

ANNEX INDEX

Coming of age in the Annex

Atwood protege finds her own voice, becomes a mentor in her own right



COURTESY DONNA SANTOS

Kirshner transferred from Northern to a small alternative school called Subway Academy II, which was then located above Future's Bakery (483 Bloor St. W.), but kept in touch with her English teacher, who she says is still her best writing coach.

If you don't already take pride in the fact that this neighbourhood has spawned some of the best writers in Canada, you will by the end of this year. 2010 marks 15 years of The Annex Gleaner. As part of the fanfare, we are taking a look at some the best writers that have come from our neighbourhood and (we think) helped shape our identity. To submit an idea for someone you'd like to see profiled here email us at gleanerinfo@gmail.com.

By EMINA GAMULIN

A first-generation Canadian, Lauren Kirshner found her experience growing up to be different from those in her cohort whose nationality did not need to be prefaced.

She counts off a list of things that she never understood about the lives of her classmates at Northern Secondary School; buying clothes at the Gap; having a cottage; getting your bangs cut at a salon; piano on Mondays and ballet on Tuesdays; going to the Bahamas and coming back with cornrows in your hair.

In a different voice, the catalogue of Canadianisms could come off as jealous or mean-spirited, but her list is sweet, funny, and offbeat. It could have come straight out of the mouth of Lucy Bloom, the protagonist of the 27-year-old's first novel *Where We Have to Go*—though Kirshner might disagree.

"We're really not the same at all, she's just a character. We share certain autobiographical stuff—we're both Jewish, we both grew up in Toronto in the same time period. I was an extremely sensitive kid; very shy, very watchful, and I gave my character a lot of those qualities, but she's a lot more outspoken and gutsy. I was a bigger wallflower than she was," she said.

The critically acclaimed book, which saw Kirshner crowned as "best emerging author" by *NOW* magazine in 2009, introduces the reader to Bloom at the age of 11, when she is obsessed with Alf, cats, and the beautiful women in her father's portfolio of glamour shots, and follows her to the brink of adulthood.

Kirshner grew up around Bathurst Street and Davenport Road, which she describes as the "northern edge" of the Annex.

"I think, historically, it has always been a really bohemian neighbourhood. Five, ten years ago, there were

more bookstores here than on any strip," she said, when asked why the area seems to be such fertile soil for writers. She also thinks it has something to do with the number of writer-friendly cafes and its proximity to the University of Toronto.

Local readers will recognize many of the landmarks—Moby's, the general discount store where Bloom worked as a teenager (but Kirshner didn't), is clearly an allusion to Honest Ed's (581 Bloor St. W.). Others were pure imagination—Tivoli Towers, a horrible high-rise complete with beds that fold into the wall, was Kirshner's vision of "the worst place you could be moved to as an 11-year-old."

The fact that it easily could have been real is a testament to her gift as a writer, although Kirshner downplays her talent.

"I think writing is really hard," she said. "And also I don't think I'm good at it, but I feel it's what I'm best at, so it would be stupid not to continue it and at least try and get better."

Rosemary Sullivan, who taught Kirshner creative writing at the University of Toronto, first as an undergrad and later while she was studying for her master's, said even Kirshner's early writing was mature. "Lauren's a natural talent," she said, adding, "She remains humble about her gift and remains open to new directions, and that's lovely to see."

Anita Chong, Kirshner's editor at McClelland & Stewart publishing, concurs.

"We see coming of age manuscripts all the time, and we could see very early on that there was something unique and fresh about the voice—such personality and such wit in it that really shines through. I remember reading the first pages and laughing out loud, and that's not always something you get when reading a manuscript."

"There was such a raw humour to her voice, and it actually reminded us of very early Margaret Atwood, [it had] that sort of sharp, acerbic, sort of a chip-on-her-shoulder edge to it."

Atwood was Kirshner's writing mentor when she was taking her master's, but Chong said the work was "all Lauren."

Initially nervous to meet Atwood, Kirshner said "she's really funny actually, really dry sense of humour, really warm."

"We met about five times in the next eight months. She would show me my manuscript with comments,

not helping me shape it, but giving me guidance on how to make a better character. It was a little more about the overarching parts of writing, mostly just encouraging me, saying 'You are going to have a book soon,' and I didn't know that, I was still thinking of myself as a student."

Kirshner will be rereading *Where We Have to Go* for the first time since it came out, to edit it for the German and Dutch editions.

"The international publishing market has been very tough as of late. To think that a first novel—set in Toronto in the '90s, with Alf and all these very North American pop-cultural references—is finding audiences in Germany and the Netherlands is amazing," said Chong.

Kirshner also recently started a program called "Sister Writes," a creative writing-mentoring program for marginalized women, the idea for which came out of earlier work she was doing with clients from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. In March, the participants will publish a magazine.

She is also working on a second novel, focusing on the lives of a group of artists in the 1980s.

"From being a writer, there's always been a conflict of 'Can I do this?' 'Can I pull this off?' Because there are a lot of people who will tell you that it's not the thing to do," she said. "A lot of my friends are musicians or visual artists, so it's sort of the culture that I've been around, sort of the air that I breathe."

Visit www.lauren-kirshner.com for more information.



New owners/new store. Come see our new look!

The best and freshest organic produce sourced from Ontario farmers
Home delivery in the city

Mention this ad and get 10 percent off your order

ORGANICS ON BLOOR
468 Bloor St. W. (west of Brunswick), 416-538-1333



secrets
from your sister BRA FITTING BOUTIQUE

beautiful lingerie
for real women

560 bloor St. w | on the corner of bloor & bathurst
416.538.1234 www.secretsfromyoursister.com

Know What Your Home Is Worth. Free.

Get a FREE home Valuation.
Click. Simple. Without Any Fuss.
From the comfort and privacy of your own home.

Interested? Then go to AnnexHomeValue.com

A new service brought to you by www.TorontoHomeValue.net and sponsored in The Annex by Nancy, Elden, Daniel Freeman of Freeman Real Estate Ltd. 416 536 7325. www.TorontoRealEstate.org



Aging in Place You can count on us.

Just like a supportive family,
we're here to make it easy for
you to enjoy each day, your way.

The Annex gives you the
assistance you need, with the
independence you desire.



The Annex
Retirement Residence

(416)961-6446

123 Spadina Rd., Toronto
annex@reveraliving.com
reveraliving.com

