

Random House Author Q&A

The Widower's Tale a novel by Julia Glass



LHJ: Your observations of life in Matlock, where the widower of the title, Percy, lives, are so vivid and acutely observed— as well as extraordinarily witty. I know that a few years ago you and your family relocated from New York City to the small(ish) Massachusetts town where you grew up. Do you think you could have written this particular book if you still lived in New York?

JG: *The Widower's Tale* grew directly out of my reaction to living for one year, as a grown-up, in my childhood town. My parents still live in the house they bought when I was 9, so I'd been visiting often during the 24 years I lived in New York City. Becoming a resident, however, gave me an entirely new vision of how the place had changed. I found myself feeling absurdly indignant about the changes I saw, as if someone ought to have asked my permission to alter this place so sacred to my memory. Of course, I was learning firsthand that you can never "go back." But I also recognized in myself a growing resistance to change of all kinds, and that's what inspired the character of Percy Darling. So no, I could not have written this book had I still been living in New York. Yet it's also true that my deeply rooted love of my hometown and of certain qualities it will always hold for me (its luxurious greenness, its Yankee history) has been with me for most of my life, even defined what I think of as "home." I suspect it was waiting inside me, all those years, for just the right story to come along.

LHJ: The characters in *The Widower's Tale* have incredibly rich backstories and personalities. Was any of it inspired by your life? Where do you most appear in the book?

JG: Seen purely in terms of personality, Percy Darling is as much like me as almost any character I've created. In a nutshell, he's my inner curmudgeon given free rein. I'll even confess that some of the preachier passages in his voice— for instance, his outrage at the current state of libraries— are fine-tuned versions of diatribes that my closest friends have heard me deliver at dinner parties (and still they love me!). But his childhood, career, and marriage, and his relationship with

his children, are definitely not mine. And I could only wish I were so eloquent and arch when out and about in the world. In social situations where I would be tongue-tied, he almost always has the perfect comeback.

LHJ: A technique you've used before, notably in *Three Junes*, is to tell the story from a male point of view—in this case, four of them. But only Percy's is in the first person; the other three are told in third-person. Can you tell us how and why you made this technical choice? Were you ever tempted to tell part of the story from one of your female character's point of view?

JG: I actually used this technique in *Three Junes* as well, where a male character's point of view is the only one rendered in first person. In both novels, I want the reader to feel more intimately connected to these protagonists than to any of the other major characters. When I started *The Widower's Tale*, I thought that one secondary point of view would be that of Trudy, Percy's daughter, who's become a successful physician. I'm fascinated by medicine and often wish I'd had the necessary emotional control to become a doctor, so I was eager to delve into that world. But before I even began to play with Trudy's perspective, I realized that Percy's story is largely about how the absence of a woman has influenced so much of his destiny. That's also true for Celestino. I knew then that a female point of view would dilute the power of the narrative as a whole. How men live both with and without women became a theme weaving in and out of the entire novel.

LHJ: The four men in this book have very different stories—a retired Harvard librarian, a gay preschool teacher, an immigrant landscaper, and a college student (to describe them in the most reductive way). Which was the most difficult to write? Which did you most enjoy?

JG: Oh, I loved writing Percy most of all by far. His voice was so distinctive, so clear to me, and as I said earlier, I agree with so many of his opinions. Let's say I'm completely sympathetic with his chronic grandiosity! And I hoped to capture, in his voice, just a bit of my father's inimitably dry sense of humor—though my dad is very different from Percy, much more circumspect and forgiving. By contrast, the most difficult point of view for me was Robert's. I do not have college-age people in my everyday life, and I had to do a bit of "research" on campus at Harvard—along with some eavesdropping at the home of a friend with three late-teenage sons—to help me enter that world. Originally, I thought Celestino would be the hardest to capture, but once I understood him as a man with a crippling obsession (not unlike Percy), he came alive for me.

LHJ: *The Widower's Tale* also very much explores what it is to be a parent. What is different about looking at this role from a male perspective? And how did your own experiences as a parent—I know you're the mother of two sons—inform your portrait of the various mothers in the book?

JG: Well, Percy is the central parent in the book, and in a way, you could see him as a father who, after his wife's death, is determined to become more like a mother to their daughters. (That's a large part of why he never remarries.) Can a man do that? Yes, and no. He can do almost everything she would have done, but he can't replace her. So much of the difficulty he has with his daughters as adults stems from his having tried to fill the shoes of the parent they lost — and unconsciously resenting them for his failure to do that. As for Clover and Trudy, I was initially interested in how two sisters might turn out to be such different mothers, but ultimately I gave very little attention to that angle. What drew me more was exploring how Robert begins to see his mother as he approaches adulthood. He sees her more fully as a daughter and a wife, also as a woman with disappointments and shortcomings, not just as the good-mom-and-virtuous-doctor he portrays in his college application essay. I am eternally fascinated by the way parent-child relationships evolve once children move away from home and establish independent lives. My own experience of motherhood isn't really reflected here; in fact, that part of my personal life looms much larger in my second novel, *The Whole World Over*. I also wonder now if I gave less attention to Trudy and Clover's relationship in *The Widower's Tale* because I had just explored sisterhood so intensively in my third book, *I See You Everywhere*.

