

Alison Lurie

Book Show #341 (1.16.1995)

Announcer: Welcome to the Book Show, produced in cooperation with the Writers Institute at the State University of New York.

Glover: Welcome to the Book Show. I am your host, Douglas Glover of the New York State Writers Institute, which is located at the University at Albany, as part of the State University of New York system. My guest today is Alison Lurie, author of eight novels including *The War Between the Tates* and *Foreign Affairs*, winner of the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Both these books work a vein of sophisticated satirical comedy, skewering the lives and loves of American academics who find their pretensions shattering on the rocks of the irrational, often something to do with sex. Since 1970 Lurie has taught in the English department at Cornell University, where she specializes in, among other subjects, folklore and children's literature. She has published three books of traditional folk tales for children. Now, Doubleday has just published *Women and Ghosts*, Alison Lurie's first collection of stories for adults; a book which in effect combines her interest in folklore with the intellectual satire of her novels. As the title suggests, these are ghost stories, but not the kind with creaking stairs, lightening bolts, and screams in the night. In Alison Lurie's ghost stories, very ordinary people meet ghosts in quite ordinary situations. A young woman finds herself haunted by the ghost of a former suitor, who shows up every time she finds a new lover. A family heirloom, the object of obsessive devotion by its owner, turns murderous. A famous poet discovers that someone is impersonating her in other cities, and gradually the impersonator, the double, takes over her life. Alison Lurie, welcome to the Book Show.

Lurie: Thank you.

Glover: I just want to start by asking you if you've ever seen a ghost.

Lurie: Well, I have seen two ghosts in my life; but one was the ghost of a dog that I saw when I was a child, and the other was a semi-hallucination -- I knew it wasn't a ghost. I was at a Writers' Colony called Yaddo. The founder of the colony, a woman named Katrina Trask is supposed to haunt the woods there, but in a benevolent manner. She comes back to see if the artists and writers and musicians to whom she left her immense fortune are still there and are still creating, as she would call it. She is said to appear in the woods. I knew this legend, and on one very foggy day towards evening I was out walking in the woods and I saw this mist and wisps of fog between the pine trees, and I thought, "That must be where the story comes from." You could squint your eyes and imagine that you really did see Katrina Trask wavering among the trees there.

Glover: So it's an ambiguous...?

Lurie: The ghosts in most of these stories are ambiguous.

Glover: Yes. I want to get to that point. I wanted first to ask you about folklore. I've already said that you teach folklore and children's literature, and it's clear that these stories arrive out of that study of folklore. What draws you to the idea of folk tales in the first place? What do you derive from them as a writer?

Lurie: A folk tale is something that survives because, though it seems simple on the surface, it expresses feelings and ideas and understandings that we have but that are not rational. We can't really put them into words. For example, you mentioned that there is a piece of furniture in my book that behaves rather badly. In the Middle Ages, when people were perhaps more credulous, there are cases of pieces of furniture being treated as if they were possessed by the devil. There was a famous case in which a stool was tried and executed for having tripped up its owner and caused him to fall and crack his head open. The stool was executed quite ceremonially by the headsman with an axe. This didn't happen very often, but the fact that it could happen means that we do sometimes attribute personalities to our possessions. I don't know how many times I've heard people say things like, "That was a great car, she never let me down. I really loved her." We're getting near that belief, but we don't quite admit to it.

Glover: That's interesting. That particular story, "The Highboy," developed directly out of your study of the folklore.

Lurie: I have to say that that wasn't my inspiration. Knowing folklore, of course, allowed me to make the imaginative jump between the feeling that a piece of furniture was ugly and took up too much space and saying that it really had an unpleasant expression.

Glover: I should point out that in this story, "The Highboy," the piece of furniture actually murders its owner.

Lurie: Well it does and it doesn't.

Glover: All right, I'll give you that.

Lurie: I believe it probably does, but you can't be sure and I want to keep it that way.

Glover: OK. I just wanted to let the listeners know that it has this fatal result. This brings up again the point of the ambiguity. In an adult fairy tale, magic works two ways. It works as if it was really happening, and then it also works as a metaphor for the imagination and the dangers inherent in the imagination when it becomes delusive. So these stories work back and forth.

Lurie: I don't think that it's always a danger. There is a story, the first story in the book, in which a young woman who is engaged to an older and very successful man, begins to see what looks like the ghost of his first wife, who is not dead actually but is living in Europe. Whenever she sees her, this ghost looks completely invisible and depressed. Gradually, she begins to realize that there's something odd about the situation. I think I'll give this one away. In the end she realizes that the ghost hasn't come to frighten her from marrying this man, but to warn her against doing so. Because when she admits to having seen the ghost, the man she's engaged to becomes irrational and destructive. We realize that there's a darker side to him. So I think that our unconscious can sometimes present us with ghosts that are helpful, even essential.

