

## **A Conversation with Dave Riese**

**Q: You're a 68-year-old man who grew up around Boston. Whatever possessed you to write a novel from the point of view of an 18-year-old Jewish girl living in Montreal in 1951?**

A: Possessed is the right word. Every morning, I had coffee in a café where I read a book to unwind after commuting to my job in Boston. Riva Weiss, an elderly woman who also stopped at the café before work, introduced herself and asked me what I was reading. Over several years, we discussed authors we liked and swapped favorite books. When I told her I was retiring, she asked about my future plans. I said I wanted to write short stories “and maybe a novel.” Riva began telling me several stories about her childhood in Montreal. When I said they would make great short stories, she encouraged me to ‘write them up.’ I jumped at the chance.

One morning, soon after I finished writing two stories, she beckoned to me as if wanting to tell me a secret. “I know you like dark stories,” she said. “Here’s one I haven’t thought about for sixty years.” For the next half hour, she described the events surrounding her engagement at the age of 18 to a young, wealthy man in Montreal in 1951. I was astounded by her story and couldn’t get it out of my mind. I also couldn’t wait to start writing.

She expected it would be another short story; I envisioned it as a novella. Every week I brought in the latest pages for her to read. After two and a half years, the novel reached over 300 pages.

**Q: You're publishing your first novel in your sixties. That's unusual. When did you decide to be a writer?**

A: One doesn't choose to be a writer. There's something inside you that compels you to write. I began writing at Bates College in Maine. While studying abroad at Oxford University in England during my junior year, I travelled throughout Europe during term breaks. For my B.A. thesis, I wrote stories, essays and poems based on my travel journals. Like many young writers, I was 'bitten' by the poetry bug in my twenties. I was cured, mercifully, within two years. Three poems were good enough to escape the shredder.

In my mid-twenties, I began writing short stories. An early story, submitted to the University of Massachusetts literary magazine, was not accepted, but the editor wrote a personal note praising the story and encouraging me to continue writing. I have always treasured that 'rejection.'

**Q: Did you take classes in writing?**

A: I attended writing classes at the Centers for Adult Education in Boston and Cambridge. While studying for my MBA at Suffolk University in Boston, I entered stories in the university's annual short story contests and won a couple of cash prizes. In my thirties, I began writing a novel off-and-on over several years. I finally finished a 400-page novel. It hides in a cardboard box under my desk.

When I decided to retire in 2012, I sat myself down for a serious talk. "You've always thought of yourself as a writer," I told myself, "but you spend more time

thinking about publishing a book than you do sitting down and doing the hard work to write one. Don't die before giving your dream a real chance."

**Q: How much of the novel is based on the woman's life?**

A: When reading the novel-in-progress, Riva often said, while holding her thumb and forefinger an inch apart, "The true parts are this much." Then holding her arms wide, she added, "This is the fiction."

In the two short stories about her childhood, I had already created the characters of Rebecca, her parents, and her best friend Jackie. What I had to create for the novel seemed daunting at first. Recalling bits of conversation and details about Montreal, Riva helped me immeasurably.

True events provided a spare foundation for the superstructure of the novel. For example, Sol really was a friend of Riva's brother who acted as the go-between when Sol asked him to sound out Rebecca for a date.

The back stories of Rebecca's parents are mostly true, such as her father working and living in a clothing store.

Riva's father had several schemes to make money, such as selling television sets and soft-serve ice cream, but he never followed through with these plans.

The two dinners, at Chanukah and at the end of the novel, were real life disasters. The scenes are fiction except for the comments questioning Rebecca's appetite and the authenticity of the Irish linen.

To this day Riva cannot remember what Sol looked like. However, casting pieces of his photograph to the wind on Mount Royal is fiction.

Everything else, except street, department store, and restaurant names, is pure fiction.

**Q: How did the 'real' Rebecca react to the fictional elements?**

A: She was a great sport. From time to time she had suggestions or corrections, but she never insisted I change a word. "You're the writer," she always said. I was most concerned about her reaction to the sexual situations which are totally fictitious. In an early draft of the Prologue, I wrote that Rebecca recalls Sol lying naked beside her. "I laughed when I read that," Riva said. "I never saw Sol naked." My reply was, "Guess what? You're having sex with him in Chapters 17 and 25."

She also had several ideas to improve the beginning of the novel. She suggested the scene with the plane crash to 'hook' the reader. She also imagined Rebecca contacting Jackie by email in the prologue, something she regrets not doing in real life.

