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## Heather O'Neill

**Lullabies for Little Criminals**  
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**Q: How did the narrative voice of *Baby* first come to you?**

A: A lot of children grow up in poverty with flawed parents but their inner world is still as inherently filled with wonder and innocence as children who are kept away from the city's underbelly. In fact, they might have more of a need for this type of imagination as a defense mechanism. I wanted *Baby*'s voice to reflect this. I wanted a voice that could at once be as simple as a child's retelling of *A Cricket in Times Square* yet also be able to encompass the realities of heroin addiction. I wanted a voice that kind of captured the metaphors of a childhood spent on the streets, and described the heroes and villains of that world. *Baby* is a poet in this way.

**Q: What were some of the fictional challenges you faced in inhabiting the mind and voice of an adolescent girl?**

A: Adolescents are still children in that they can't yet tell the difference between make believe and fiction. They don't believe in love making or that they will be adults. They don't believe any of this until it is right before their eyes. They don't know the consequences of being an adult. It is all still like dress up. They were just having conversation with stuffed monkeys a couple years before. They're so vulnerable; it's nerve-wracking to write about them. I found it difficult emotionally because you want to save children from hardship and protect them, but I wrote them into some dark situations. Even seeing a child missing the city bus is heartbreaking to me, so it was mentally draining to write some of the stuff that happens in the book. It made me feel like a bad person. When you write about little children, you can avoid tragedy, but adolescents look for trouble, so I thought it was necessary for sad things to happen. Adolescents are attracted to tragic heroes. That's why rock stars dress like homeless people. Adolescence is a fall. It's when every child becomes an orphan. If we could, we would keep children as far away from the adult world as possible, but they are going to be adults no matter what.

**Q: The vivid first-person narration of your novel makes it read more like autobiography than fiction. To what extent did you borrow from your own experiences as a teenager in crafting the world *Baby* inhabits?**

A: The novel isn't autobiographical. The down and out world of Montreal was the one that I grew up in, though. It's a world that is composed of what attracted and fascinated me at *Baby*'s age. Also, like *Baby*, I didn't have a mother. I was raised by my father since I was seven years old. So the longing and absence for a mother is something that is in my bones, especially the difficulties of being an adolescent girl without a mother and looking for maternal love in relationships with boys. A lot of the children in the book were inspired by children that I was infatuated with. My dad is very different from Jules. But he's similar in being eccentric and outrageous, but more in a tough guy kind of way. Like Jules, he tried his best, although his idea of parenting was absurd.

**Q: Your book has been compared to works by Kaye Gibbons, J.D. Salinger, and Donna Tartt, among others. Were any of these authors' direct or indirect influences on your novel?**

A: I've never read Kaye Gibbons. J.D. Salinger is a rite of passage. Every child sees themselves a little differently after reading Salinger. In his novels, children's angst and depression and beauty are taken seriously. We are constantly interpreting the world for children, but in Salinger's world, the child is always the authority on society and its weaknesses. *Baby* has the keenest sense of observation of all the characters in the book.

Also, Salinger captures the nobility and tragedy of being an adolescent. His adolescents are displaced aristocrats who have lost their kingdom and wealth, which was childhood. This is especially devastating to Salinger's Glass children, who were so precocious and starred on a radio show called "It's a Wise Child." I like to think of *Baby* as being one of these precocious children, on par with the Glass kids. She happened not to have a privileged childhood in the traditional sense. But to her Jules is as entertaining and exotic as a Vaudevillian performer or a philosopher. At the beginning of the novel, she sees herself and Jules as being the most interesting family on the block.

Donna Tartt's brilliant youths are at once precocious and lost in the world of childhood. They act and posture like adults, but their idea of being an adult comes from fairy tales. They still believe that being an adult means being a crusader or a daring detective. Tartt describes the dangerous path of clever children who should have straight A's but choose instead to be romantic delinquents. I think this idea of young adolescents acting out adult situations is an important one in my novel. The line between pretending to be a criminal and actually being one is a fine one for children. They never quite know when they have crossed it. I love Tartt's writing, but I wasn't thinking of it directly while writing my book. Narrative voices are years in the making. Mine was influenced by everything I read and everyone I met in some way, from Shakespeare to my father cursing a leaking pipe.

**Q: *Lullabies for Little Criminals* is your first novel. What was the most rewarding aspect of writing this book?**

A: I really enjoyed the lower class world that I grew up in. I was always smitten with lowlifes and daredevils and junkies. Being able to capture the joy and breathlessness of this world, of living les quatre cents coups, was rewarding. I had a ludicrous childhood, but I feel that I was able to profit from a lot of the idiotic and unfortunate things that happened to me by turning them into fiction. I feel in that way that I cheated fate by writing this book, by declaring that ordinary stones were gold.

During the writing of the book, I was inspired by children around me. Watching children playing their recorders for change on the street corner, seeing them try on pink Converse sneakers, sunbathing at the pool with their fake tattoos of tigers, looking both way before crossing a street all gave me imagery and ideas for the book. I was also inspired by rock and roll and photographs and leather boots and pin striped suits and roses in hats and cars with missing doors. The nature of the things that inspired this book along the way was delightful.