrified at how I was looking in people's windows, which both horrifies and secretly pleases me.

PR: You wrote a wonderful introduction to Lorrie Moore's *Collected Stories*. You said, "Writers are solitary beasts, but not one of us has ever entered a life of writing alone, and most of us can identify the voice that guided us through the blind and treacherous tunnels that we must enter when we go from being a reader to being a writer. Lorrie Moore was this for me."

She was that for me too. You mention going to the University of Wisconsin for your MFA, where Moore was teaching then, and feeling ashamed to submit something for workshop that was a kind of imitation of her style. So you "swiftly began to write in a different mode that, after some pain, became my own." Would you say you still write in that mode you started to develop when you decided you shouldn't try to be the next Lorrie Moore?

LG: This question is really two questions, I think. One is about what it means to meet one of your literary heroes in the flesh and know them as a teacher and a person. The other is about what it means to come into your own style and whether you can even say that you have a style when your style is constantly evolving. As for the meeting your idol thing, I got very lucky that my idol was Lorrie. I could have met any number of idols and been profoundly disappointed by them because if the writer is good, the human is never as good as the writing. Your heroes will likely disappoint you. But Lorrie is exactly like her writing, and she's gracious and kind, but there was also a certain reserve and sternness to her. I was raised to be a person who tried to please people; I knew that writing a pastiche of Lorrie Moore would not please her. I would get her very grave workshop face and be embarrassed for the rest of my life.

It was good to shock myself out of a way of writing that wasn't necessarily native to me. But then I thought she didn't actually like my work in workshop, which made me constantly quest afterwards to find something that she might have liked better. I don't know that I'm working in the same mode I was then. I think that I write differently depending on the project at hand, at least I hope so, because I'm constantly changing and becoming a different person. I would love to never write the same book twice, even accidentally. So I think the mode of writing that I was looking for was just a questing one, as opposed to the settled one. I was always looking for a way to express the story that was deepest in me, using the tools that I could manage to master.

PR: You did an interview for the *New York Times Book Review*'s "By the Book" feature. When asked, "What moves you most in a work of literature?" you said, "In all genres, I wait in ambush for the exact, perfect, telling detail, the thing that makes the scene or line come alive." Your work is full of those perfect, telling details. Do you have any suggestions for how to try to teach someone to create those kinds of details? I think it's one of the most essential things, and yet it seems, in a way, one of the most difficult things to teach somebody else how to do.

LG: Well, I didn't have a formulated way of doing this until I saw Charles Baxter, whom I absolutely adore, give this talk, and he was talking about how if you looked at a pencil for long enough, it would become an alien object. If you're just paying attention closely enough, describing a thing in your mind enough, you're going to create something new out of something that you've seen a million times in your life and have really strong associations with. I think that this is correct, that the telling detail emerges out of the quality of your attention. If a paragraph doesn't feel quite specific enough, the writer just needs time to sit with that paragraph, push really hard against every element in that paragraph, and eventually come up with a moment that is the exact right moment.

Right now, I'm reading Joy Williams again, *The Changeling*. It is so full of genius; I don't know how it was ever published. Anatole Broyard slammed it in *The New York Times Book Review*, and I don't agree with his assessment at all, but I can understand where it's coming from because *The Changeling* is a book written by an alien. These glimmering moments in every line—every line is perfect, or strange, or a mix of things that lets you see the world in a strange light. I mean, yes, Joy Williams is a genius, but also, I think she just spends a long time looking at sentences and then making them weird or undermining something within the sentence

themselves. I think specificity arises out of attention and time, and that this is great because everyone can work on improving their attention and ability to sit with an image or sentence over time. It's a way of refining one's art that feels very democratic.

PR: Some of your most devastating and inventive stories feature children in disastrous situations: the girls stranded by themselves on an island in “Dogs Go Wolf,” the child who loses her parents after a tsunami in your recent *New Yorker* story “Under the Wave.” I’m wondering how you go about crafting a story like this—to what extent do you rely on research to capture a place or a natural disaster or the psychology of a child in a traumatic circumstance, and to what extent does your intuition lead you to imagine how a particular child might react in these extreme contexts?

