

Book Group / Discussion Guide for *Red Lightning*:

What inspired this book – and Tess?

Red Lightning highlights several of my core themes: immigration and social justice issues, environmental issues of the contemporary West, climate change, family, striving for a fully realized and intense life. More specifically, I wanted to write about recovery from a fractured state—both internal fractures (PTSD, for example) and external fractures (people parting from their cultures, countries, and families, which is seen on several levels here). To do that, I picked the story of a *leventona*—a woman who transports immigrants—as the main character. She is crossing boundaries, literally. She is helping others cross boundaries. She is trying to cross the boundary into her true and best self. During all this transport, things get stolen, taken away, worn down to bone. I wanted to write about modern day piracy. So many things can get stolen from us during the course of life—nations, economies, peace of mind, health, childhood.

Is it also the story of finding a better map?

Yes, I suppose so. This novel takes place in a handful of days in which Tess embarks on a last-ditch journey for redemption. She is very close to death. Yet, as we near the end of the book, Tess has rediscovered her 10-year old daughter, made some peace with her dying mother, found the beauty in her sister---and most importantly, has located herself. It reminds me of that saying: “The most expensive and difficult journey you ever take will be the one inside yourself.”

This novel has an innovative point-of-view. How did you determine that you'd move between first-person and the close third-person sections where Tess is speaking in a kind of poetry-prose hybrid?

I love that you call it a poetry-prose hybrid, because that was my intent. My goal was this: I wanted to render Tess’s disassociative disorder on the page. The bravest thing I could do as I writer, I think, was to acknowledge that Tess simply could not narrate a story in a familiar way, given her state of mind. She is too broken. A nonstandard narrative was, in my opinion, the best way to uniquely reveal her broken soul.

I knowingly took two risks. One was an occasional device wherein the text is deeply indented only when Tess disassociates from herself. Moreover, the novel is told in first person, but when Tess becomes disembodied, a third person omniscient self floats around and advises her. During these moments, she insists she feels too little, can’t feel any emotions at all, in fact—but the reader suspects that the opposite is true. In fact, she feels too much, and this floating directorial voice is her way of coping. Within this device, I have small nuances. For example, after a critical scene, this third person becomes first, a signal that she is becoming “reunited” or reintegrated as one self, which is important during the climax, when she *needs* to disassociate in order to do

something horrible—her PTSD finally comes in handy, in other words. Although I hope it has a “loose look,” all this was intentional and carefully constructed. I wanted form to *inform* content.

The other risk was to meld words together, such as “boneknowledge” or “heartfade.” I’ve always done this in my writing, but in this book, it became a clear part of her voice. Tess’s way of understanding the world is unique; while her dissociative disorder pulls her apart, she responds by jamming the incongruent together. I’ve always felt that careful melding of words (without a dash or space) creates a new image in the reader’s head. One thing I’m ridiculously proud of, in fact, is the list of words that the copyeditor sent me to acknowledge she had not fixed these improper words. The list is five pages long. To me, it reads like a poem. It made me laugh, remembering how many times I had to click “Ignore” when I ran a spell-check on my computer. Carpel-tunnel plagued me for weeks.

How did you learn so much about the ways in which immigrants are moved across the U.S. border? I’m guessing you did some serious research.

Well, I know people who have crossed the border illegally. I interviewed them and I interviewed strangers as well. In particular, I wanted to know what it was like post-ICE. I found what I always have, which is people are generous and want to share their stories.

My initial interest in human rights issues surrounding immigration started when I was 16 and living for a summer in Oaxaca, Mexico. I was supposed to be there building latrines, but what I was really learning was about how and why people came to the US. There was a young boy there, Alejandro, who wanted so much to “go to university,” as he always put it. I knew then that his dreams were pretty disassociated from his life, and his became the face I saw whenever I heard of men dying on the border.

I love that you've divided the book into sections after the four elements - wind, earth, fire, water. What inspired this decision?

Three lines of Dean Young’s poem “Elemental” introduce the book:

This end won’t summarize our forever.
Some things can be fixed by fire,
some not. Dearheart, already we’re air.

To me, this is a book of elements. I suppose I became intrigued by how low a soul can go. Tess is worn down to the basic elements, and only a fifth element, kindness, will save her. Each of the four elements is a reality and a metaphor. I try to meld Tess’s internal life and the external elements. For example, Tess can’t breathe, due to anxiety; meanwhile, the fire is gobbling up all the oxygen as it rages.

There’s also this: During the writing of this novel, I was evacuated from my home for a wildfire, and a year later, by historic floods that were worsened by the fact that there were no longer trees and grasses to hold down the soil. Westerners are strongly influenced by the elements,

particularly where I live. Fires happen. Floods happen. High winds happen. Earth burns. Air fills. The elements are in charge. Both in our external world, and in our hearts as well.

You've written about some of these characters in your other books. They're rich and beautifully drawn, and so it's no surprise that you're compelled to keep writing about them. But what is it about them, specifically, that keeps drawing you back?

Certain characters become lodged in the mind. A few years ago, I started hearing the voice of a character named Tess, and she was basically saying, “Hey, I want my story told too!” She’d been a minor character in my first novel, *Sky Bridge*, and now, it seemed, she had something to say. At first, I didn’t want to write her story: she’s really a tough character with some deep recesses and difficult flaws (although she’s beautiful for those same reasons). Anyway, I eventually heeded her request and sat down to write. What resulted is *Red Lightning*. I’m glad I “listened” to her, because, in the end, she had a really unique story to tell.

I also notice that I circle around the same core themes – social justice issues, environmental issues, the bonds of family, the Western landscape, and our individual struggle for redemption and a life well lived.

What were some of your influences as you were writing *Red Lightning*?

There were several influences: Alejandro, the little boy I fell in love with in Mexico. The recent wildfires in the West. My love for the outdoors, which saved me. Books such as Keri Hume’s *The Bone People*, which influenced my writing style. All these melded in my mind.

If you don't mind giving us a hint, what are you working on now?

A new book of connected stories, due out from Counterpoint in 2017 called *The Blue Hour*. Each story is concerned with a different angle of human sexuality. The messy, difficult, sad, joyful, mess of sex. Old people, young people, middle aged people of all orientations and experiences. There is lots and lots of sex—the real, human, vulnerable, true kind. That’s a bit of a hook, no?