

'Give yourself permission to write'

Where We Have to Go author Lauren Kirshner experienced a literary awakening as a child at the Word on the Street Festival. Now, with a critically acclaimed novel and a U of T Creative Writing degree under her belt, she's ready to influence a whole new generation of Toronto writers.

ANNA GALLAGHER-ROSS

Lauren Kirshner was 10 years old when she attended her first Word on the Street Festival. As she wove in and out of readings, she dutifully filled out a ballot for every contest held among the booths. She promptly forgot about these entries until weeks later, when she was called and informed that she had won a complete set of Margaret Atwood's books.

In the years to come, Kirshner would read and become deeply influenced by novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Edible Woman*, but this significant first encounter with Atwood would not be her last. In her second year as an M.A. student in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Toronto, she found herself sitting across from Atwood, her new mentor.

Kirshner recalls this first meeting: "I kept thinking, 'I am sitting here having tea with a legend.'" Atwood would oversee Kirshner's M.A. thesis project, a 20-page short story about a girl named Lucy, which would eventually become her debut novel. Since its release last spring, *Where We Have to Go* (McClelland & Stewart) has had a tremendous reception in Canada, and was recently sold to major publishers in Holland and Germany.

Where We Have to Go is the touching story of Lucy Bloom, the spunky, smart, and loveable teenager who adores two things: her cat Lulu, and the television character ALF. Lucy's coming of age, set against the familiar backdrop of Toronto in the 1990s, combines rich and vivid characters with evocative imagery to tell a compelling tale of adolescence: suffering through high school, her family's breaking apart, ceasing to eat as she struggles to become the "right" shape, making and keeping friends, and coming to terms with herself.

We are introduced to her eccentric mother, Joy, who was once a beauty queen in suburban Bulgaria and now loves shopping at Salvation Army stores, collecting mannequins, and teaching ESL. Her father, Frank, ever-clad in his brown parka, once had dreams of being a famous photographer but now attends AA meetings and works in a travel agency. Kirshner's whole cast of artfully drawn characters maintains consistently compelling voices.

We follow Lucy over eight years of her teenaged life, through familiar Toronto streets and landmarks. Kirshner uniquely captures with levity and humour the familiar (and painful) experiences of growing up different at an age when it is imperative that one aims for similarity.

The title of the novel was adapted from a poem by Theodore Roethke, which appears in its original form on the opening page. Kirshner explains: "It's about perseverance and navigating the acrobatics of life. I had it tacked to the wall in front of my desk while writing." She struggled with the title initially: "We considered calling it 'Odd Girl Out' but I disliked it because I wanted the female characters to be more dimensional than simply



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'odd' or outside of the norm." In fact, the narrative presents many facets of female adolescence, exploring the complexities of family, friendships, and self-discovery that occur in, as Kirshner puts it, "the chasm between childhood and adulthood."

Kirshner thought it was important to write in a new way about an issue that affects some young women; although she portrays Lucy's struggle with anorexia, it isn't the only thing that defines the character. Kirshner is concerned that teens are subjected to a proliferation of images of how to be, or what beauty or goodness is: "Lucy is an average teen growing up in a digital, culture-saturated age who constantly compares herself to these images."

Kirshner refers to her own adolescence as a time when she was "learning how to say 'yes' and 'no' to the world." She is often asked if the novel is autobiographical, and her response is that it's more about "a feeling than an actual event. Parts of me are there, on every page." Like Lucy, Kirshner described herself growing up quite shy: "I liked to feel undetected, like wallpaper." She was 23 when she began writing the novel and says she had to be conscious of not writing about

her own development, instead letting Lucy have her own: "We were so close in age, it was difficult to write her as she got older. But I felt good about leaving her at 19. I feel like people begin their lives at that time."

A captivating aspect of the novel is the role that storytelling plays in Lucy's life. Kirshner explains that "stories are a way for Lucy to tell true things about herself." A touching instance of this occurs when Lucy slips a letter about her hero ALF under her parents' bedroom door during a pause in their frequent fighting: "I love ALF because no one expects him to make a difference. I love ALF because when he sees a problem that needs to be solved, he takes responsibility."

