Q&A with Author Lenore H. Gay

SHELTER OF LEAVES

A NOVEL

LENORE H. GAY
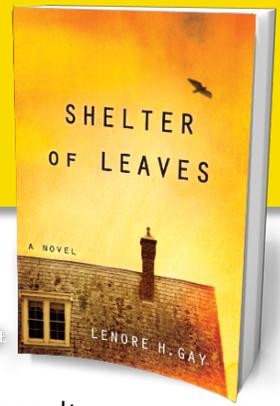
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1. **What do you think accounts for the appeal of post-apocalyptic fictions?**

During the Cold War US citizens were preoccupied with the Red Menace. It gave rise to the McCarthy hearings and other Communist witch-hunts. Spy books and books about war were popular with readers then.

Now the younger generation, as well as some older Americans, are preoccupied with the degradation of the planet, and terrorist attacks. With the explosion of media, Americans can stay immersed in news about homegrown terrorists, as well as attacks in other parts of the world. Since 9/11 the preoccupation with terror has grown, and it's reflected in the book's imagining a world of chaos.

2. **What interested you in setting your novel in such a time?**

I wanted to write about an event that affected the country. In 2008 I decided to take on a big theme: terrorism and peoples' responses to the fear and deprivation a crisis brings. I began writing *Shelter of Leaves* that year.

3. **If you could describe *Shelter of Leaves* in three words, what would they be?**

Surviving, searching, finding…these things drive the characters and book's action.

4. **How did you develop Sabine and her complex qualities? Not only must she survive dangers of the world you created, she must work through the psychological and emotional suffering and memory loss that came before the bombings, in order to reclaim her identity and family.**

During my career as a therapist, I worked with people who had lived through various traumas: loss of a family member at a young age, neglect and physical abuse by a close relative(s), abandonment by parents, rape and incest. I was familiar with the types of defenses that children use to protect themselves.

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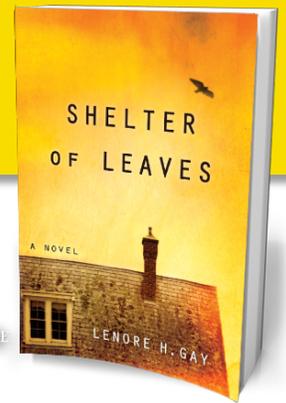
These defenses stay with a person into adulthood where they don't work. Often these defenses block them off from others. They're caught inside themselves, struggling to form relationships. I created Sabine from experience with how people work to heal themselves. They learn to be honest with themselves, to take the risk of reaching out to others and to move away from destructive relationships. They practice loving themselves and others.

I put Sabine in a chaotic situation and then created her inner and outer struggles. She comes into contact with strangers and begins to develop relationships. She works with others toward a common goal: survival, and discovers strengths she didn't know she had.

5. **What is the significance of Sabine's trauma? Was it your intention to write a story about psychological abuse?**

Yes. I intended to discover how a previously traumatized person would respond to a crisis that would trigger more trauma. I was exploring whether healing was possible and what it takes to heal.

6. **The characters Sabine encounters aren't simply consequences of the dystopian America. How did you consider the changes in their behaviors— whether they would change for good or ill, and if change would be permanent?**

This is a more difficult question to answer. The characters came to me as I wrote. First, I saw what they looked like. I thought about their families of origin and what part of the country they came from, their skills and abilities, their weaknesses.

Of course while working on the book, I deepened character and made changes based on interactions among the characters. If I wrote a sequel to the book, I'd consider whether a certain character could change. Were they capable of change? Some characters don't change but they do move.

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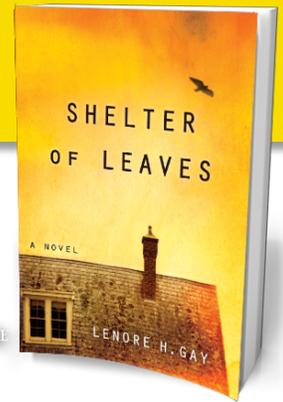
7. **The images of chaos and violence after the bombings are easy to understand from nightly news, but terrifying to consider in America. How did you create such vivid descriptions and the sensory reactions in Sabine?**

When I write I stare out of the window while sitting at my desk. I imagined the emotions I'd feel in Sabine's situation, and in the other characters' situation. I thought about how losses would have an impact on Sabine's character. I asked myself questions about resilience, longing, fear and anger. I used my imagination and visualized the road she travels and the people she meets.

8. **What do we learn from Sabine as she goes on the first harrowing journey and finds other refugees? How does she make her way back to herself?**

I think readers will have various responses to Sabine at different points in the book. Perhaps they will be puzzled by her behavior. As a reader, I like complex characters. I like to be surprised by characters' actions and thoughts. Strong writing is important. I tried to carry this out in writing *Shelter of Leaves*.

9. **What books influence your writing and how do you pick books to read?**

My early education helped form my interests. We read literary works from Shakespeare's poems and plays to *Moby Dick, To Kill a Mockingbird, Silas Marner* and *The Scarlet Letter*. In later years I read noted books by Margaret Atwood, Henry Miller, Sartre, Rimbaud, Anais Nin, Truman Capote, Ernest Hemingway, Gunter Grass, Mary Renault, Doris Lessing, Jack Kerouac, Reynolds Price, Ray Bradbury, Ursula LeGuin and D.H. Lawrence.

These days I'm an avid reader and pick books from reviews in print and online. I talk with writer friends and browse in bookstores, skim a few pages to get a sense of the work. Recent non-fiction by Jon Krakauer, John McPhee, Lucy Grealy, Bernd Heinrich, Kathleen Norris and Tobias Wolff.
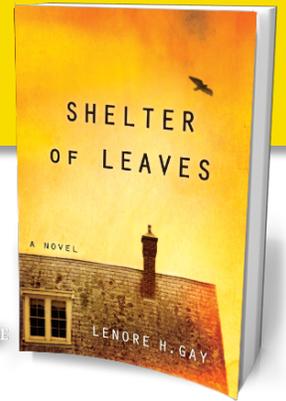
Some current favorite novelists are Donna Tartt, David Mitchell, Haruki Murakami, Cormac McCarthy, Charles Frazier, Michael Cunningham, Chang-Rae Lee, Siri Hustvedt and Ann Patchett. I enjoy work by dystopian, science fiction and fantasy writers like Patrick Rothfuss, Lev Grossman, Emily St. John Mandel, Neil Gaiman, Edan Lepucki, Justin Cronin, Victoria Schwab and Greg Hrbek.

10. Are you writing another book? Can you tell us about it?

Yes. Since writing *Shelter of Leaves*, I've completed another novel called *Feathers & Wax*. The book is loosely based on the Daedalus and Icarus myth.

Recently I started work on a new manuscript. It's in the beginning stages, too soon to discuss because it's in flux. It is an experiment. It is not dystopian or post-apocalyptic