

THE SOUNDING DRAFT:
A CONVERSATION WITH LAUREN GROFF

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into something, at some point.”*

Lauren Groff’s debut novel, *The Monsters of Templeton*, a *New York Times* and *Book Sense* bestseller, was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for New Writers and praised by Stephen King as “doing that thing all good novels are supposed to do, provide you with a magical experience.” And what a magical experience it is: a fifty-foot lake monster, a centuries-old overly-protective ghost, murderers, arsonists, prostitutes, baseball, and a family tree that spans the entire history of the United States. Her second book, *Delicate Edible Birds*, is a collection of short stories, some of which have appeared in *Best American Short Stories* (“L. DeBard and Aliette” in 2007 and “Delicate Edible Birds” in 2010), *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ploughshares*, *Glimmer Train*, *One Story*, *Five Points*, the *Pushcart Prize* anthology, *Best New American Voices*, and elsewhere. Her new novel, *Arcadia*, is due out in 2012.

Literary accolades aside, what likely strikes the individual fortunate enough to spend some time with Lauren Groff is her graciousness, an infectious, warm and exuberant sense of understanding that permeates the conversation. I first met her in 2009, when she stopped by Tallahassee, Florida for a reading and some chitchat with the creative writing grad students at Florida State. Within minutes, sipping drinks she had bought for the whole gang, we had been thoroughly charmed and were ready to declare allegiance behind anything she said. We could readily see how she could speak the motley voices of

an entire clan, how she's able to show such compassion for each of her characters, monsters and gentle folk alike, why *Washington Times* claims it is "her sense of life as a braid of emotions, ambitions, constraints and surprises that ties everyone in place" that distinguishes her from other writers.

Type in "Lauren Groff" on YouTube and you'll see what I mean.

The following interview took place over email in early 2011.

J.W. Wang: First, can you tell us a bit about your upcoming book, *Arcadia*?

Lauren Groff: *Arcadia* began for years ago as a reaction against—or critique of—a general feeling of disengagement in the culture around me. I'd far prefer to talk to people who have passionate, even if radically different, views about the world, and for some reason it felt as if people had gotten weary, that they would rather skim the surface of an argument under the guise of politeness and balance than to be invested in discussion; that, or they would entirely escape to the massive distraction of entertainment and technology. And so I began researching, which is what I do when I'm sad. One thing led to another, and I began to get fascinated by written utopias and communitarian experiments, then went whole-hog, visiting places like The Farm, a seventies commune in Tennessee and Oneida, a nineteenth-century commune in upstate New York. I began to see patterns, and one of the most heartbreaking was that the children of these experiments were the people who were most wounded when the experiments themselves failed, as they almost inevitably did. And yet, at the same time, the kind of wholehearted passion that fueled the experiments is valuable and should be treasured. From those opposing tensions was born Bit Stone, my main character, who was raised in a communitarian experiment, and how his life was rollicked after his parents left when he was still a child.

JW: I've read in a previous interview that you go through five to seven books a week, and that you write every single day. You're also a mother of a toddler, and, well, it's a marvel you're able to find time to do all that you do. Any advice for writers starting out there who say they can never find enough time to write?

LG: Oh, no, it's not a marvel at all. I have fantastic help. My husband gets up with my son so that I can start working early; my son goes to school until three, so I have all day to work. When my brain won't function any more, I still have hours to read before he comes home and, recently, I've been squeezing a few more hours in with a babysitter after Beck comes home. That said, there have been times in my life when it has been much, much harder to write, and I've had to carve out nontraditional times: a lunch break, from four to seven in the morning, late at night after the world has gone to bed. It helps that we don't have a television, I'm afraid of technology, and my husband and I are both big readers. That alone gives me a ton of time—the average American watches four hours of TV a day, which is time I spend working or reading. Otherwise, my best advice is unsexy and utilitarian: make your writing into the biggest priority in your day, hoodwink the people around you into believing it, too, and make your work schedule into a routine.

JW: Let's talk about your revision process: first draft in long hand, then you put it aside and begin anew. Then you put that aside and begin anew: never mind those wonderful turns of phrase or delicious descriptions you thought you had; if they were that great, you'll write them again. I confess: the prospect of not working with a rough draft and writing the same story from scratch daunts the bejeezus out of me. Is there something about creating these stories anew repeatedly that lifts these stories to their final form, something you can't get out of working with an existing draft? What about the challenges of working from a blank page each time?