Kirshner comments on how Lucy's fictions explore truth: "Does truth have to be something that actually happens, or is it something inside ourselves that becomes apparent in the way we live?" One of the most tender moments is the story Lucy and her mother invent together at her mother's bedside. After so many years of withholding their true feelings from one another, they experience a precious instance of being on the same page as they bask in their newfound words and intimacy. They discover, through

unspoken agreement, that storytelling is a way for them to connect and for truth to pass between them.

Kirshner, who graduated from U of T's Creative Writing Program in 2007, describes her time as an undergrad as a very different, somewhat alienating experience: "I felt lost in the mix. I was a silent observer who always left class with a knot in my throat." But she describes meeting professor and author Rosemary Sullivan—who also heads the M.A. program in Creative Writing—in her third year and being inspired. Kirshner says it was during her graduate studies that she was able to find her feet as an author: "The program gave me the permission to be a writer."

Kirshner's thesis project, which evolved into *Where We Have to Go*, was conceived inside the classroom but also throughout the U of T campus, including around King's College Circle. She also wrote for hours in the Victoria and Trinity libraries: "I would take breaks in the Trinity cafeteria," she remembers and then laughs. "You could get a huge plate of food for eight dollars." Food was important. Kirshner describes intensive, non-stop writing sessions: "The character of Lucy first came as a voice, loud and clear,

and it was unlike anything I had encountered before. I just stayed up writing for three weeks straight. Lucy was good company."

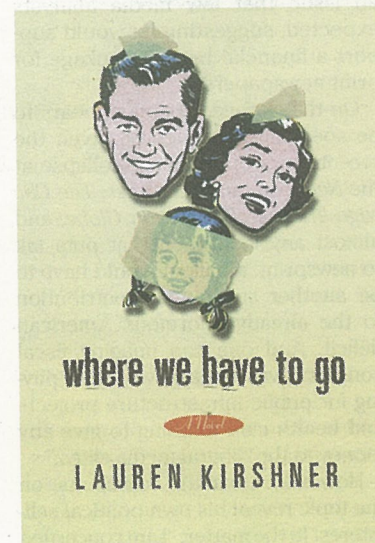
In addition to her thesis project, Kirshner's writing took other forms during her time at U of T. In 2005 she departed from fiction to collaborate with her sister, actor and author Mia Kirshner, on the book *I Live Here* (Pantheon), an interdisciplinary project that tells the story of globalization. Mia asked Lauren to write a chapter entitled "20 Poems for Claudia" about Claudia Ivette González, a young woman who was murdered in Juárez, México in 2003. The result is a beautiful and gripping piece that blends non-fiction with poetic prose. She was also the Arts Editor for *The Newspaper* in 2006.

Born and raised in Toronto, Kirshner speaks animatedly about her city, praising its eclectic arts community. Though she admits that the cityscape is very different from when she was a teenager, "gentrification is not necessarily a bad thing, but it makes the city look different—it's an ineffable quality. Like Gerrard Street where the Salvation Army 'By the Pound' shop used to be. The old Toronto is slowly being hidden beneath the new." Her only criticism: "I wish rent was lower. I wish it was easier to make a living as an artist, but it's a choice you have to make, you just may not buy a condo or be a surgeon like your mother wants you to be."

Currently, Kirshner is in the early stages of her second novel: "It's about the experience of a group of different artists in their twenties. Some of it is set in Toronto. It explores themes of identity and how one makes their way in the world."

"Oh," she adds, "and it has lots more rock and roll."

Her advice to young writers? "Give yourself permission to write. Don't let anything get in the way of that. It's a private permission. Stop talking or explaining about being a writer and just go ahead and be. Write without explanation."



Lauren Kirshner will be reading at the Word on the Street Festival in Queen's Park on September 26.