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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS LEE ZACHARIAS, AUTHOR OF "ACROSS THE GREAT LAKE"

OCTOBER 16, 2018 BY ALLEN MENDENHALL LEAVE A COMMENT

Lee Zacharias

AM: Lee, I'm happy that we get to do this interview about your new novel, *Across the Great Lake*. I want to try to have this conversation without, as they say, any spoilers. This novel is told in the voice of 85-year-old Fern Halverson, who is looking back on her childhood. What led you to the first-person perspective here?

LZ: Thanks, Allen. *Across the Great Lake* grew out of research I was doing for a personal essay about Frankfort, Michigan, which I visited once as a girl. I grew up in Hammond, Indiana, in the heart of the industrial Calumet Region at the bottom of Lake Michigan, where the shore was lined with mills belching smoke. I thought Frankfort was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen, and at the unhappy age of twelve or thirteen convinced myself that my life would be perfect if only I could live there, though more than forty years would pass before I saw Frankfort again, and then only briefly.

Driving from my mother's house in Hammond to meet my husband in Traverse City, where some of his cousins were holding a reunion, I realized Frankfort was no more than ten minutes out of my way and took a detour. I was astonished at how accurately my memory had preserved that childhood paradise—there was the beach, the house where we had stayed, the restaurant where my family had eaten breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The only thing missing was the deep, evocative call of the foghorn. The railroad car ferries that had docked in Elberta, on the other side of Frankfort's harbor, had stopped running, though no one I asked seemed to recall exactly when, and so I bought a history of the Ann Arbor railroad car ferries. Immediately I was plunged into a world of tricky currents, perilous shoals, fierce storms, and ice, so much ice, because unlike ore boats or freighters, these ferries ran year round. I was so taken with the material that after I finished my essay I couldn't let it go.

The first line of the novel, "we went to the ice," simply came to me, though I didn't know who was speaking. In the course of writing the short first chapter, I learned it was a five-year-old girl whose father was a captain, but I didn't know her name. A friend and I sat on the porch at North Carolina's Wildacres Retreat and tossed names back and forth until we both said, "That's it." In other words, the use of the first person wasn't really a conscious choice, though I can't imagine the novel in third person because it's written in the form of a memoir. Awful things happen to the narrator, of course—a novel is no place for a perfect life—but in a way writing in the first person allowed me to realize my childhood fantasy of living in Frankfort. Even though the novel is in no way autobiographical and Fern a generation older than I am, subconscious desires, even those childhood longings you thought you'd long since left behind, can have a very powerful voice.

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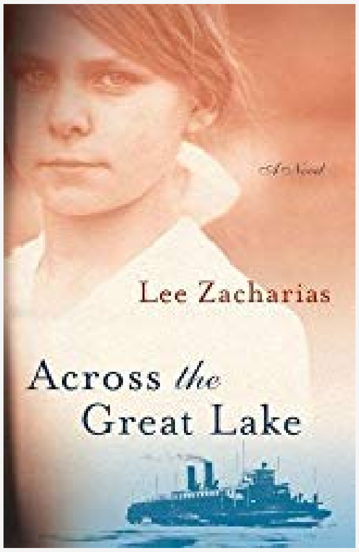
AM: Your writing has been classified as "literary fiction." Do you like that term?

LZ: Your question actually made me laugh. Because the answer depends on how it's used. I don't like it when an agent uses it as a way of explaining that my work won't sell. Many commercial publishers use the term pejoratively—as a kind dismissal that implies fiction deemed to be literary is too intellectual or dense for a general readership to enjoy. On the other hand, it's the classification I name when my press asks me which category they should choose to enter my novel in a contest like the Independent Publisher Book Awards (the IPPYs). I'm proud that my work is taken seriously enough to be considered literary. Essentially what it means to me is that my work is well written and has a dimension that goes beyond the what-happens-next of plot, that it explores the meaning of whatever experience each novel portrays. (Or essay, I'd like to add, because I also write nonfiction that is considered literary.) Rhythm is important to me; I strive for language that is more than simply adequate to tell the story, but I don't think that makes my prose too dense for the general reader. Rather, it adds something I like to think akin to music. And a great deal of literary fiction does sell. Look at Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, for example. That's a beautifully written, very literary novel, and besides winning the Pulitzer Prize, it spent more than two and a half years on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

