

**Alison Lurie**

**The Book Show: 89.1.19**

**Smith:** My guest today is Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, Alison Lurie, author of such acclaimed satiric novels as *The War Between the Tates*, *Foreign Affairs*, and most recently, *The Truth About Lorin Jones*, which incidentally you'll find in bookstores across the country, published by Little Brown and Company.

Welcome Alison, and congratulations for another literary hit!

**Lurie:** Well, thank you very much.

**Smith:** *The Truth About Lorin Jones*, actually, I think there might be a subtitle—*The Search for Polly Alter*—was there any one inspiration for the title character? I mean, Lorin Jones is a dead American painter, but her life is pursued by the art historian become biographer, Polly Alter. Did you have any particular story in mind or is this a synthesis of recent cultural history or what?

**Lurie:** Well, I began the novel because so many people I knew were writing biographies, literary biographies, and I was amazed by how deeply involved their subject, and occasionally with the relatives and friends of their subject, and how emotional an experience this was. I had always thought of biography as a peaceful, scholarly pursuit, and I still imagine it is, that if your subject has been dead two hundred years. But when you're dealing with people who are still alive or whose friends and relatives are still alive, it's a much different kettle of fish. And what happened to my friends was interesting to observe, and I thought it would make a very good novel.

**Smith:** Well, it certainly is a wonderful novel. It's very comic, but also, there are some very, very serious things about our own quest for identity. I mean, not just your heroine Polly Alter, maybe we should say for the benefit of our listeners that *The Truth About Lorin Jones*, focuses on the heroine who is Polly Alter, who is an art historian, who is writing a biography and researching the life, career, and early death of the American painter, Lorin Jones, who dies, I believe, in 1969. And Lorin Jones was, perhaps, betrayed and destroyed by the several men in her life—or was she? [Laughs] That's the question.

**Lurie:** That is the question. At the beginning, Polly believes that everything that happened to Lorin Jones was the fault of men. And she also tends to believe that what's happened to her in her life was the fault of men. So, she goes into this project with fixed ideas, and, in fact, biographers often do that. They'll take up the project because they think they know all about it, and they want to tell the world. And very often, they "think they know" turns out to be, at the best, a partial truth.

**Smith:** Yeah, sort of like, I couldn't help but recall, when I was reading *The Truth About Lorin Jones*, the old great Japanese movie from the 1950s, *Rashomon*, where you get endless angles of vision, I mean, everybody's life is a reflecting mirror of their survivor's life. And, certainly, that is the case with Lorin Jones. It's not that the people lied, at least, that's what I got toward the

end of the book; they really believed that their vision of Lorin Jones was the right one. And, meanwhile, Polly, as you said, went in with this preconceived notion of Lorin as a victim of patriarchy and men, very much like she felt.

**Lurie:** Yes, that's true. And I think you're right in saying "no one is lying." I think that very seldom do we come across people who are consciously lying, unless they're real villains. What happens much more frequently is a combination of two things, first that we don't all know the same person. The Tom Smith that I know is not the same person that your children know, that your banker knows, that your students know, that your mother knew. These are overlapping but identical selves. And I think we see this often. I will notice that I'm talking to someone and another person will come up. In subtle ways, my tone will change, the subjects I discuss will change, and I, in fact, am presenting a slightly different person without any conscious attempt to do so. And I think life is like that. On the other hand, I don't think that the truth is often completely different from one version to the other as it is in *Rashomon*.

**Smith:** Yes. Well, in your novels, I'm talking about the past novels, you write so well and so marvelously about, for example, adultery and divorce. And, as we know from life, life is comic the way your novels are. Everybody has a story. I mean, your next-door neighbors break up and you hear his story and her story, they're not really deliberately lying. And I think that's something that you catch with scintillating precision in all of your novels, particularly *The Truth About Lorin Jones*. Now, let me ask you something about Polly's projection. She acknowledges at the end that, perhaps, she had projected herself onto Lorin Jones, and also, if she wrote one kind of biography, she would please certain people and certain ideologies and become a loathsome figure in others. I think your term is or her term is "any narrow, vertical view of anybody's life." Now, did you intend the story as an anti-feminist narrative, or what? Or is it just a rejection of all kinds of projected roles.