Glover: This is certainly the case with the last story in the book, the one called "The Double Poet." It's close to being the most interesting story in the book for me.

Lurie: Well writers always think that.

Glover: Oh sure, OK. I also like "Counting Sheep" a lot.

Lurie: Thank you. Well, that's another somewhat literary story. That's the ghost that can appear in a scourer's life and the last one is about the ghost that can appear in a writer's life.

Glover: In "The Double Poet" there is a famous poet doing a residency at a college, and during the term she starts appearing in other cities, or at least her friends say that people saw her in other cities. There are reports of readings being given by her in other cities, and this double is moving closer and closer to her. I guess I better not give away the whole plot, but in the end the disaster that occurs is redemptive for this poet and puts her back into her writing mode, as opposed to the teaching mode and being a famous poet.

Lurie: That's right. The story is about several things. It's the longest story in the book. One of the things it's about is how a writer, and in particular a poet, can get so involved in the puppet life of being a writer -- of giving readings, of giving interviews, of signing books -- they begin to be cut off from inspirations and cheated of the solitude and the contemplation they need to write poetry. The public self begins to take over. That's really what this story is about.

Glover: It is a ghost story in one sense, but it's very clearly written to establish that this could be a real thing that was happening in a way. Mistakes were being made, and the poet herself becomes more and more frantic, even hysterical.

Lurie: Well, of course you can read it realistically and there are cases of people imitating writers. The most famous one that comes to my mind is the time Thomas Pynchon turned up in London, called his publisher, visited, was taken out to lunch, met people, and wasn't Thomas Pynchon at all. It was just somebody who said to himself, "Hey, nobody knows what Thomas Pynchon looks like, and I'm about that age, and I'm in London, and I think I'll have a good time for myself." It was obviously someone a bit deranged because he knew Pynchon's works very, very well. So this sort of thing can happen, though it's rare.

Glover: Didn't I read in an interview that in fact someone came up to you once and said that they'd seen you in a city that you had not been to at the time?

Lurie: Oh yes. That's happened to me. People get confused. They can't tell one writer from another maybe, or they forget where they were, where you were. But I've never had anything more than that happen to me.

Glover: I should just interrupt momentarily to let our listeners know that I'm speaking with Alison Lurie, author of *Women and Ghosts*, just published by Doubleday. These stories are all interesting, but one thing that shows up occasionally is a setting that, to use an anthropological term, is a liminal geography. The setting of the story contributes to a sense of instability. The story takes place in the mind of a child or a couple is in India looking to adopt an Indian child and the culture of India itself destabilizes them. One of the stories takes place on successive Halloweens when, in fact, the dead walk. That seems like part of an attempt to establish the ambiguity of a situation.

Lurie: Well, I think that there are places and times in which the boundaries between the rational and the irrational are broken down somewhat. Certainly this is true in foreign countries. I don't mean a foreign country like England, where we're more or less familiar with things. It can happen even there, but if you go to Africa or Asia, you don't understand things. Things seem strange to you anyway, and if something even stranger should happen, you are more open to it. Of course, people travel partly to escape from their routine, from the rational, conventional lives they're living. So they're up for it. The same is true for holidays like Halloween and New Year's Eve, and even some of the holidays we think of as celebrating all that is conventional and patriotic, like the Fourth of July. Sitting out in the dark watching fireworks is not real life as we're living it in our kitchens.

Glover: In children's folktales, there is often a moral element. That is true of these stories as well; at least moral in the sense of judging certain acts and characters. In "The Highboy," which we've mentioned, the main character loves this piece of furniture excessively.

Lurie: Well she loves all her possessions excessively. She's someone who somehow has become very attached to objects, which is something that is easy to do in this country. You can't pick up a magazine or turn on the television without being told that it's good and wonderful to be attached to objects -- particularly automobiles, for instance.

Glover: This story, in a sense, proceeds to skewer the pretension of her love for objects. She is, in the end, taken over by the object and punished by the object.

Lurie: Destroyed by it. I suppose you could say that she is cut off from the world by her attachment to her objects. There is a scene in which she screams at her grandchildren because she thinks they might be scratching this piece of furniture, which is certainly a skewed order of priority. Most people would be more likely to scream at the piece of furniture or get rid of a piece of furniture that was dangerous to small children. So sure, it's moral in that sense.