AM: Thanks, Lee. That's a great response. I dislike the term "literary fiction" because I believe all fiction should strive to be "literary," whatever the genre. Your prose does stand out, though, and in the best way. I just read a passage in the book where you describe men with saws cutting blocks from ice, and the prose there has a beautiful, incantatory rhythm to it. How do you refine your prose as you work on a novel? Do you write to get the story down and then go back and polish, for instance, or do you try to get the prose just right the first time around to save you trouble on the back end? I suspect some combination of the two, or perhaps something different altogether. But I'm curious to know.

LZ: Yes, definitely a combination of the two. I write on my laptop, chapter by chapter, saving each chapter as a separate document because I do so many drafts of each one, printing each version out because I like to revise from hard copy. Every chapter has a file folder in a milk crate in my study. So I end up revising each chapter many, many times, trying to refine the language and the pacing, before I copy and paste all the chapters into a single document that I call my "first draft," though that's certainly a misnomer, given the number of revisions each chapter has already gone through. Then I begin revising again, with more of a mind to the whole.



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Sometimes I re-order chapters, remove one, or add new ones, but even by the time I get to the twenty-fifth draft of the single document, I'm still tinkering with the language. It's a very inefficient method, pretty accurately described by the cliché "a day to put a comma in, another day to take it out." So before I ever got that first draft of *Across the Great Lake*, the single document (also printed out), there were three milk crates on top of a chest behind my desk, two filled with the individual chapter files, and one with my overflowing files of notes and materials I'd printed from the web, information about the railroad car ferries, the setting, the lake, the 1930s, even one titled "Norwegian stuff."

Years ago, when my younger son was going to a summer day camp, I had something like 6 weeks, roughly 8 to 5 Mondays through Fridays to begin a new novel before I had to return to teaching and some family obligations, and knowing how I usually work I realized that at the end of that window I'd probably have no more than one or two chapters that had been through many revisions, not enough to feel I really had something going when I resumed, so I set myself a goal of 100 pages, no looking back. At the end of the 6 weeks I had 120 pages, and when I did reread them I realized that, yes, they were rough, though not as bad as I'd feared and certainly revisable. But I'm afraid the lesson didn't stick. It's just my nature to rewrite constantly as I go along. And reading aloud or at least whispering the words really helps with fine tuning the language. In *Across the Great Lake* the first chapter isn't all that different from the very first words I typed, even though I printed out plenty of drafts, but I must have rewritten the last chapter more than a hundred times.

AM: That's fascinating. And by the way, I just returned home from Norway last week. Did it take much research to write *Across the Great Lake*, to set the story when and where it's set?

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LZ: I hope it was a great trip. A Norwegian friend who helped me with nuances of the language that no dictionary can convey posts stunningly beautiful pictures on his Facebook page. Luckily he was in the States for much of the time while I was writing this novel and so was able also to help me with pronunciation for readings.

Yes, I did a great deal of research. I read numerous books, academic histories, ghost legends, memoirs, even the *Merchant Marine Manual*, and did a lot of googling. I also made numerous trips to Frankfort and the railroad car ferry museum, the *SS City of Milwaukee*, in Manistee, where I asked so many questions I think the guide got sick of me. In Frankfort I was able to talk to the pastor and secretary of Trinity Lutheran Church. I talked with the mayors of both Elberta and Frankfort. The latter's grandfather had been a pastor of the church, and he still had his grandfather's sermons written in Norwegian that he offered to loan me. The Frankfort Chamber of Commerce allowed me to have their out-of-print history of Frankfort copied. The principal of the Frankfort Elementary School went up to the attic to show me a picture of the old school. I visited and re-visited the car ferry exhibit at the Benzie Area Historical Museum and talked with the director. I paid a call on the Frankfort Coast Guard station and made extensive use of the Benzie Shores Public Library. A clerk in the township office showed me the original plat for what used to be called the Norwegian cemetery, and I visited both cemeteries many times, picking out a gravesite at Crystal Lake North for Fern's mother. I found the site where the Elberta school once stood and interviewed a clerk in the village hall who had gone there.

