A CONVERSATION WITH ELIZABETH BRUNDAGE

Q. Readers and critics have sometimes described your work as "feminist," a word that is notoriously difficult to define and is also laden with lots of overdetermined meanings. How do you respond to the characterization of "feminist" and in what way might it be problematical as applied to your writing?

According to most dictionaries, feminism advocates equal political and economic rights for men and women, and, based on this definition, I am certainly a feminist. However, when it comes to my work, I don't have much use for labels and I certainly wouldn't want a reader to not read my novels based on assumptions about my political views. I'm interested in considering and perhaps challenging the assumptions we make based on gender. I fight for my male characters just as much as my female characters and try to explore and disrupt the various cultural nuances that attempt to define us as men and women.

Q. Your previous novel, *Somebody Else's Daughter*, was set in the Berkshires, a long way from the Hollywood backdrop of *A Stranger Like You*. How do you think geography influences the characters you write about?

Geography influences my characters a great deal. A sense of place is important in my work, as it is important to me in my life. To some degree, where we live, how we live, defines us in some way-not that it has to be permanent, but it may inform one's perspective at the time. In *Somebody Else's Daughter*, the Berkshires were meaningful because the characters, for the most part, had chosen to live there-to pursue what they hoped would be an ideal life based on their fantasies of what that might mean. Hollywood is a place that attracts people who are seeking a different version of an idealized fantasy-the tantalizing possibility of fame and fortune-and it's a place that can also make people desperate. Back in New Jersey, Hugh Waters is probably considered a pretty reasonable guy, but when his dreams get trampled (to borrow from Yeats-tread softly because you tread on my dreams) it revives a bitter longing from someplace deep and he can't let it go. Having lived in Los Angeles, I wanted to re-create a city that is at once seedy and elegant, gloriously deceptive, brutally dispassionate.

Q. The topic of Judaism has surfaced more than once in your novels. What is your personal relation to Judaism, and how does it inspire you?

As a Jew, the idea of faith interests me. Faith requires a suspension of disbelief in the same way that movies do-you must submit to the journey and be open to what comes next. I thought this was an interesting parallel to explore in the novel. Although she was raised in a Jewish home, Hedda is a non-believer. She is somewhat literal in her thinking, not the sort of person who can trust abstractions, and so the notion that there is a God confounds her. In her profession as a producer she has learned to rely on the facts, the numbers, the bottom line-in her business dreams are for amateurs-and yet she wants desperately to believe in something. I think many of us want to believe in something . . . but this crosses into the novel on many levels. When she buys the car from the bereaved magician, there is a suggestion of magic in the transaction-the magic is presented, but you must believe in the possibility. If you believe, for example, that the lingering scent of roses in the car indicates the presence of the man's dead wife, then you may also believe that there is something else-God-that decides our destiny. We live in complicated times and religion-the commitment to faith-has become, for many, an obscure pursuit. For some it brings solace and comfort, for others guilt and confusion. From the beginning of time, religion has instigated war; the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the "unrest" in Israel are no exception. Religion is about devotion, passion. But it's also, and always has been, about territory.

In America, the idea of passion, of being passionate, has lost some of its charm. I think a kind of emotional anemia has tainted our cultural blood flow-passion, believing in something so intensely that you're willing to stake your life on it-has somehow become almost naïve. In these hard-line economic times, we have learned, in the way abused children learn, not to expect anything, not even love. To believe in something means you will most likely be betrayed. And these are some of the realities I wanted to explore in this novel.

Q. The literary genre of the thriller is not traditionally known for its enlightened attitudes regarding gender. What were the challenges in using this genre to tell what is, fundamentally, a pro-woman story?

Having lived and worked in Los Angeles, first as a film student and then in a variety of industry jobs, I caught a heady whiff of sexism. I thought it would be interesting to write about a female producer who has sacrificed her passion to garner success. When an opportunity arises to make an important film about an Iraqi woman who is accused of adultery and sentenced to death, Hedda decides to take on the project, but it's not because she's getting in touch with her feminist side. On the contrary, she's in love with the film's screenwriter, Tom Foster, who reminds her of who she once was-a filmmaker fueled by conviction and the desire to tell the truth. Hedda Chase is a woman who has grown accustomed to getting her way-she is strong and powerful-and yet she soon discovers that her freedom is more vulnerable than she ever imagined. Freedom is a gift and, as Americans, we take it for granted (as we should). But the rest of the world doesn't function by our rules. I wanted to draw a parallel between what happens to Hedda, trapped and at the mercy of her captor or *God* ,and the women in countries like Iraq, where the idea of being free, a free, woman, is elusive and ignored.

Q. Do you think it makes sense to read Hedda's imprisonment in the trunk of her car as a metaphor for the other entrapments in her life?

I think Hedda's imprisonment is a metaphor for what it feels like to have your rights taken away.

Q. How fully do you plot a book before you write it? Are you yourself ever surprised by the direction one of your stories takes?