LG: Oh, I do know how insane it sounds. But this method really does work for me. I suppose I'd say that the first draft, for me, is the sounding draft, when you throw your voice around to see what exactly you're thinking, and don't care too much about the mechanics. The big flaws become apparent: the architecture is all wrong for the story you're telling, the main character isn't the one you believed it to be; the tone is off. None of these things can be fixed by doing line-by-line edits, and a writer can waste years on beautifying the surface of something with deep underground faults. It takes a lot of energy to start again, but when I do, I do with more confidence, and it shows. Believe it or not, this way of working saves a lot of time—and, it's true, if there is a turn of phrase that is especially apt, I will remember it, and if I don't, it wasn't meant to be. It helps to know that my prose is never so good that I can't do better.

JW: *The Monsters of Templeton* begins and ends with Glimmey, the lake monster, but Glimmey makes only brief and marginal appearances throughout the rest of the novel. I have to admit I was skeptical of Glimmey at first, treating it as a transparent metaphor, but by the end I was hooked; Glimmey had become my favorite character. The epilogue was some of the most beautiful and heartwrenching prose I've read. Can you talk a little bit about working with Glimmey and the Averell Cottage ghost, taking these risks and making believers out of your readers?

LG: Yes, yes, I, too, was skeptical about Glimmey and the ghost, and there's part of me that still is, to be honest. Heavy-handed metaphor—indeed. But. But! I suppose the process I've described above, of working through draft after draft of a novel with no expectation of publication was a purifying one, in a way: with each draft, I came closer to the slippery story I longed to tell. And the story happened to be of the Cooperstown of my childhood, and both Glimmey and the ghost were some of the largest characters in the actual town of my

youth. I have such poor eyesight I'm practically blind; even then, I'd read into the wee hours of the night and my brain would be sparked by what I'd read and, by God, there were ghosts in my house and a monster in my lake. Only when I gave up hope of publishing did I let myself allow these huge elements of my childhood into the book. And that was when the book was published.

JW: I love that you gave Glimmey a . . . mohawk? Ponytail? Spartan plume? How long did it take you to create that sketch?

LG: Heh. Glimmey got a fin, I think. One afternoon, I was fed up with the book and about to cry my wee eyes out, and so took a long walk through the snow. I ended up at the UW-Madison library, where I wandered into the art-books section and started grabbing all of the copyright-free illustration books I could find. Then sat down at a computer and, chuckling madly to myself like a 21st-Century Doctor Frankenstein, Photoshopped the disparate elements of the beast together in about two hours. It was just for fun, but I put it into the book when I sent it off to sell it, and, to my surprise, my editor liked it. The best part is that it's the cover of the Dutch edition — my crazy, stupid concoction!

JW: It seems to me a significant portion of American literature is rooted in some brand of realism, a lot of stories dealing with domestic issues and set in conventional and familiar environments, while literature that harness myth and fable are often associated with writers from other parts of the world. Going through your books I was thrilled to find a rich sense of myth and maybe even the necessity of myth behind the characters and their stories. Was this an intentional effort?

LG: I absolutely believe you're right, but I also believe that American literature is an incredibly beautiful many-handed monster, with sur-

real strains all over the place. You don't have to go deeply into our communal foundational texts – fairy tales, Greek myth, even the bible – to find these gorgeous and evocative one-off mythologies. Even people we think are super-realists are deeply effected by a murmuring undercurrent of stories – you can't *not* be.

JW: The stories in *Delicate Edible Birds* show a diverse range of story structure and points of view. Is this something you actively seek out, playing with different approaches to storytelling? Do you ever sit down and say, “Okay, today I’m going to try to write a first person omniscient story”?

LG: No, most of those stories started somewhere else, and gradually, through the drafts, evolved to take the form that they did. The marriage of the story being told with the mode of telling it – all that.