**Lurie:** Well, I certainly don't think of it as an anti-feminist narrative. I think that Polly is right to an extent in believing that Lorin Jones's professional life was damaged not so much by individual men, but when she was alive and painting women's art was not taken seriously. And I can think of several billion women artists who were painting at the time of the New York School who are now very well known, but at the time they were not taken as seriously as the men: Jane Freilicher, Lee Krasner, and so forth. These people, although they could show, they didn't command the respect or the prices of their contemporaries who happened to be male. I feel this is something that really happened and did a lot of damage to women artists. It was particularly hard on painters, women writers have always had an easier time [with] it. Although, I do think that a woman writer is apt to be taken less seriously than a male writer of the same level.

**Smith:** We still haven't come out of the woods totally about that. With all the proliferation of wonderful and various novels by women, particularly over the last twenty years, why still, there's a kind of expected denseness and heaviness that some people come to the work of male novels, where they, perhaps, without being fully conscious of it, don't yet with women.

Alison, one other shallow reading of *The Truth About Lorin Jones*, in addition to, let's say an anti-feminist reading of the book, would be that it's a triumph of heterosexuality over homosexuality. But Polly's friend Jean, her lesbian friend Jean, reverses all the stereotypes, the

expectations of what I think people would have of a radical feminist lesbian. And I wonder if that's part of your design, that all bets are off, all expectations and projections are off.

**Lurie:** Well, there are many things going there. One is that I think the stereotype of what a lesbian is like is very narrow and stupid. There's no reason for a woman who loves women to wear overalls and cut off all her hair, so there's that. On the other hand, with Jean, what I'm trying to get at is something that I do see happening with women, not necessarily with homosexual women, but this movement toward separatism. The idea that any sort of relationship with men is hopeless, and we're just going to move away from them; we're not going to speak to them or deal with them if we can possibly help it. And I think this is in many cases understandable. I feel very sorry for Jean, because she's someone who's had terrible experiences with men as a child. In the original earlier version of the book, I went into this more about how she'd been abused by her father and her brother, but it didn't seem so relevant. I didn't want to say that this is the only way that you can get into this frame of mind, so I cut those passages. But I do think that she's a woman who is terrified of men, and it's natural of her; it's very understandable for her to take the position she does. But I think in the long run, it's a bad development in modern life that women, sometimes, the most interesting, intelligent, sensitive women, do feel they should separate themselves from men. I think it's perfectly possible for a woman to love other women. I mean, at the end of the book, there's a lesbian who, although she doesn't play a very big role, is not a separatist and is obviously very happy as she is, and able to like both men and women, even though it's women that she loves. So, I would be very sorry if people thought this was an anti-homosexual book.

**Smith:** Well, as I said, I think only a very shallow and tendentious reading will allow people to truly feel that way, because there's many, many very appealing things, and very tender and soft things about Jean that all her contradictions, [finally?], really don't undercut, and really don't negate.

**Lurie:** Yes, that's true! I see her as someone who has a misfortune to fall in love with a second-rate person. And she knows that this has happened. Part of her knows this. I believe if you fall in love with a second-rate person, you have a tendency to do second rate things. That's why it's better to fall in love with decent, first-rate people if you can possibly manage it.

**Smith:** The only trouble is that first-rate people are always certified "decent" and maybe that's a contradiction there.

**Lurie:** What you mean is that you can't tell [until] you leave them? Well, that's perfectly true, but I think after a period of association you can kind of tell.

**Smith:** Yes, I think that's true. Another one of the myths that you examine, both satirically and seriously in *The Truth About Lorin Jones*, is the various myths of creativity; the victimization of the artist; the naïve and therefore victimized, suffering artist; do you think—that's another thing that we went a little bit too far in this culture, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth century with. Especially if the artist was a woman who dies at the age of 43 or whatever age Lorin was when she died—the whole notion of the victimized artist.

**Lurie:** Well, I think that some authors are victimized, others aren't, and there are also artists who make other people their victims. I think the range is much the same as you have with people who are not artists. I think, insofar as Lorin Jones victimized people, she did so out of terror and self-defense. I don't really believe she did any serious damage to anyone.