I am often surprised by the choices my characters make and these, to a large degree, decide the plot. I hate that word "plot" because it sounds like a hole in the ground where you put a dead person, but it is a good idea to have a sense of direction when you write. It's funny because as a kid I had a lousy sense of direction and my parents would criticize me when a two-hour drive became six hours of "touring"- we didn't have MapQuest back then-but I like to think, as a novelist, that my sense of direction is strategic. If you know your characters well before you begin, then your instincts will lead you. Instinct, in fact, is an important aspect of writing. You must sense your characters-your instinct is your compass.

When writing a first draft, I like to be surprised. Usually, if I go too far in one direction, my character will tap me on the shoulder and turn me around. Sometimes research will help to inform the direction a book takes. While writing the first draft of *A Stranger Like You*, I wasn't sure who would steal the car once Hedda was inside the trunk. I had only an inkling of Denny at that point and had decided he was a veteran with PTSD, and then I thought it might be interesting to have him work at an airport parking lot because the gatehouse reminded me of the tight quarters inside a tank. Once you know your characters well they begin to tell you things, and take you to places you never thought you'd go.

Q. Like Hugh Waters, you have taken your turns at scriptwriting. How did your experiences in that kind of writing influence your work on *A Stranger Like You*?

In college I began studying film and directed my first 16mm films, which were pretty weird. I have always been interested in images and how images convey meaning, and film is an intriguing medium in which to explore these interests. I wrote my first feature screenplay in my senior year at Hampshire College and that script earned my acceptance to the American Film Institute as a screenwriting fellow. In the novel, the "conservatory" is based on AFI-a really special place for young filmmakers, and an extraordinary opportunity for me at the time. Screenplays are highly structured inventions, and it was there that I learned how to tell a story that had a beginning, a middle and an end, a structure that is deceptively simple. Screenwriting classes differ from fiction-writing classes in that they stress the architecture of a story over anything else-an underlying premise is played out over time. A character confronts a problem and has to deal with it and in doing so experiences a change. In fiction, the focus is on character. What I try

to do in my novels is to combine these two elements; strong characterization within a structure that has a sort of domino effect progression-one scene pushing through to the next toward an inevitable resolution.

After AFI, I continued to write screenplays. One day I met with an agent who had liked one of my scripts. She looked at me curiously and asked if I'd ever written fiction. I had tried writing prose in college, but not much had come of it. At her suggestion, I went home and wrote my first short story, and that was the beginning of my life as a fiction writer.

Q. For the time being, at least, you've chosen novel writing over screenwriting. Why?

I like writing novels because you create an entire world on the page. As a kid, I used to play for hours down in our basement setting up "apartments" and creating lives and situations and problems with my dolls and stuffed animals. That sense of play is a natural way to work things out. Writing fiction is not all that different. For me, as a writer, I like to work out the knots with words. Fiction is a place where anything is possible. Novels take the reader into a landscape that is at once familiar and unique. I especially like the novel form as it allows for a deeper analysis of a character. I like the almost intimate relationship that occurs between writer and reader when two imaginations collide, when the reader "translates" the writer's version of the story into his own.

Q. Through the character of Denny Rios, you explore the effects of posttraumatic stress disorder. What was it like to research his character, and what did you learn?

Here's how Denny came about. We were having trouble with our television reception and called DirecTV for help. They sent someone over and when he got to the door I had just come out of the shower and had a towel on my head. I answered the door and apologized for my appearance and he made a comment that it was okay, he was used to "towel heads." He had returned from his tour in Iraq a few months before and had a limp and hadn't gotten his health benefits yet and was angry about it. Although most of the time he complained about his experience, it was obvious to me that he'd been an excellent soldier. He was fastidious in his way of working. I could see that, for a period of time, he was accustomed to going into a situation and dealing with it until it was resolved. It wasn't until months later that I decided to base a character on him and regretted never getting his name. On another occasion when we were having a second TV installed, DirecTV sent two other young men who had also been to Iraq. I noticed that all three had similar qualities. Something in their faces told me they'd see things they'd never fully be able to process. Thus, the character of Denny was born. I began to look for veterans to interview and was told about an organization called Soldier's Heart in Troy, New York, that helps veterans cope with their experiences. They urged me to read a book called *War and the Soul*, by Edward Tick, which explores strategies for coping with posttraumatic stress disorder. Through Soldier's Heart I met a young marine named Sean who had served in the first invasion in 2003 and who helped me to further understand the dynamics of being at war and the difficulties that often surface when coming home.

Q. America's involvement in Iraq exerts a powerful force over events in your novel, both through the character of Denny and through the film that Hedda makes in Abu Dhabi. Why did you choose to give so much attention to the Middle East in what is, in most respects, a Hollywood story?