JW: “Backstory” is one of the most dreaded terms in a creative writing workshop. Apprentice writers are often beseeched to avoid backstory entirely, to stay with present action. *The Monsters of Templeton* and many stories in *Delicate Edible Birds*, however, are filled with backstory, in great, delicious heaps (in a manner that reminds me of Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*). What would be your suggestion to writing students who can’t help but fill in copious amounts of backstory in between scenes of present day action?

LG: Yes, my god, I love Junot Diaz almost too much, and I adore backstory. I say: don't worry about it. If it feels right, include it, if it doesn't feel right on rereading or re-drafting, cut it. Think of your work as a big hunk of clay: you can craft a fine amphora or sculpture or what have you and continue working with the material until it's published, when it's shoved into the fiery kiln (where all the angry critics shriek from the flames – too much?). Some of my favorite books are almost

entirely backstory: look at the structure of *Wuthering Heights*, and you'll see a book that's almost revolutionary in its incredible nested architecture. Trust that the story will tell you how to tell it.

JW: I loved the footnotes that began appearing near the end of *The Monsters of Templeton*. How come we didn't see more of those earlier on?

LG: I have no idea. If I could only talk to the Lauren of seven years ago, who wrote the book! That's one of the questions I'd ask her.

JW: Trying to run down someone with a bush plane sounds . . . really fun. Tell me this actually happened.

LG: I wish! In many ways, and in many situations, I wish.

JW: You've said that you worked a bunch of crappy jobs before doing your M.F.A. at University of Wisconsin, Madison. What were some of them? Did you find any of them conducive to writing lots?

LG: Oh, dear. Are you ready? Bartender at a huge Philly bar (I was the worst—it helps to be able to count), canvasser for the Sierra Club, phone-bank operator for a cord-blood service, case reviewer for the Department of Human Services, weirdo new-age book editor, lonely administrator at Stanford's Center for Psychiatry and the Law, office toady at Stanford's Media X. The major thing these jobs gave me was a hunger for my MFA, when I gobbled up the two years of paid time to write under the aegis of great teachers. I was writing all along, but exhaustedly, without a great deal of guidance, and it felt glorious to get to Madison and be able to stretch my wings.

JW: What are you reading right now? Any recent favorites you'd recommend?

LG: Yes! I just finished Deborah Eisenberg's new omnibus *Collected Stories*, and think she's a genius—"Some Other, Better Otto" is my favorite short story written in the past ten years. I'm reading Nicole Krauss's new book, and last night I finished Mary Robison's *Tell Me: Thirty Stories*. The latter is an example of the way a book has to dovetail with the reader's need at the time of reading it or else it won't sink in: I know there has been a time in my life (and there will be other times in the future) when the book would have/will have blown me away. But right now, right after Eisenberg, the stories felt somewhat shallow to me. I'll put it into the To Read Again pile to see if there's a time when I can see Robison's full brilliance.

JW: What would you say is about the most unwriterly thing about you?

LG: I hate computers—does that count? I don't even like to type up my stories so I can print them out. And my husband says I'm a misanthropist, but I just say that I love humanity with all my heart, but the individuals always disappoint me.

JW: Do you have other creative outlets? Something in which you allow yourself to be a dilettante yet still be able to flex your imagination?

LG: Oh, yes, I'm a dilettante in almost everything. I'm a terrible cook, but I love to cook. I call myself a gardener, but sixty percent of my plants insist on dying. When I'm in my wee little studio and can't write and can't read, I try to paint, but have never had any training, and I'm happy to be bad. They could be hipster-ironic if I weren't so earnest about them. And—my god—you should see my poetry! It's awesomely awful.

JW: What are you currently working on? A new novel? Short stories?

LG: I'm working on a new baby, due in a month, which puts me into the kind of dreamy, unfocused mindset where I'll start writing a story in the morning and three hours later, find myself, pen in hand and two paragraphs on the paper, staring at the wall. I'm not sure I understand why, but I have very little focus or drive when I'm pregnant. I think my body absorbs all my ambition so that it can form those little fingers and neurons at the center of me. That said, I show up every day, and even a paragraph or two seven days a week builds into something, at some point. So I'm doing stories, yes, and am letting the next novel slowly gestate in some dark, warm corner of my brain. I think it'll be in fragments, and that's about as far as I've gotten. It feels nice, after the past year of immense stress and constant rewriting of *Arcadia*, to be a bit adrift. ■