LG: I research the larger issues in my work. I read a lot of nonfiction books. And then I just try to think about what a child, these particular children, would do in any situation, and that is all intuition and trying to love these specific children. It's a fine balance because it's hard not to make children twee or unbelievable in fiction, and at the same time, children are automatically sympathetic. I write these stories because this is the way that my anxieties get organized. Maybe it's reaching for a kind of magic spell to keep my children safe or to keep other children safe. I don't want to write such stories, but they sit on me until I have to.

PR: The story “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners” appears in the anthology *100 Years of the Best American Short Stories*. The note that precedes it says, “This story is indebted to stories her father-in-law has told of his Florida childhood.” Many writers are interested in using family stories as inspiration for their work, yet it is often so difficult to figure out how to fictionalize that material. How do you transform it into your own story? Could you speak a bit to that process, either for this particular story or just in general? How do you advise people to take material that may come from actual life and fictionalize it as one needs to do?

LG: I would tell people, gently, to please learn from my horrendous mistakes. In my first short story collection, there's a story called “Majorette,” which I thought was a loving homage to my mom when I was writing it. I fictionalized some things, but she was a majorette, and the character's progression in the book was roughly taken from her life. I think I knew that I wasn't quite acting morally because I didn't give my mother the story until the day before the book was published when she couldn't stop it. She didn't talk to me for three months. I've received death threats, but the letter she wrote me was the most devastating letter I've ever had directed toward me in my entire life.

I learned that you can take some things from the people you love, but you can't take everything. It's not about the exposition of secrets; it's about the love with which it's done and the truth that people will see in it. I think that I acted wrongly, and I will forever be sad and ashamed about it. That said, I do think that whatever stories are pressing on the writer's mind, they should write, even if something in the story feels like the most offensive thing on the planet. But nobody has to publish everything we write the way it first comes out. Editing is a beautiful tool to reconcile the

truth of the story with the truth of the world. I would urge people to write what they have to, but then edit until it's right for the world.

PR: What do you think would have happened if you had shown your mother that story earlier—do you think you might have come to some way of revising it that would have felt right?

LG: Absolutely, yes. Had I showed the story to my mother not as a *fait accompli* but as something in progress, she would have understood the impetus and love behind it. But I didn't. I was being a vampire. I know in a certain way, fiction writers have to be murderers. We have to be able to look into those dark corners of ourselves and the people around us. But there are ways to write into the dark corners ethically. Like everything else in writing, we have to come to these understandings incrementally, through gradations of failure, until, at last, we're no longer failing.

Interview with Lauren Groff her book *Florida*

Fiction writer Lauren Groff will work on her fourth novel as the 2018–2019 Suzanne Young Murray Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Her third, “Fates and Furies,” told the story of a marriage from two perspectives. The 2015 novel won numerous awards, was praised by critics, and was selected by President Obama as his book of the year. Last month, Groff published her second story collection, “Florida,” a moody meditation on life in her adopted state, a setting that conjures “a metaphorical sense of the world, a deep, swampy dread covered by a glorious and unceasing pour of sunshine.” We spoke with Groff about subversive prose, mothers and children, and crafting a vivid sense of place

GAZETTE: What do you consider the role of the fiction writer? Is the goal different with a novel versus a short story?

GROFF: The goals of novelist and story writer feel utterly similar and radically different at the same time. A novel is a long, slow, delicious creation that lives with you the entire time you work on it; a story is a blazing bright flare. Looseness is desirable in a novel, because too much

tautness can make for a wearisome read, while every word in a short story must carry three levels of meaning. Yet both are still fiction, sculptures created out of time, character, and words. I do think that the major difference is that novels tend to be in a major key and short stories in a minor key.

GAZETTE: Your new collection is called “Florida” and the stories are either set there or have deep ties to the state. Why?

GROFF: Florida signifies not only the geographical area to me, but also a metaphorical sense of the world, a deep, swampy dread covered by a glorious and unceasing pour of sunshine. It’s simultaneously a symbol, microcosm, and critique of America. [Florida is] simultaneously a symbol, microcosm, and critique of America.”

GAZETTE: You’ve said in other interviews that you were first opposed to living there in part because it’s so alien and strange. Do you feel different now? If so, why?

GROFF: My feelings have strengthened and deepened in multiple directions, while Florida still acts as a creative nemesis for me. It’s less strange now — I have a warm affection for the lizards that get into my house — but it will always be alien because I’ll never feel at home there. I think alienation is a really rich and delightful place to be for a fiction writer.