I chose houses for Fern and Alv. The last time I was there Fern's house was for sale, but I decided against going inside, because I had a floor plan in my head that I didn't want contradicted. I rode a bike to Beulah along the Betsy Valley Trail, which used to be the railroad bed, and picked out the house where Fern's stepmother's sister lived. I hiked in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore and kayaked down the Platte River to Platte Bay, the same route Fern and a party of neighbors took in inner tubes. Twice I toured South Manitou Island, but did not hear the voices of the cholera victims crying out for help. I drove around the lake and boarded an excursion boat in Door County, Wisconsin, to determine for myself whether you could see both Wisconsin and Michigan from the middle of Green Bay. Then I drove to the tip of the peninsula to take a look at the passage known as Death's Door. A clerk in a Frankfort boutique where I was shopping gave me a phone number and address for Grant Brown, Jr., the author of *Ninety Years*, the history of the Ann Arbor railroad car ferries that led me from my essay to the novel. I wrote him a letter, and we began an email correspondence. A lot of my questions had to do with things a history would not cover. For example, I knew about spudding from his book, but didn't know how the men would get down to the ice, because these were enormous ships. It was from him that I learned about the Jacob's ladders, about jumping the clump, and other docking procedures. Whenever I asked a question he couldn't answer, he tracked down a couple of veteran sailors from the ferries, who are pretty scarce now. I was astounded by his generosity and the warm reception I got from everyone in the area that I approached. I put a lot of time into research, but for me it wasn't work; it was pleasure. However, there is one danger in research, and that is the temptation to use it all. A part of the revision process is figuring out where information is getting in the way of the story and taking it out.

AM: May I ask about ghosts in the novel?

LZ: On each of my tours of the *SS City of Milwaukee* the guide pointed to the paneling in the steward's cabin where some claim to see the face of a ghost in the grain of the wood. I took pictures, and I confess I can't make out the face. But sailors are a superstitious lot, as I learned from my reading. Most of the stories the bosun tells can be found in Frederick Stonehouse's books about the ghost legends associated with the Great Lakes, though of course the bosun tells them in his own voice. And many Great Lakes ships did carry a horseshoe with its prongs pointing upwards as a precaution against bad luck. For much of my life I was skeptical about the paranormal. But then I encountered a ghost at the Island Inn on Ocracoke in North Carolina. She—and I say she because her identity is well known to people there—did exactly what the ghost on Fern's father's ship does, and though I wasn't terrified, she did make for an uneasy night. Still, I might have thought I'd imagined it if the desk clerk hadn't taken one look at my face as I came down the stairs to the lobby the next morning and said, "Would you like to change rooms?" Yes, I would, and Mrs. Godfrey never bothered me again, though why she haunts only one of the several rooms no one seems to know. The Outer Banks too abound with ghost tales. There is something about places where land meets water, something about edges, that seems to attract restless spirits. But I was more than twenty drafts into *Across the Great Lake* before I knew who the *Manitou*'s ghost was or what she wanted. The ghost was there from the beginning, but at first it was just a ghost, and while I borrowed her behavior from my own experience at the Island Inn, the ghost might have been anyone—perhaps a former crew member or passenger who met some tragic fate. When I finally realized who the ghost was and that it had a specific mission, that it wasn't there just because most ships have a ghost, it changed everything and immeasurably deepened the book.

By the way, before my first trip to Manistee, I learned from the website that the *SS City of Milwaukee* rents out cabins in the passenger quarters overnight, and I was in the process of booking one when I thought to ask, “Does the boat have a ghost?” “Depends on who you talk to” was the answer. I thought about my night at the Island Inn and said, “Never mind. I think I’ll stay somewhere else.”

