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Interview

Lauren Groff: 'I didn't want there to be extramarital sex in this book'

By Joanna Scutts

Her new novel, *Fates and Furies*, is a resounding critical success – and a likely bestseller – as it addresses the complicated dynamics of a marriage that lasts

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Lauren Groff is having quite the week. Her new novel *Fates and Furies*, the follow-up to 2011's well-received *Arcadia*, has already eclipsed its predecessor: since its release on Tuesday, it's already been longlisted for the National Book award in fiction and is on Amazon's top 20 bestseller list. For Groff, in the midst of a book tour, it's been a surreal, sleepless, exhilarating burst into the light. "You write these things in the darkness of your own house and your solitude, and then it's like zipping on a scuba suit – you have to put on a mask and a persona that's very different from the one you inhabit at home," she says.

Fates and Furies tells the story of an unlikely marriage between two impetuous, attractive young people, Lotto and Mathilde. They impulsively get engaged at the end of college after only two

weeks together. The novel follows them as Lotto, an eternal optimist, tries to become an actor and, failing that, a successful playwright. Meanwhile, Mathilde, a cynic at heart, dedicates herself - in ways Lotto will never know - to the advancement of his career, his happiness and their partnership.

“My deepest desire for this book was to write a subversive book that didn’t look subversive,” Groff says. “So how do you do it but to take something that is sneered at?” Like marriage, that innocuous, ubiquitous novelistic subject, which could be about so much more: the nature of time passing, in slow days and leaps of years, and the way a life together is made up of shared and competing stories (in one striking passage, Mathilde furiously attacks Lotto for - quite unwittingly - telling a story from her own dark childhood as though it happened to him).

Most importantly for Groff, however, the story she was telling provided a way for her to address “the nature of privilege”. Without ever turning him into a fool, Groff slyly exposes the ways in which Lotto’s sex, race and class cushion him in myriad ways and - despite the early death of his father - give him a view of the world as essentially rational and benign. “I know that people who have it sometimes don’t believe it, but situation makes money,” Groff says. “And situation comes out of what you’re given and what you seize for yourself.” Lotto fails to see the brutality of the luck that blessed his family with enormous wealth, the result of a springwater bottling business his father managed to build on the land he owned in Florida. Groff finds personal resonance in the idea of wealth seized from a common good: “I live in the state of Florida and it’s something that happens all the time. It’s devastating.”

The book’s two halves are linked together by a wry, omniscient voice that pops up in square brackets to qualify, contradict or resolve the mysteries of the characters’ lives. It’s similar to the technique Virginia Woolf deploys in *To the Lighthouse*. “Yeah, I totally stole that,” Groff admits with a laugh when I bring it up. “But I needed it structurally in order to tie the two halves together.” Appropriately for a novel so focused on theatrical performance, these “wink-wink asides” highlight the ways that the characters are dissembling for effect, or to keep the marital peace. The asides also keep us at a distance - giving us a sudden glimpse of a future when this or that crisis will no longer matter.

“I’d read *The Iliad*, and one of the beautiful things about that piece of literature is that there are these different points of telling: there’s super-close, deeply, almost luxuriantly textural, and then there are moments where Homer (or whoever) shoots out and sees everything from a godlike perspective,” Groff explains. “We think of stories a lot of the time as being horizontal texts, beginning to end. But I love the idea of having little vertical spikes in the story too.”

The *Iliad* oddly fits as a model, in that the magnetic, six-foot-seven Lotto shares some elements with an epic hero, “who is just a little bit bigger and brighter than everyone around him”, as Groff puts it, “and then through his own ideas, effects his own downfall”.

“I know this is not traditional, but in my head both sets are these gorgeous goddesses who are impassive and deeply invested in watching,” Groff adds, of her titular Fates and Furies. “I just love the idea of having these three figures, the spinner, the measurer, and the cutter, following us all around figuring out our fates.” It’s no coincidence that Lotto believes that those are the forces underpinning reality. “That’s what privilege is,” Groff reiterates. “You think you’re fated to get things.” By contrast, Mathilde’s harsher philosophy, born in part of childhood abandonment, comes from the Furies: spirits of ancient and distinctly female vengeance.

Despite their differences, however, Lotto and Mathilde are firmly faithful to one another - another kind of subversion in a novel like this. "A lot of books about marriage are about marriages falling apart," Groff says. "I never wanted there to be extramarital sex in this book." Both partners might be tempted, but in the end are deeply connected to each other, physically as well as emotionally, which gave Groff license to write plenty of marital sex scenes. "It took some girding of loins," she says with a laugh, "but it was so much fun."

Groff's novel also keenly probes the different ways that men's and women's creativity and human value are assessed. At some point, a successful, middle-aged, and more than lightly sozzled Lotto gives a speech in which he characterizes men as intellectual and women as physical creators (Groff says the story is based on an incident she witnessed, involving a famous playwright). Of course in the end, it's Lotto who desperately wants a baby, not Mathilde.

In Groff's own marriage, those gendered roles are flipped. "This book is somewhat of an apology to my husband, who is the primary parent in our family - it's my attempt to have an empathetic understanding of the way he feels about being the helpmeet," she says. "I'm not as charismatic, but Lotto shares a lot of me, unfortunately."

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