GAZETTE: Can you talk about trying to create “subversive” work? I’ve seen reviewers use that word in describing “Florida,” and I read an interview in which you said your goal with “Fates and Furies” was to “write a subversive book that didn’t look subversive.” Why is that word important to your work?

GROFF: One of the jobs of the fiction writer is to feel out the limitations of the systems and institutions in which we live, many of which we take for granted, and to push as hard as we can against them. Many of these systems and institutions have proven themselves corrupt and in need of subversion from as many angles as we can manage.

GAZETTE: You are a mother of two. In 10 years you have produced three novels and two short-story collections. Can you talk about your process and how you manage work and family?

GROFF: I understand that this is a question of vital importance to many people, particularly to other mothers who are artists trying to get their work done, and know that I feel for everyone in the struggle. But until I see a male writer asked this question, I'm going to respectfully decline to answer it.

GAZETTE: Motherhood and childhood are themes that run through many of the stories in "Florida." Did you have that in mind when you began working on the collection?

GROFF: A writer works from her particular urgency. Having vulnerable, beautiful, beloved dependents is like having had my own heart replicated and sent out into the world. Nothing feels more urgent to me than that.

GAZETTE: What's the key to developing such a rich sense of place — the feeling that Florida is not just a state, but also a state of mind?

GROFF: I'd say a keen eye and a healthy set of paranoias, revulsions, and passionate adorations.

Lauren Groff on the Aftershocks of Violence

By Cressida Leyshon

From the New Yorker Archives

Your story in this week's issue, "The Wind," is about a mother, Ruby, and her three children fleeing a violent husband and father. When did you first start thinking about this scenario?

A few decades ago, in a ratty booth at some bar in Philadelphia, a person I didn't know told me a strange and heavy story that I've been carrying around ever since. Early on, I didn't feel as though I could touch it; it was too painful, and it was never mine to write. But time worked a slow magic, and, over the twenty years since I heard it, the story morphed in my brain, and then it changed even more when I applied fiction to it, until at last it became something with a similar violence and flight at its center, but with all its other elements radically transformed. I'm sure the original teller would never recognize their story here, and, at the same time, I hope I honored the truth at the center of their need to tell it, which was so overwhelming at the moment that they needed to give it to some panicky stranger trapped next to them in a booth in the scuzziest bar in Philly.

This is told from the perspective of Ruby's granddaughter, as she describes the way her own mother, Michelle, who was twelve on the day of these events, would recall what happened. It was, the narrator observes, a story that her mother told down to the last detail, "as though dreaming it into life." Did you always know you'd use this perspective? What does it allow you to do in the story?

I needed to give this story a very firm bedrock, by which I mean that I needed the perspective to make clear from the beginning of the story that the children would live beyond this terrible day; and at the same time I needed to allow the story flexibility, which comes from the shifting structures of memory, imagination, denial, and supposition. They had to exist simultaneously, the firmness and the looseness, because this is a story about aftershocks of violence, which don't die down in months or years, but often ripple through decades and distant generations.

As Ruby and her children flee, it gradually becomes clear that she works in a hospital and her husband is a police officer. His violence doesn't seem to come as a surprise to the people—the school-bus driver, Ruby's co-workers—whom she and her children encounter that day. They're met with kindness and support, but that's never been enough to stop him. How powerless does Ruby feel?

I think that much of the evil of this world comes from people who consider themselves good people, who genuinely love their families and friends and communities, but who act just a little

bit too slowly to be of much help, who give just a little less than they should, who don't want to get involved in other people's messes, who value their own comfort a little more than the thought of extending themselves as far as they can to insure the security and happiness of others. If this weren't the case, the U.S. would have universal health care, inexpensive education, and gun laws that actually protect the populace. We would care about people we don't know. But we don't, because we've made it normal to extend our collective acts of caring only far enough to protect our immediate families and friends. And, in a small town like the one in the story, where everyone knows everyone else's business, peace is maintained by avoiding speaking openly of things that are considered private business. Ruby is powerless because of the collective hesitancy of caring and this small town's pact of silence, but also because the authority that she should expect to protect her is, instead, protecting one of its own.