



# tête-à-tête

Sharon Klein interviews **Lori Lansens**, author of *The Girls*

Both your first novel, *Rush Home Road*, and now *The Girls* are set in and around the Chatham area. What does this area mean to you?

I was born and raised in Chatham, Ontario. My mother and father still live in the house where I grew up and when I visit them, I feel like I'm really going home. I appreciate the uniqueness of the area and I'm fascinated by its history—as a final destination on the Underground Railroad, as a port for the rum runners during prohibition, as a battleground during the war of 1812. I suppose I'm drawn to the place as a setting for my stories because I spent my youth imagining I was a writer, gathering notes and making imprints on my senses.

Tell me about the genesis of *The Girls*. I heard you were actually writing another book for about one year before you scrapped it and started to write *The Girls*.

I was writing a story called “The Wives.” It was set in rural Ontario and it was about a man with multiple wives. But after *Rush Home Road* was launched, and after my second baby was born, I felt like a very different person, and what had interested me about “The Wives,” the passion I'd had for the main character, began to wane. I'd started to have fuzzy visions of Rose and Ruby, these twin sisters born joined at the head. After doing some unrelated research about unusual people, and after seeing several pairs of conjoined twins in the

news, the fuzzy visions began to crystallize. (One set of twins, the Bijani girls, sought surgical separation in 2003 and died on the operating table. Like Rose and Ruby, they were joined at the skull. They spoke of how they longed to look into each other's eyes, which I found poetic.) With two very small children, whose dependence on me was absolute and who I was either nursing or carrying or sleeping beside, I became intrigued by the notion of intimacy and attachment. Obviously being a mother is not the same thing as being a conjoined twin, but it was a jumping-off place. Even while I was working on “The Wives,” *The Girls* were knocking on my door. When I began to hear their voices, first Rose and then Ruby, I knew what I had to do. With more relief than grief, I said goodbye to “The Wives.”

Your female characters in *Rush Home Road* and *The Girls* are such strong, formidable women. They are survivors. Yet, they are marginalized. Tell me about that.

I'm telling the kinds of stories that I like to read in fiction, or to hear told in life, about extraordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. Addy Shadd [from *Rush Home Road*] and Rose and Ruby Darlen climb the same mountains that ordinary women climb, but because they're marginalized their journeys are more difficult, their struggles more profound, and their victories ultimately sweeter.

The story of *The Girls* is told in the first person, by two narrators with very distinct voices. Was that always your intention?

When I first began to write, it was Rose's voice that I heard clearly, because like me she's wanted to be a writer all her life. I never imagined Ruby caring that much about what her sister was writing. But as Rose began to describe her sister, Ruby's portrait became more detailed, and one day she just sort of shouted, "MY TURN!"

Authors have mined their own life or their own experiences in their fiction but it would be hard to accuse you of that! The main character in *Rush Home Road* was an old black woman and in *The Girls*, the main characters are conjoined twins. Where do your ideas come from? Where did you get this sensibility?

Authors are naturally asked where their ideas come from, but I've never thought of my stories, *Rush Home Road* or *The Girls*, or any of the screenplays I've written, as having come from ideas. The stories come from the characters, and though it sounds a little flaky, I think the characters exist in some other world, one I imagine above me, rather than below, and the strong ones knock on my door, demanding that I tell their stories. I have a strange sense that I'm channelling these characters, and while I think I'm manipulating their stories, they're fully in charge of me.

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Interestingly, the people very close to me see a great deal of my character in the women I've written about, though of course they seem worlds apart from me.

Was it harder to write *The Girls*? What lessons/experiences did you learn from your first book?

I was expecting my first child when I wrote *Rush Home Road*. It was not unusual for me to write for 8 hours a day. And I often wrote 7 days a week. I wrote the last line of Addy Shadd's story days before I delivered my son. I had all the time in the world and the story was flowing. It was my first attempt at a novel, after many years writing for the screen, and I had no idea how it would be received. I tried not to think about the fact that I might be wasting more than a year of my life on a work that might simply be dismissed.

I gave birth to my second child just weeks after *Rush Home Road* was launched. So I had two very small children when I wrote *The Girls*. The difficulty came in managing my time, and like all working moms, feeling pulled in different directions. I've never had a problem with feeling stuck or blocked (I like to joke that my muse is the on switch of my

computer), but my writing days were much shorter for this book, and there were times when I was clicking on my computer that I ached for my children, and times when I was with my children that I was impatient to get back to my keyboard to edit the chapter I'd just finished.

What are you writing now?

Camping lists, grocery lists, birthday party invitations for my 3-year-old. I'm taking a short break before I begin my next novel. Two new characters have recently introduced themselves to me. Fuzzy snap shots. Whispered voices. **R**



#### EXCERPT

I have never looked into my sister's eyes. I have never bathed alone. I have never stood in the grass at night and raised my arms to a beguiling moon. I've never used an airplane bathroom. Or worn a hat. Or been kissed like that. I've never driven a car. Or slept through the night. Never a private talk. Or solo walk. I've never climbed a tree. Or faded into a crowd. So many things I've never done, but oh, how I've been loved. And, if such things were to be, I'd live a thousand lives as me, to be loved so exponentially.

My sister, Ruby, and I, by mishap or miracle, having intended to divide from a single fertilized egg, remained joined instead, by a spot the size of a bread plate on the sides of our twin heads. We're known to the world medical community as the oldest surviving craniopagus twins (we are twenty-nine years old) and to millions around the globe, those whose interest in people like us is more than just passing, as conjoined craniopagus twins Rose and Ruby Darlen of Baldoon County. We've been called many things: freaks, horrors, monsters, devils, witches, retards, wonders, marvels. To most, we're a curiosity. In small-town Leaford, where we live and work, we're just "The Girls."

Raise your right hand. Press the base of your palm to the lobe of your right ear. Cover your ear and fan out your fingers—that's where my sister and I are affixed, our faces not quite side by side, our skulls fused together in a circular pattern running up the temple and curving around the frontal lobe. If you glance at us, you might think we're two women embracing, leaning against the other tête-à-tête, the way sisters do.

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