



Lisa Carey

Love in the Asylum
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An Interview with Lisa Carey

What kind of research did you do on mental health facilities and disorders during the composition of *Love in the Asylum*?

Most of my research came from books and interviews. One invaluable resource was *Women of the Asylum* by Jeffrey L. Geller and Maxine Harris, which has first person accounts of women residing in mental hospitals from 1840 to 1945. While I have some experience with depression which inspired the book, bipolar disorder, drug addiction, and schizophrenia were less familiar, so I read a lot, and some of my sources are listed in the author's note. I have two friends who work in mental health; one of them helped me with diagnoses, psychopharmaceuticals and their side effects, and the other smuggled me the sort of forms given to new admissions in a mental hospital, which inspired the paperwork chapters. I read novels and memoirs, like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Girl Interrupted*. I was told I

wouldn't be allowed to observe a mental hospital without actually committing myself as a patient, so I tried to imagine the rest. If you've been to a writing colony or an MFA program or lived on a small island, this is not so difficult.

Were there any special challenges for you in creating Alba, a character who — like you — is an author?

I thought it would be easy, after all, there was no research involved, but I worried people would assume I was writing about myself. (Like most of my characters, Alba is me in some ways and not me in others.) I decided to make her a children's writer to tie into her biggest regret — the son she was forced to give up for adoption. Writing also provided a good contrast to Oscar, one of those people who dreams of being an author but never actually does anything about it. It seemed like a good way for her to be successful and sick at the same time. I wanted her to have something independent of her father when she moved away in the end. I couldn't imagine her holding down an office job.

Why is Alba so dismissive of Oscar's drug addiction? Does she feel that her own condition is in some way superior, or more difficult to deal with, than his?

When she first meets Oscar, Alba believes her illness is a curse while his isn't even an illness — it's a failing. She thinks his drug addiction is his own fault, that he has the choice to live a normal life, which she is denied. She resents the fact that she needs drugs to control her illness, and can't imagine using them for recreation or escape. Alba's view of drug addiction is condescending and naïve, with little understanding of the power of addiction and no room for sympathy. It is also ironic, since she could control her illness by taking drugs but refuses to and makes herself sicker in the process. By the end she learns that Oscar has also been a victim and she is not entirely powerless.

Much of *Love in the Asylum* is written in a series of first-person narratives — from Mary Doherty's unsent letters to her son and Oscar's questionnaire and autobiography to doctors' case notes. What did you hope to achieve by using these varied formats?

All my novels are written from multiple points of view. When I wrote *The Mermaids Singing*, I switched between the voices of three women because I couldn't imagine writing a whole novel about just one. Since then I have found that I like the contrasts and tension that are created by showing different stories, or the same story from different points of view. Most of my writing is about relationships — parents and children, siblings, and lovers. What interests me most about my characters is how differently two of them can interpret the same situation. This says a lot about who people are, as well as what is going on in their relationship. I used the paperwork chapters to get the feel of an institution, and to show the differences in mental health treatment between Mary's time and today. I have always enjoyed epistolary novels and wanted to experiment with the technique, and it turned out to be a good way to reveal Mary's story in a suspenseful, "unreliable" way, since she doesn't tell her son the whole truth at the beginning.

To what extent does Alba see her enforced separation from her adopted son as a parallel to Mary's isolation from her son, Peter?

Alba is initially attracted to Mary's letters because of the similarities she sees between their lives. But there are also differences, some of which scare Alba, while others give her hope. Despite her father's influence, Alba has more control over her life than Mary does. Mary's relationship with her son is cut short, Alba never begins one. What intrigues Alba most about Mary's story is not her son, but her belief in magical healing. Alba is looking for a miracle cure to replace her drugs. I don't think it is until she visits Peter and sees how ill he is that she consciously connects this to the fear she has about her own son. I wrote about Mary and Alba to show how different two women's experiences in the same hospital could be over the span of a century. In many ways, Alba is luckier than Mary, though for a while she sees it otherwise. Mary never gets the chance to go home.

Are Alba and Oscar destined for each other in some larger sense, or is their emerging relationship more of a "misery loves company" alliance of convenience?

If I heard about Oscar and Alba in real life I'd think they were doomed to dysfunction. On the outside they are all wrong for each other and seem like they will only intensify each others misery. They are both immature and inexperienced in adult relationships. But in the tradition of opposites attracting and two wrongs creating a right, I think they end up helping more than they hurt. There is a theory that true love brings out the best in people. In Oscar's case especially, this is what happens. Oscar has spent most of his adulthood not

taking responsibility for anyone, not even himself. Alba brings out the boy hero he left behind years ago, which turns out to be the strongest, least selfish part of him. It was his denial of this self that led him to drugs in the first place, and his selfishness that blocked his recovery. For Alba, Oscar is the first indication that she can have a life outside of illness and her father's overprotective cocoon. He makes her feel without making her sick. This is what she wants more than anything.

Throughout history, madness and artistic genius have been linked. Are Alba and Mary driven to creative greatness by their respective conditions, or are their conditions the physical responses to the intense demands of their creative impulses?

There are entire books devoted to this question, but no definitive answer. As far as Mary and Alba are concerned, I believe it is a bit of both. I think creativity requires intense feeling and profound empathy, and that intense feeling can drive delicate minds over the edge. There is a tendency to romanticize mental illness, to believe it is inseparable from creativity, and this can be dangerous, as it was to Alba: Some scientists believe that shamanism is a romantic interpretation of schizophrenic behavior; that young people who show symptoms of mental illness are mistaken as gifted. One of the biggest changes in mental health treatment between Mary and Alba's times at Abenaki, was the discovery of the role of chemical imbalance. Is artistic genius a by-product of wacky neurotransmitters? Is madness a side effect of creativity? The "therapies" Mary is subjected to sap her ability to heal. Alba is afraid to take her medication because she doesn't want to stifle her inspiration along with her illness. I think by the end, she is being led toward the idea that one can exist independent of the other. I wrote this book because this question has always interested me. I don't think the answer is clean-cut or perfect. I am a devotee of both science and the soul. I believe mental illness can take a person's life away, but also that today's medications, with all their side effects, help people live their lives. Like my characters, I am attracted by miracles. When I first read about shamanism, the theory that mental illness was the loss of a piece of one's soul, and that a shaman's job was to find and bring it back, I knew I wanted to write about it. I don't necessarily believe in shamanism, anymore than I believe in ghosts or mermaids, but I do believe we are more than the function of our brain chemicals. And that we can be saved by the most unlikely creatures.

In Oscar and Alba's relationship, who rescues whom?

They save each other, of course.

What's your next project?

My next novel is titled **Every Visible Thing**. It is about a family in the 1980s whose oldest son went missing and was never found. Five years later his two younger siblings tell the story of what is left of their shattered family, both with their own plans about how to get it back together again. There are only two narrators.