**Smith:** Yes. They all certainly survived her in every way. She might have victimized the men rather than vice versa, but certainly, they not only survive her, but they seem to be flourishing.

**Lurie:** Yeah, well, they're all doing fine and none of them are destroyed. I think that the worst you can say over it is that she put painting before emotional entanglement, and when a man does that, particularly when a male artist does that, we admire him. We don't criticize Picasso, because he dropped one woman and took up with another; but if a woman does that, we get upset.

**Smith:** We still have the double standard.

Alison, I want to ask you about "biography is fiction and fiction is biography." Do you think that now, since Polly has turned to the role of biographer, do you think we as a culture are obsessed by the truth and the whole truth, and the dirty truth of other people's lives. We all have, perhaps, read of Joyce Carol Oates's new term that she coined, pathography, recently. Do you feel that is a kind of cultural obsession now? That we got to get the real secret, dirty secret, of the people not only in our own lives but cultural heroes and heroines?

**Lurie:** Well, I think it's certainly something that is very common now. It's not new. There were biographies in the past which exposed the private life of famous people. I think what is new now is that someone is scarcely dead, or even not dead yet, and people will leap upon them and try to expose whatever they can. As I said in the book, I believe that this happens partly because of envy of successful people; that we can only really love these people if they're flawed. If their lives were perfect, and they were happy, it's so irritating to us: "how come they have a better life than we do?" Not only can they paint beautiful pictures or write beautiful music, but they were married happily and had four or five lovely children, and a big house on the [?]. This is hateful toward it.

**Smith:** [Laughs] It really is.

**Lurie:** And the more famous someone is, the more scandal, and pain, and suffering we want to see in their lives. So if you're just a moderately successful life, just a little alcohol or divorce will do, but if you're John Lennon everything in the world's got to be wrong with you. I think it's really silly, but it's understandable.

**Smith:** Alison, let me ask you a couple things about your style. You're celebrated and rightfully so as one of the supreme weavers of comedy of manners these days. Now, there's always a precarious balance of tone, it seemed to me, when you're writing satiric novels. Are we always silly? There's a certain way, even when the consequences are serious in your books, and maybe this is true of life, our love affairs, our illusions about ourselves, always seem to be somewhat silly and unheroic if they're not absolutely fatal. I just wonder how you get that

precarious balance of tone where you don't seem to be nihilistic, but at the same time, why, it is comic.

**Lurie:** Well, it's a matter of how one sees the world. It would be very possible to write the same plots that I use from a romantic, from a melodramatic, from a political, from a Freudian, from a whatever you like perspective, but a writer has a particular way of looking at events and people, and I think you just have to go with that.

**Smith:** Yes. I don't know which French writer, someone after Flaubert, observed; "what would the modern novel be without adultery?" But that person, that writer wasn't necessarily talking about adultery as a subject for comedy, but it can work out either way. I guess you could turn both *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* into a comedy of manners, and it's been done. It just looks very different.

**Lurie:** Well, it's a comedy that ends with a disastrous death, it doesn't work very well. It's the ending of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* that makes them into tragedies. And I think that if Anna Karenina had simply gone off with Vronsky and got married, they would have continued to love each other, but there would have been irritations having to do with money and children and servants. Then it becomes a comedy. In a way, a passion is preserved by death and by tragedy.

**Smith:** Yes. So, it's the death itself really that turns comic illusion into tragedy and, therefore, makes the passionate permanent. Ah, very good, as a matter of fact.

Now let me ask you something about you and your audience, and when you're actually writing. Now, you're a supreme ironist in your books, in your style. I mean, I worry about this all the time. I think anybody who teaches classes, or writes anything, or talks on the radio [does]. What if your audience doesn't get it, doesn't get irony. This is a kind of literalist era we're in. And how does that affect you as a writer? I mean, when you sit down to write, whether it's *The War Between the Tates* or *Foreign Affairs*, or *The Truth About Lorin Jones*. Do you worry about that?