War is a kind of theater. The invasion of Iraq was an enormous, high-budget production. I wanted to draw parallels between Iraq and Hollywood-the notion that conflict can be manufactured and managed by a select few. My research led me into various directions. I came upon a YouTube video that showed from beginning to end an Iraqi woman getting stoned to death. The fact that it is a rare occurrence condoned by religious extremists does not dismiss its significance, and the rationale that supports such condemnation seems to say something about the country's overall regard for women. Through the character of Fatima Kassim I was able to address some of these issues and to consider how behavior like this speaks to the larger global community and why nothing is done to stop it. The *why* is what keeps me up at night. It's why Hedda makes her movie and it's one of the reasons I wanted to write this book.

Q. One of our favorite scenes in A Stranger Like You takes place in Chapter six, when Hedda tries to explain why she is offended by the rough sex scene in *The Promise*. What were your thoughts and motivations when you were writing that part of the novel?

In this country, women have fought hard for their rights, and we are still fighting. We have fought for the right to vote, the right to work, the right to fair pay, the right to govern our own bodies and yet, incredibly, we are continually facing new challenges. From a very young age, children are fed images of women, from the housewives in dish soap commercials to the slutty chicks in the jeans ads. Advertisements do more than sell products. They sell lifestyle; behavior. And so do movies. But of course movies are not real. They are manufactured representations and this is something I wanted to consider thematically in the novel as a whole.

I started thinking about how we watch and process behavior on the screen. Sex is right there for us to see, but is it an accurate representation of lovemaking? Do sex scenes in film reinforce and encourage a certain kind of expression in men and women? I started watching sex scenes more critically and realized that, for the most part, the scenes focus on the woman's experience from a male perspective-the way the camera frames a woman teaches us how to perceive her, identifies what is attractive, sexy, encourages us to *feast our eyes*. *She* is there for the taking, so help yourself. Ultimately, on some level, this seeps into the collective unconscious. It raises certain questions. Back in the seventies and early eighties a conversation started about women and sex. The word pleasure came into the discussion. I can remember sitting around with my girlfriends talking about orgasms, masturbating, oral sex-all of those quiet subjects you didn't discuss with your mother *and still don't*-like "achieving" an orgasm, as if you were taking a test. And what if you're not scoring As-of course it's your own fault. Perhaps you're not trying hard enough? *Maybe it's better not to talk about it*. I guess my motivation with this scene was to get the conversation started again. I thought it presented an interesting counterpoint to Hedda's work as a filmmaker, indicating a shift in her perspective. She begins to question her work, her life, her power as a woman in a male-dominated industry. When she travels to Abu Dhabi and discovers that many of the women are wearing abayas *with sexy expensive underwear underneath*, it gives her pause. She is told that the women are covered for their own protection, escorted by husbands or fathers in the streets, that what's underneath is for their husband's eyes only. What does this really mean? What does it mean that suicide bombers are promised virgins in the afterlife? What does it mean when rape is reduced to collateral damage during war? How do these realities determine the way we negotiate with other cultures on a global scale? These are some of the questions I wanted to raise in this novel.

Q. Although the ending of *A Stranger Like You* could be a good deal bleaker than it is, it isn't quite a happy ending, either. What made you choose such a dissonant tone for your final pages?

The ending of the novel is a bit mysterious, even to me. Hedda has been saved and is told she will be fine, but she too suffers from PTSD. She survived an ordeal that will not be easy to forget. It doesn't just go away. The memories linger. The nurse tells her that she'll be back to her old self in no time, but that phrase is elusive at best, not to mention patronizing. Hedda can't remember who she was, not really she can't. Something has been lost. I guess what I'm getting at is that we have become so accustomed to witnessing violence-on television, in movies and video games, in the news-that we're somewhat desensitized to it, and I want to remind the reader that violence is not something you recover from. Yes, time passes and you learn to move on, but you don't *recover*.

Q. In chapter nine of *A Stranger Like You*, guests at a party come up with four-word "X leads to Y" premises to describe movie plots and their lives. What is the four-word premise of your life so far and why?

Every screenplay has an underlying premise that promises some kind of progression-one condition leads to another. It is a way that screenwriters begin to think about the story they want to tell and one of the first things I learned in film school. For me, I suppose the premise of my life so far is: Hard work leads to success. Writing is hard work. There is just no way around it. You have to put in the hours. You have to think things through. You spend a lot of time in a little room at your desk getting the words down on the page. I think it's easy to idealize the life of a writer, but there is absolutely nothing ideal about it. You think publishing will make it easier; it doesn't. In fact, it makes it harder. Facing the blank page every day is at once a privilege and a misery. You just have to keep moving forward, one word at a time.

Q. What, for you, is the best part of writing?

Writing is a solitary profession. Months may pass and you see few people outside of your family members; you may find yourself talking at length to your dog. The process of writing a novel from start to finish is long and difficult, but when you are finished there is no better feeling. You feel, well, released. You feel as if you have stated your case. You have done well by your characters. Perhaps you will be redeemed. There is a great sense of accomplishment. I would have to say that I love that feeling; it's what keeps me doing it. I can't imagine doing anything else.