AM: For many years you taught at the college level. Did you enjoy teaching?

LZ: I still do, although I am happy to be retired from my full-time university position because travel is no longer restricted by the demands of the academic year and I have more time to write. For the past ten years I’ve been a fairly regular faculty member of the Wildacres Writers Conference, where I teach a workshop in creative nonfiction. Those are wonderful, intense weeks, in which a group of students who’ve never met quickly form a tight bond. At the university I especially loved working with upper division and graduate students, in literature classes and writing workshops, both fiction and nonfiction. I loved designing the syllabi for my Contemporary American Novel and Structure of Fiction classes, because I wanted the novels I chose and the way I ordered them to form a narrative, as opposed to just picking ten or twelve of my favorite books. I was fortunate to teach in an MFA program that had writing tutorials in its curriculum, so that after their first year I met with the students one-on-one, which allowed me more context for their stories and novels and fostered an even closer working relationship. Like many writers I am somewhat of an introvert, but that quality disappears in teaching—there’s a kind of transformative magic to it. I retired from the university early only because academic bureaucracy—meetings and committees and reports—was becoming a much larger and more divisive part of the job. And of course I have yet to meet a teacher who says he or she enjoys grading papers. But I felt acutely the loss of the community our writing program provided, even though I am still in touch with many of my former students.

Lee Zacharias

AM: I truly regret that this interview is coming to an end. I’ve enjoyed it so much and learned a lot about you. Last question, and I hope it’s not frivolous: who’s your favorite literary character?

LZ: Thank you, Allen. I’ve greatly enjoyed our conversation too. No, your last question isn’t frivolous at all. In fact it’s a hard one, because now would be a most inappropriate time to name the horribly perverted but hilarious sexual predator Humbert Humbert. So maybe I should go with Nabokov’s delusional Charles Kinbote from *Pale Fire* or even his endearingly pathetic and ineffectual Professor Pnin. I love complex characters, and perhaps because I was born on the south side of Chicago, which the second wave of the Great Migration caused my family to leave for Hammond, Indiana, when I was five and because my mother, who was a very sentimental person, so mythologized a city that was lost to me, I feel an affinity for exiles.

On the other hand, there is something so wonderfully innocent about the characters Tommy Hays creates for his novels, I feel enormous affection for Sam, for Prate Marshbanks, and his Grover, namesake of Thomas Wolfe’s Grover and a reminder of the difficulty of never being able to live up to a dead sibling that Wolfe so beautifully portrays in his novella *The Lost Boy*.

But how can I forget Pip from *Great Expectations* or Huckleberry Finn? And then there is Nick Carraway, whom I love for none of the reasons he claims I should, but because I consider him an unreliable narrator. Jay Gatsby’s misguided belief that ill-gotten money can allow him to repeat the past is hardly noble. But *The Great Gatsby* is still a beautifully constructed novel. I like irony, and nothing begets irony like an unreliable narrator. One of the reasons it’s such a hard question is that if you asked me tomorrow or next week, I would probably give you different answers. Tomorrow I might tell you it’s Philip Marlow because the metaphors Raymond Chandler attributes to him are so wickedly funny, or the narrator of Alice McDermott’s masterful short novel *That Night*, who so subtly tells her story of loss by speculating on someone else’s, or Josephine Humphreys’ Lucille Odom, who love love loves where she lives, and so I often thought of her while writing Fern, who also love love loves where she lived, or the narrator of Rebecca Lee’s novella *The City Is a Rising Tide,* or Jo Ann Beard herself in “The Fourth State of Matter.” You see the problem: we are all richer for having known so many vivid characters literature has given us to choose from.

AM: There are some great names on that list, many of whom I've loved as well. Thank you so much for this interview, Lee. I know our readers will enjoy *Across the Great Lake*.

LZ: I hope so. Thank *you*.

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