

Literary Fiction Book Review

Lynn Sloan

1. What inspired you to write this book?

Years ago I was visiting a friend in Michigan, and I brought her a copy of my most recent short story publication. I'd been writing stories for a while and wanted to see if I could write a novel, but I had no idea what I wanted to write about. Nothing. That Friday night, for entertainment my friend took me to the opening reception for an art exhibit at the local college. The place was jammed. Well-wishers mobbed the artist, a young, handsome sculptor with a big smile and easy manner. Every few minutes a shy-looking young woman finagled her way through the crowd, bringing someone up to meet the sculptor, and she'd move others along, but she acted as if she wished she were any place else but where she was. She obviously wasn't staff. I asked who she was: his wife. What had drawn these two dissimilar people together, I wondered. Answering this question, I decided, might launch a novel. The sculptor I saw that night, whose name I've forgotten, became the basis for Rolly in *Principles of Navigation*. The shy, awkward wife I saw that night is nothing like Alice.

2. Is there a particular character within your work that you feel particularly drawn to? Why?

I am drawn to both Alice and Rolly. I love them both. I understand Alice's yearnings and desires, and I understand Rolly's needs too. Walt Whitman said, "I contain multitudes." I think all writers contain multitudes. That's how we get beyond the limits of our own lives.

3. Can you tell us a little about the process of writing this novel?

When I began writing this novel, I had in mind two main characters, a married couple but I had no plot, no story. Since a plot requires conflict, I knew that something bad had to happen to them. I decided that I wanted the conflict to come from deep inside the characters, not from external events. Unlike the couple I saw in the art gallery, Alice and Rolly don't seem ill suited to each other at the beginning of my novel. They love each other. They're close. But a plot requires trouble, so I gave Alice difficulty conceiving a baby they both want. Their differing ways of dealing with their disappointment opens fissures in their relationship. I didn't have an outline or a plan, but as I complicated their lives, I came to know their deepest, secret needs, and the story took shape.

4. How did you come up with the title?

Titling is very hard for me. I have a notebook filled with terrible titles. Since *Principles of Navigation* is told from two points of view, I wanted a title that connected well with both characters. Marriage over time, it seems to me, involves traveling through a changing landscape, and traveling through this landscape changes the traveller. Once I had this image of marriage being a journey with no destination, the title came to me.

5. Is there a message in your novel that you want readers to grasp?

Fiction reveals how we live beneath the surface of the obvious and the visible. That's why I love reading fiction, and why I write fiction. But I don't think fiction delivers messages, unless the message is to be alert to how people live beneath the surface of the obvious and the visible.

6. What were the challenges (research, literary, psychological, and logistical) in bringing this work to life?

I wrote the first version of this novel (first version after eight drafts) a decade ago, and put it aside when my writer friends, whose judgment I trust, said they liked one character and disliked the other. Since I loved Alice and Rolly, I saw this as a huge problem, put the novel in a box, and turned back to short story writing. Three years ago I decided to take another look at my manuscript. With the passage of time, the weaknesses and the strengths were clear. I started cutting and re-writing. No sentence remains from that first version. I may not believe that fiction delivers messages, but there is a message in my experience writing this novel: stepping away lets you see anew, and patience is a virtue. I should cross-stitch that on a sampler.

7. What are you working on now?

I'm writing short stories, and letting ideas for my next novel percolate.