

Wresting Control

*A discussion with Lauren Francis-Sharma about her new novel,
Book of the Little Axe*

By Zach Powers

Rosa is your novel's main character, the one who connects all the threads, but the novel opens from her son Victor's perspective. Rosa almost sneaks into the narrative after that. Why do you think Rosa's character doesn't start in the foreground?

Rosa is certainly the central character in the novel, but the story became necessary to write because of Victor, her son. Victor is seeking answers he doesn't yet know he needs to ask. It seemed important to introduce readers to Victor first, so that the reader might understand why he needs these three distinct narratives to be told. From a craft perspective, I knew Rosa and the island of Trinidad might be a draw for my readers, especially those who liked my first book, *Til the Well Runs Dry*. It's much harder to shift readers to a new narrator, a new setting and a new chronological time when they're fully entrenched in one narrative strand, so I began the story with Victor, hoping to make the reader invest in both characters simultaneously, while also investing in their relationship as mother and son.

One of the main themes running throughout the novel is that "one must control all that is within one's control." How would you describe your characters' journeys in terms of this desire to control even a small part of their lives?

The very act of journeying and finding one's place is an act of wresting control. But beyond this, at least for Rosa, control is limited. Rosa is a Black woman living in the late 18th century, on land where Black chattel slavery is legal. Control, at least as we know it today, doesn't exist for Rosa, so even though she



has great agency and is strong and brave and brash, her life has to be small. And this is what I wanted to show. I wanted to show how external forces can shrink people, how our communities are better served when people are allowed to grow into their greatest selves. Rosa's father imagined one day she might be able to control a small part of her own story, which is why he ultimately makes the hardest decision of his life.

Setting plays such a crucial role in the novel, I think especially because the two main settings are so different. First, there's the American West at its broadest, contrasted with the Rendon estate, which presents a much narrower view of Trinidad. How did you approach each setting? Were there unique or deliberate techniques you used to render place?

You're right that the American West initially feels so much more expansive because inherent in the idea of "the West" is great possibility. But this idea of "the West" was created with only certain people in mind. What you come to realize as you read this book is that even though the land and the seas feel boundless, the experience of living in North America and in Trinidad is not without confines. Similar to Rosa's inability to will her own life, I wanted to show how limited certain people are in their ability to actually move across the earth. It was impossible to imagine how Rosa would travel alone to the "New World" without a white-presenting companion. Even if I could dress her in men's clothing, I could never take away her susceptibility to slavery and/or brutality because she is also Black. It had a huge impact on the way I could write this story.

On the question of approach...to be honest, I don't see the differences in the two settings as much as perhaps others might. The reason I was drawn to these two places is because they remind me so much of the other. With the exception of a surrounding ocean in Trinidad, both of these places are wild, have mountains, a lushness and beauty beyond imagination. And even their colonial histories are similar, which is fascinating to me. The rendering of these parallelisms is what I hoped to achieve.

There are several different points of view in the novel, each following the struggles of a different character. How did the parallel storytelling structure of the novel come about? What did placing these perspectives side-by-side allow you to do that might not have been possible in a linear narrative?

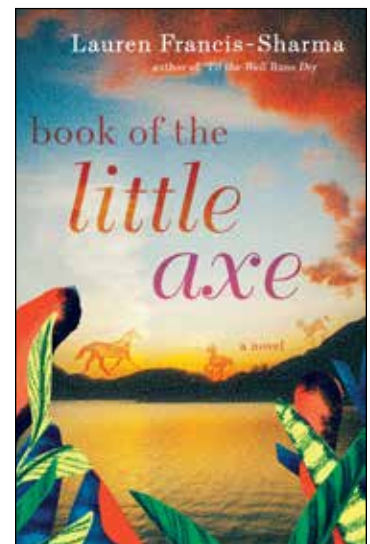
I hinted at this earlier, but because I built my story around a Black character in the West Indies during

a time of colonization, the story itself became as confined as Rosa. Maybe one day I'll set about writing an essay on what writers of color and women have to do to create epic and ambitious stories in a fictitious world that still hopes to reflect some of the suffocating effects of racism, sexism, colorism, and/or capitalism. But now is not that time! Lucky for you! Ulti-

mately, though, I had to grapple with *how* Rosa might travel safely from home, which is when Creadon became a necessary character. This strange man who shows up on their little island, makes Rosa's subsequent journey plausible. Of course, I didn't have to make Creadon such an important character, but Rosa's father would not have trusted his child with just anyone. The man he'd trust to take his daughter to the new world would have to be nearly as beloved as his own children. And for me, there was no other way to understand her father's choice but to show Creadon's story so the reader would trust him too. Race makes this book complicated. But race gives the story its depth, its layers, its immediacy.

I'm interested in how literature can draw from different media. With your novel, I noticed a serial quality, similar to what you find in a prestige television drama. There's a main, overarching storyline, plus there are smaller episodes throughout that have complete story arcs. How do you balance the small scale with the large?

I always say the movie and television industry likely had no idea that Gen X-ers would still be such avid movie-goers and television consumers, but we are the first generation of children raised with more than one television in our homes, the first generation who could rent six movies and watch them over a weekend! So I'm sure my writing reflects these media,



whether I wish them to or not. But as a writer and as a person who considers herself part of a larger communal landscape, who does not buy into the idea of individualism, I reject the notion of a single strand narrative. The human story is nothing if it is not a reflection of those who choose to invest in us and those who choose to neglect us. So if I do anything in this book, I try to sharpen the focus on the parts of a character's life that illustrates those major moments of investment and neglect so a reader is grounded when the overarching storyline shifts in an unexpected direction.

Is there anything you learned during the process of writing this novel? About being a writer? About life?

There are no secrets. Sometimes it's just luck or the divine or whatever you want to call it that the right story comes at the right time, and that someone wishes to publish it. But I've learned a lot from other women writers on the daily grind of it. Dolen Perkins-Valdez reminded me once when I became frustrated, that I don't stop being a mother just because I'm writing. That helped me to both expect and accept some of the more serious interruptions dur-

ing my writing time and to keep it moving. Bernice McFadden told me it was okay not to write every day. Lauren Groff is an example of a woman who established the rules early with her family and though I didn't have the luxury of starting in this career early enough to do it quite Lauren's way, she inspires me to give myself real time to be with the work—a weekend at a friend's place, a night at a hotel, a membership to a writing co-op like the one I ran for three years. But all in all what I know for sure is that a generous spirit makes this business and life so much more fulfilling.

Finally, what's one piece of advice you'd give to a writer just starting out?

Well...I am the Assistant Director at Bread Loaf Writer's Conference now. A place I wish I'd found earlier in my writing life. I have also been the owner of D.C. Writers Room. This is a place I discovered near the end of writing my first book. And my first writing group and my first novel were born at The Writers' Center! All of these places offered me community. Building and maintaining a writing community for oneself is an important aspect of the writer's life. So...start now.

**NEW ONLINE POP-UP
WORKSHOPS & FREE
VIRTUAL EVENTS
EVERY WEEK!**

We don't know exactly when our building will reopen, but we'll keep bringing you new ways to use your words throughout the lockdown.

Check writer.org weekly

