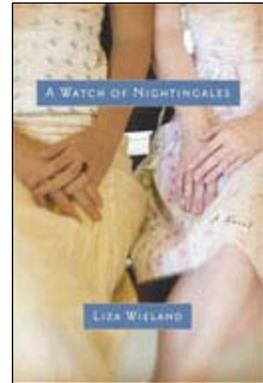


Q&A with Liza Wieland, author of *A Watch of Nightingales*

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University of Michigan Press: What is your book about?

Liza Wieland: The novel takes place in present-day Washington, D.C., and in England, in 1977, both in London and in a girl's boarding school near Wales. The two main characters are an American, named Mara, and a Pakistani, called Kokila. They meet at the boarding school in 1977 when Mara's an exchange student and Kokila is finishing there, headed for university, at Cambridge. They meet again in Washington, D.C. where Mara is the widow of the headmaster of a boy's school, and Kokila is the mother of one of the students. There are new problems now based partly on cultural differences, but also old problems to be sorted out, difficulties, relationships, dating from their first meeting in the late 70s. So the novel brings them back together and it's structured back and forth—a chapter in Washington, a chapter in England.



UMP: What was the inspiration for writing it?

LW: The novel's very close to autobiography. I was an exchange student at a girl's school in England and the head girl was a Pakistani who got herself in some trouble. Though I haven't met up with her again, I've often imagined what it would be like to do so, and I got interested in the possibility. The novel opens as Mara, the headmaster's widow, has to deal with an incident involving a kirpan, which is an unsharpened knife that Sikh men wear. It's wrapped in a sheath and is worn next to the body, but it is exposed in a pick-up basketball game at the school. The students mistake it for a threatening sort of knife, and Mara has to sort this out. There was a case like that in Canada in the 80s, and was intrigued by. I'm interested in how it plays out: the law of the land versus spiritual law. And I'm interested in people who are different from each other, who are trying to get past those differences or at least live with them if they can't get past them. This may have something to do with growing up in Atlanta in the 60's, to look more deeply into the question of inspiration. My first novel, *The Names of the Lost*, is about the Atlanta child murders of the late seventies and early eighties and the questions of racism raised in the city at that time. I think in some ways, there's a part of that time and place in everything I write.

UMP: What do you hope people will take away upon reading it?

LW: I hope readers feel they've been told a good story. I hope readers remember the characters and the places they live, the two schools they inhabit, the way a vivid dream sticks with you for a long time after you wake up. I hope the book makes readers ponder the question of tolerance. The novel is also about relations between parents and children, particularly mothers and daughters, so I hope that readers who are parents will think about their children, and of course, the other way around.

UMP: What projects are you currently working on?

LW: I've just finished a collection of short stories, the working title of which is *Quickening*. The collection takes as one of its formal models Hemingway's *In Our Time*; in which the stories are separated by short, terse inter-chapters which serve to illuminate what precedes or follows. I think of it sometimes as a woman writer's answer to Hemingway's book, as most of the stories concern contemporary girls and women, their lives and loves and losses. But there are similarities too: the shadow of war—and sometimes the fact of war—hangs over many of the stories: World War II, American actions in Beirut and in Iraq. Many of the stories take as their subject Americans in Europe, which certainly interested Hemingway.

And I'm about to finish a new novel. This novel is set during World War II and after, up to the late 80's. The main characters, an American soldier and a young French woman, meet in Normandy, just after the D-Day invasion in 1944. What brings them together is history, the liberation of France by the Allies, but also the end of history: each has come from a place that no longer exists. The soldier grew up in Dana, Massachusetts, which was one of four towns abandoned and flooded in 1939 to make way for the Quabbin Reservoir, and the French woman is from Oradour-sur-Glane, in central France, which was destroyed and its 625 citizens massacred by the Nazis just after D-Day. The soldier is in possession of a mysterious photograph and the Frenchwoman has a damning secret. Each needs the other in order to find a way back into the world.

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