LHJ: Like Sarah in the novel, you are a breast cancer survivor. Some of those scenes in the oncology clinic run by Percy's high-profile daughter, Trudy, are almost painfully real. How did Sarah's experience in the novel reflect your own?

JG: As a cancer patient, I've been "luckier" than Sarah, at least so far. Though I was almost 20 years younger than Sarah when I was diagnosed, my cancer was caught early; and though I went through a frightening recurrence some years later, I am now 10 years out of my last cancer treatments and feeling pretty healthy for my age. Sarah's cancer is caught late, so her prognosis is uncertain — and it's a different type of breast cancer from mine. But cancer patients, regardless of their various pathologies and treatments, share so many aspects of the experience, particularly the private emotions, the change in relationships to loved ones, and the establishment of new relationships with medical caregivers. Chemotherapy can be a long, tough haul — for me, it went on for six months — and the best doctors and nurses become, if only for that period of time, as essential in your life as friends or spouses. As a cancer patient, I've also spent a lot of time just waiting — in reception areas, exam rooms, phlebotomy labs, chemo suites: sterile, austere, often windowless spaces. I am constantly amazed at how willingly doctors and their colleagues spend most of their lives in such surroundings. I have to believe that takes an unusual degree of dedication. A lot of what I've observed and felt in these places went into what Percy observes and feels when he visits Trudy at her office and, later, accompanies Sarah for her treatments.

LHJ: I thought Robert and Arturo's activism was bitingly funny, though I also felt shock and discomfort at what they were doing. What inspired the theme of eco-terrorism and the tension it created between the two of them? What questions did you want the reader to consider about their relationship?

JG: When I started writing about Percy, I was thinking about what happens between the time we're young and hungry for change and the day we realize that we wish the world would just stand still, that what we once saw as progress now looks like a threat. (I think that's often what happens when we realize we're closer to the end than to the beginning of life. We want to yell, Stop the conveyor belt!) I decided I wanted to have a young character who would be the counterweight to Percy's attitude— and I wanted him to be someone with whom Percy would have a loving relationship, about whom Percy has ambitions and dreams of his own. Ergo, the favorite grandson. At about this time, the New York Times gave a lot of coverage to young idealists making radical changes in their lifestyles to try to reduce their impact on the environment (e.g., freeganism, foraging, college housing with group showering), and while I could read these articles and laugh at such eccentricities, it's hard not to admire the discipline they show—and the message they send. I'm not sure when I decided that eco-activism— not terrorism, by the way, which aims at taking lives— would figure in the book, but my visits to the Harvard campus gave me glimpses of a generation that justifiably fears what its future will look like if it doesn't act extremely and urgently. Confrontation, even provocation, is an essential ingredient of changing the status quo. Robert's conversion to Arturo's militant standpoint may be naive, but it's also noble. The reader may wish he'd been less impetuous, but what would it say about Robert if he couldn't respect his best friend's passions? And if Arturo betrays Robert, it's not by placing him in danger; it's by deceiving him about much simpler matters.

LHJ: Many authors say they can't read fiction while they write, partly because they are so sensitive to language and susceptible to the influence of other writers' prose on their own. You, on the other hand, have adamantly said otherwise. What books have you read recently and loved? Did you ever feel that any of them posed a risk to your own style?

JG: I don't see how you can write well if you're not reading well at the same time. I think the only risk is reading too many books of one "type" in a row. Though I'd like to get to some of the classics I've missed, right now I'm reading a lot of contemporary fiction— sometimes because I know the authors as friends and want to keep up with their work (I am a very slow reader). Here are some exceptional books I've read recently: *To the End of the Land*, by David Grossman; *Emily, Alone*, by Stewart O'Nan; *A Long, Long Time Ago and Essentially True*, by Brigid Pasulka; *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli; *The Confessions of Edward Day*, by Valerie Martin; *The Walking People*, by Mary Beth Keane; *Where the God of Love Hangs Out*, by Amy Bloom. I could go on and on!

LHJ: As a teaser for your millions of fans— including the editors here at LHJ— can you tell us what you’re working on now and approximately how long we’ll have to wait before we can get our hands on it?

JG: I’m midway through my next novel, and I don’t know when it will be published— ideally, 18 months or so from now—but I will disclose two things about it. First, it grew out of my desire to write a contemporary “hero’s quest”; second, it brings back a couple of characters from Three Junes...and several new ones as well. And can I say how grateful I am to all those fans? I still have so much fun going out on the road and meeting “my” readers— along with the dedicated independent booksellers who host those meetings. Without their personal passion for reading, their ability to connect individual readers with books they might never find on their own, so many authors would never have fans to begin with. I urge all my readers to support their independent bookstores. (Percy would tell you this with much more panache!)