**Q: Did she ever disagree with something you included in the novel?**

A: We had only one disagreement, and that was over the ending to the novel. Early readers of the novel rebelled against the original ending. When I sent a copy of the new Chapter 35 and Epilogue to Riva, she was hugely disappointed. I argued that the rules of fiction demanded more closure. She disagreed and then thought for a moment. "That may be the decision I'd make now from the vantage point of old age." I suggested adding, at the very end of the Epilogue, the ambivalence of memory.

“OK, if you do that,” she said, “I might be happy.” I think Rebecca’s last thoughts give the novel one last ironic twist.

**Q: What difficulties did you encounter writing a novel taking place in an unfamiliar city 65 years ago?**

A: The most difficult challenge was capturing the attitudes, prejudices and social conventions of that era. Knowing someone who lived during those years is a precious advantage. Also, the Internet is an amazing resource. Here are some issues I encountered while writing the novel:

When Sol and Rebecca go to the cabin in the Laurentians, I originally had them driving on a highway that did not exist in 1952.

In early drafts, I wrote scenes in which people watch television. Canadian television did not exist until the first TV stations were built in Toronto and Montreal toward the end of 1952.

Using a specific consumer product usually required an Internet search. For example, I remembered the commercial for Ipana toothpaste from my childhood – a cartoon beaver singing “Brusha, brusha, brusha, get the new Ipana.” I confirmed on the web that Ipana toothpaste was sold in Canada in the early fifties.

Researching radio shows that Rebecca might have heard while looking at her bouquet of roses, I discovered that Princess Elizabeth came to Canada in October, 1951.

Contemporary newspaper descriptions supplied details about Ben’s Deluxe Deli – the décor, waiters’ uniforms, and the Wall of Fame.

The hardest work was striking the right tone regarding the attitudes of people in 1951-2 in areas of pre-marital sex, public displays of affection, parental control of daughters, and the revelations of child abuse. I hope I've resolved these complaints satisfactorily.

**Q: You talk about 'early' readers. How helpful were they?**

A: Once I completed the first draft and several revisions, I joined a writers' critique group that met once a month. Despite years of experience accepting criticism, I always have heart palpitations and sweaty palms before a meeting. Once or twice I almost skipped a meeting when I anticipated (and deserved) negative feedback. Finally, I understood that, if I didn't trust the group to provide fair and honest criticism, I was wasting my time. Fortunately, the feedback was on target 95% of the time.

Someone once said, "A novel is a piece of fiction of a certain length with something wrong with it." An author rarely thinks his novel is finished. Instead, he reaches a point when he finally admits he can't make it substantially better or he is so sick of the plot and characters, he borders on a nervous breakdown.

I'll conclude with an incident which, while depressing at the time, is funny in memory. A new member of the critique group made a comment after reading two chapters in the middle of the novel. "From what I've read so far," the reader wrote, "I don't much like Rebecca. I also don't like Sol. And really, I wonder if you do." It took me several days to find the courage to get back writing. But the comment made me question the tone and emphasis of many scenes and, in doing so, improved them.

**Q: Why did you decide to publish the book independently and not go the traditional route of finding an agent and a corporate publishing house?**

A: One word: reality. Looking for an agent can take a year or more without any guarantee of success. Agents receive thousands of queries a year. Most don't have the time to take on more than a half dozen new authors a year. And they must absolutely love the book and believe in its potential. Most novels have 90 days to make their numbers or disappear from bookstore shelves. Despite having a large publishing company behind them, most authors, especially those with a debut novel, must spend their own time and money planning and implementing a publicity campaign.

Making a living as a novelist is rarely possible. The harsh reality is that most independently published books sell less than 500 e-book and paperback copies. At best an author hopes to make enough money to earn back his out-of-pocket expenses (which can then be used to finance his next book). On the upside, independently publishing a book gives the author control over all aspects of it. And best of all: the book is never out of print.

Despite the financial insecurity, most authors write because they must to feel fulfilled as human beings. The novel is the author's baby and he/she will do whatever can be done to give it the best life possible.

**Q: What is your next writing project?**

A: Authors are superstitious about discussing their next project. They may discover after six months of writing that the novel or memoir isn't working and abandon it.

Inevitably, when people learn you're a writer, they'll ask, "Who's your agent?" and "When will it be published?" and "Is it about anyone I know?" The writer often underestimates the time required to finish the work (I needed an extra year), then feels compelled to justify why the book is taking so long to complete. These discussions never end well.

Nevertheless I often ignore my own advice. I've started a fictional memoir based on the last years in the lives of my parents when I faced the fact that they will not be with him much longer. Watching them fail both physically and mentally caused me to confront my own mortality. The novel will explore how memories change over time to reveal my parents in a different light. Of course, there will be family secrets. I hope to show how memories both deceive us and encourage us to reexamine our lives.

And, no, I do not know when it will be finished.