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Leeway Cottage
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How did you arrive at the idea of pairing the stories of inhabitants of a summer colony in Maine with the experiences of Danish survivors of German persecution?

It came partly from the fact that I knew the Danish story and thought it needed to be told (or retold) and partly from Sept. 11. I knew early on that the character who became Sydney would marry a European musician as a sort of shorthand for how different they are; the fact that his side of the story of their marriage would make such a statement about how little Americans understand what it means to have war on home soil, came from the events of 2001.

You have said that "writing novels is an extended response to curiosity." Can you describe in a bit more detail how curiosity drives your creative process?

We all have cracks in our heads (that's how the light gets in), and you can't tell what will light up for you until it happens. If you're going to spend two or three years immersed in a subject, you better be deeply interested in it, or it won't be interesting to the reader. The process itself is a bewildering business of reading, listening, sorting through bits of things and trying to make patterns until something begins to accumulate weight in the right way. When I started writing *Leeway*, it was assumed that what I would write next would be about the three grown children of the family, inheritance politics, how they handle owning the summer house together. But events have intervened, such that I now no longer want to use that material, at least not centrally. I can't say more about how it will shape up since it isn't clear yet, but I will say that if you followed me around or looked carefully at the books stacked around my reading chair, you'd assume that I'm preparing for Holy Orders. This life is full of surprises.

Why is the courageous Danish resistance movement during World War II so little-known by most people?

Such an interesting question, and I've heard a lot of theories. I think it is mostly because the Danes are both proud and modest and therefore unlikely to blow their own horns, and that other nationalities are not so likely to broadcast a story that casts their own national behavior in the war, no matter what individual stories of heroism they own, into shadow. It is true that Sweden was right there and that the timing was right for the Danes, but still. How could virtually an entire populous throw caution to the winds to do the right thing, and trust that their countrymen would do the same? It's pretty dumbfounding. Maybe the story isn't told because there are so many heroes; it's hard to make a story dramatic or even comprehensible when it stars a whole country. For any readers wanting a true story from that time, with a real life heroine, I'd recommend *Monica*, by Christina Sutherland, the story of Baroness Wichfeld for whom Monica Moss is named.

Is the marriage between Sydney and Laurus Moss and their willingness to stay together despite their deep differences intended as a model of an old-fashioned commitment, or do you think that it still has currency in today's culture?

I think it had to do with character and the way those two responded to the mores of their generation. I assume that their staying together was, all told, an admirable thing for the community, and provided an example of steadfastness to their children, but to know for sure whether it was altogether a good thing for the children, we'd have to know more about how they turned out. (I'm working on it.) Sydney and Laurus presented them with examples of behavior that can be quite damaging; denial, pretending black is white, behaving politely when maybe another reaction would be more emotionally appropriate, and perhaps more fruitful. I was trying to paint a picture of the last generation to be virtually untouched by Freud. That's a cork that is never going back into the bottle. All we can do is hope that what we replace that generation's morality with is, while different, equally socially useful.

Near the end of *Leeway Cottage*, you supply a vision of Laurus Moss's "movie" in heaven, and it examines his sister's experiences in a concentration camp. What influenced your decision to include this scene in your novel?

Laurus's movie was part of the earliest idea of the novel, and I knew that it would include his family's war experiences. The movie was conceived to satisfy the reader's curiosity, but more importantly to focus at an unexpected place in the structure of the story on what Laurus had had to live with quietly, knowing his wife would never share his interest in it. In the beginning I thought his movie would also include things like the truth about the blue envelope scene, or maybe things to do with the children. But once Nina's story was written, it was clear that the novel was over. You can't go back to domestic drama with any relish after that; I couldn't and I don't think the reader could. But I also had come to believe that Laurus had long ago decided what he did and didn't want to know about his wife's behavior and inner life, and his children's. Truths about the families we grew up in are endlessly fascinating to most people, certainly to me. When you are young, others pick and choose what is appropriate or convenient for you to know. When you grow up, you pick and choose for yourself what it is useful to know and deal with and what is better left unexamined. Laurus sees shades of Nina in his daughter Monica, and misses his spirited little sister his whole life, so the decision about his movie made itself.