Glover: I was also thinking of the story called "The Pool People," in which June Graber (?) is really quite needlessly cruel to a pair of workmen repairing her house in Florida. She's especially nasty about them getting into the pool. Because of something she does, their lives fall apart and both of them end up dying in various accidental ways, and then she drowns in the pool.

Lurie: That's right. She's the only really disagreeable character in this whole book. I think that she's another person who in a way is more attached to objects or more aware of objects than normal people. Her house, her pool, mean more to her than anybody who isn't in her social circle. She certainly, in a way, gets what she deserves. She ends up where she wants to be, which is swimming in a pool in Florida, but not quite as she planned it.

Glover: No one sees the ghosts in this story except her grandchild.

Lurie: That's right. For her grandchild, they are benevolent ghosts. They come and play with her. They are kind of like imaginary friends, and I think maybe what I'm saying here is that if you're a nice and innocent person, the supernatural won't do you too much harm. I know this is completely opposite from the view of Steven King, where innocent people are in great danger.

Glover: You mentioned that June Graber (?) is one of the least nice people in this book. There is a sense of cruelty running through these stories; maybe cruelty is a harsh word.

Lurie: Oh, no...

Glover: You wouldn't say cruelty?

Lurie: No, I wouldn't say cruelty.

Glover: I'm overstating it, but the point I mean to make is this. In "Counting Sheep," which as I said is one of my favorite stories in the book, we're at the Wordsworth house in the Lake District. There are a number of young scholars working there. Their lives are benighted by the academic rat race they're trying to enter. One, who is not particularly ambitious, is essentially seen as a waif. The life that he's being forced to lead is not the life he's suited for. So in that sense, life is being kind of cruel to him. The magic of the story is that he turns into a sheep.

Lurie: You're just giving away all my endings.

Glover: I'm sorry, I shouldn't do that. People should read these, but they have to know it's delightfully surprising and comic.

Lurie: They'll forget anyway, by the time they find the book. I don't think it's cruel really. In a way, he chooses this life. He wishes for it. He probably enjoys it more than the life he would have had.

Glover: I understand that, the sheep thing is wonderful; I think he really does enjoy that. You make that quite clear, that the life of a male sheep is quite cushy, as opposed to the life of a scholar.

Lurie: He might have enjoyed remaining a scholar if he could have stayed in the Lake District, but the kind of jobs he's going to get after that, because he's not particularly ambitious and because he doesn't publish anything, would be terrible for him. He'd be teaching in some inner city high school, say.

Glover: That was all that was open to him.

Lurie: Yes. The academic life is very competitive in Britain these days because of all the cuts in education. Not that it isn't fairly competitive here.

Glover: Your stories are so interesting, but they are a real departure for you. First of all, this is the first book of short stories that you've published.

Lurie: That's right.

Glover: To what extent do these stories and does this book reflect continuing literary concerns and ambitions that you have? I'm thinking, for example, of the theme one notices often in your work, the clash between the relatively sophisticated and the irrational.

Lurie: Well I think that's true. Of course the things I'm concerned about are going to reappear in these stories, but maybe in a more obvious way. You have to make your point more rapidly in a short story, and for me at least, I think you have to exaggerate things. You have to get it across to the reader much faster, and you have to narrow the canvas. I never thought I could write short stories because I just couldn't get said what I wanted to say in such a few pages. I didn't have the gift. But if you allow yourself the supernatural, then you can make your point more rapidly and you can make manifest things that are otherwise vague and woolly. For instance, there's a story which you mentioned in which a woman starts seeing the ghost of her former boyfriend whenever she goes out with another man. This is something that in a much more abstract way can happen to anybody. You break up with an important relationship, and you go out with somebody else, and you can imagine that the person that you were with before is there. You can imagine what they'll think of you and the things you're saying. You can imagine the rude remarks they might make about the new person, and so on. I think we've all had that, but it makes a better story and you get the point across faster if you allow the ghost to really appear.

Glover: I have to close now, we're running out of time. Thank you very much for being with us, Alison Lurie.

Lurie: OK, well, thank you too.

Glover: I have been speaking with Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Alison Lurie, author of a new story collection, *Women and Ghosts*, published by Doubleday; nine witty tales of ordinary mortals who suddenly find themselves with a ghostly problem. *Women and Ghosts* is superbly crafted, witty, unsettling, comic, and knowing; cautionary tales for adults; the Brothers Grimm in suburbia. This is Douglas Glover saying so long for now from the Book Show.

Transcribed by Kelley Conroy