**Lurie:** Well, of course, one would always like to have a larger audience. I know that my audience is going to be limited to people who see the world somewhat the way I do, but what can we do about it? [Smith laughs] The most I can hope, I think, is people who haven't seen the world this way, who've taken it more seriously and been in states of either self importance or despair, will see that there are other ways of looking at what's happened to them; that they don't have to emote and carry on, and let their lives be ruined. There's another way of looking at the world. So, I want to go on writing this way, first for the people who see the world this way anyhow, and second, for people who might profit by looking at it this way for just a little while.

**Smith:** Yeah. You are popular in England. You have a real solid following there. And I believe you spend part of every year in London. *Foreign Affairs*, which won you the Pulitzer Prize a couple years ago, was described as a Jamesian, Henry James that is, where two American seekers go on a pilgrimage to Europe, and they find many things about themselves, quite separately, that they wouldn't find back home. And I wonder if your English audience

understands something that, maybe, a lot of American audiences might not now. I just wondered how you feel about that. Do you think of your English readership as somewhat different from your American readers, or don't you think that when you set out to write a book.

**Lurie:** Well, I don't think about it when I write. I know that my books do better in England than here, and they do well in France also. I think it has partly to do with the fact that in those countries people still have a classical education, and they read nineteenth century novels, and they're used to the tone I take.

**Smith:** That's the irony once again, though.

**Lurie:** Yeah. And they're used to the comedy of manners. They're used to books about a small society. They're used to novels about character and about social class. Here, there's a certain amount of dislike of books like this. And America is so vast, and there's so many different societies here that plenty of people in America feel, "what do I want to read about upper middle-class intellectuals in the Northeast. This is boring to me.

**Smith:** On the other hand, *The War Between the Tates*, which was published, I believe, in 1974, is not only enormously, it has been enormous popular in this country, but it's a very American story in the sense that it's a rite of passage novel about this particular marriage, and I really feel many American marriages play it against the background of the Vietnam War. Was that meant to be a kind of "end of the illusion" about 50s marriages as well as American imperialism or whatever you want to call it?

**Lurie:** Well, I mean, one was a metaphor for the other. I wouldn't want to take it too far, because the troubles my married couple have cannot possibly be compared to what we did in Vietnam. When I began it, I thought, also, [of] the Civil War. I wasn't thinking so much at all of a foreign war, but of a domestic war in which people who have loved each other become enemies. So, that was the principal metaphor, and the fact that the Vietnam War was going on at that time just meant that events happened and certain parallels were made.

**Smith:** Yes. Well, actually, would you say, [pauses] it's a very funny book, I didn't mean to introduce that note of heaviness by saying it was a Vietnam War novel of the domestic disintegration of life both within families and within the society at large. Certainly, it has a very satiric itch. Alison, another one of your—we only have a minute or so—but I want to ask you something about another one of your celebrated books. This is the non-fiction book, *The Language of Clothes*, which was published in the early eighties, and I wonder if you have any comment on the latest 'language of clothes': a presentation of self in period and gender styles. You talk so well of Victorian dress in the 50s and even the late 70s, the 'Annie Hall' look. Do you have any comments? Images of the late 80s?

**Lurie:** Well, I have plenty of ideas, and, in fact, I'm considering updating the book and adding a chapter about what's happening now. I think at the moment, we're in a transition between a very conventional period, and God knows what is coming after. I don't now think that people are going to go on or, at least, I hope they're not going to go on dressing for success in this terribly

boring 80s way. But you never know. Sometimes, I have a horror that women's clothing is now going to freeze the way men's clothing did in the nineteenth century.

**Smith:** Oh, God [laughs]. Yes.

**Lurie:** I hope not, but sometimes it looks to me as if it has.

**Smith:** Well, we'll wait and see, and you will tell us. We have simply run out of time Alison. Thank you so much and please give us more of those scintillating comedies of manners, and good luck!

**Lurie:** Thank you very much, and I'll let you know what happens.

**Smith:** Okay.

**Lurie:** All right, bye bye.

**Smith:** This is Tom Smith saying, "so long, until the next time on the Public Radio Book Show."

Key Words: Alison Lurie; fiction writing; *The Truth About Lorin Jones*; "Polly Alter"; life of Lorin Jones; different versions on truth; heterosexuality and homosexuality; the victimized artist; "pathography"; comedy and irony in writing; popularity in England; *The War Between the Tates*; updating nonfiction book *The Language of Clothes*