

# The Lost Wife

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A rapturous novel of star-crossed love in a time of war—from the international bestselling author of *The Velvet Hours*.

In pre-World War II Prague, the dreams of two young lovers are shattered when they are separated by the Nazi invasion. Then, decades later, thousands of miles away in New York, an unexpected encounter leads to an inescapable glance of recognition, and the realization that providence has given Lenka and Josef one more chance...

From the glamorous ease of life in Prague before the Occupation, to the horrors of Nazi Europe, *The Lost Wife* explores the power of first love, the resilience of the human spirit—and the strength of memory.

"Staggeringly evocative, romantic, heart-rending, sensual and beautifully written...[it] may very well be the Sophie's Choice of this generation."—New York Times bestselling author John Lescroart

A Q&A with best-selling author John Lescroart and Alyson Richman about *The Lost Wife*

Lescroart:

Say a few words about your extraordinary Prologue to this book and how it initiated the creative process of the novel.

Richman:

I had been hoping to write a novel where I could explore an artist's experience during WWII and the Holocaust. So I started to do research about how certain real life artists were still able to create, even under these horrific and dangerous circumstances. But I didn't know how I was going to frame the novel. Then one day I was getting my hair cut at a local salon, and I overheard the stylist next to me telling a story he had recently heard from another client. It was about a woman who had recently attended a wedding where the bride's grandmother and the groom's grandfather had not met previously. At the rehearsal dinner the night before, the groom's grandfather insisted he knew the bride's grandmother "from somewhere." At the end of the evening, still convinced that he recognized her (despite her denials), he asked her to roll up her sleeve. There the six-number tattoo from Auschwitz was inked into her skin. He looked at her again, this time more closely. Studying her face one more time, he said: "You were my wife."

When I heard that story, I knew I had the beginning of my novel! I would begin and end it at the wedding scene, but invent this couple's journey in between: how they fell in love in

romantic pre-war Prague, but then became separated as the Germans invaded, and later how they each begin new lives in America. I made Lenka--the "lost wife" of the book's title--a young art student at the beginning of the war, so I could weave in my historical research about various artists who had survived Terezin and Auschwitz by using their artistic skills. It was my hope that my readers would learn and appreciate the history of these artists, while also becoming swept away into Josef and Lenka's love story that I created.

### Lescroart:

I have rarely come across a novel where the visual arts have played such an important role, in both the personal and political realm. What is your own background, if any, in visual art? To what extent did your creation of Lenka the artist help you deal with the themes in the book?

### Richman:

I am the daughter of an abstract oil painter and a painter myself. I actually went to college thinking I was going to major in studio art, but then fell in love with art history. What I love about it was uncovering the story within the painting. My mother taught me, early on in my childhood, the "gift of seeing." If you're going to paint, you need to look at the clues of your subject, the traces of life--whether it's the bruise on a pear or a wrinkle on a face. I try to bring that to my writing and to also incorporate texture and color into my words, so that the reader has a full, sensory experience.

To that end, the reader will experience a marked change in Lenka as the novel progresses. She starts off as a naive, young art student, who is often more of an observer than a participant. Then becomes an artist willing to steal supplies for the young children in Terezin and anxious to become part of a secret resistance of artists trying to get their art work to the outside world. By the end of the war, she has wholly changed - both as a stronger woman and as a more risk-taking artist.

### Lescroart:

Josef and Lenka both go on to have lengthy married lives to other people after the war ends. Josef, particularly, builds a life with Amalia that is just heart-rending. How did you envision these people coming together? What kept them together? How was Lenka's marriage similar, if at all, to Josef's, and what does your answer say about the nature of marriage itself?

### Richman:

Many people who have read this novel have said that they've never read a book where there are so many different types of love depicted. There a "first love" between the young Lenka and Josef; the love between a parent and child, as well as between sisters; then the love among all the friends Lenka makes in the Terezin ghetto; and finally the loves that both Josef and Lenka experience within their second marriages later in their lives.

The first love between Josef and Lenka is the most beautiful, the most romantic, but I think it's the subtler shades of love within their respective second marriages that are more

complex and perhaps more interesting. On the surface, Josef's and Amalia's appears to be loveless. Lifeless. But it is a marriage that exists from a shared pact of silence and respect for their mutual pasts and survivor's guilt over their lost families. I wanted to create Amalia as an almost "living ghost" because I wanted to explore how Josef would react: his heart is still attached to Lenka, who is truly a ghost of his past, but who still lives deeply within his memory.

Lenka's post-war marriage to Carl is perhaps the biggest surprise to the reader. At the end of their lengthy marriage, they share a deep love that has transformed over time, built on family and her gratitude for his saving her after the war. But it is a very different kind of love compared to the one Lenka experienced as a young girl with Josef.

### Lescroart:

The central conceit of this book, and indeed the genesis of the title, strongly relies on the reader's suspension of disbelief that these two lovers could not only have lost track of one another, but have entirely given up on each other's survival. In this high wire act, you were completely successful, and I was left in awe by the technical virtuosity of your plotting. Can you describe your plotting/outlining process and some of the problems--both this and others--you found most difficult to solve?

### Richman:

Well, that's a very good question. I knew I wanted to involve the Nazi's sinking of the S.S. Athenia in 1939 into the novel. So I interviewed a survivor of that ship, whose family had mistakenly believed that their father had drowned but then later learned he had in fact survived. So I knew there was, in actuality, a great deal of confusion with casualty reports at that time. Then there is the issue of how inundated the Red Cross was right after the war, with so many refugees and other people trying to locate their loved ones but the information was coming so slowly over from Europe. One has to remember there was no computers or internet at that time.

But truly, the success of the novel's ringing true to me has to do with the exploration of memory and just how powerful it is. Josef, who was safe here during the war, clings to the memory of Lenka in order to survive, while Lenka must suppress hers of him in order to survive her far more physically traumatic experiences in Terezin and Auschwitz.

### Lescroart:

You portray life in the Czechoslovakian prison camp of Terezin as horrible of course, yet quite different--more filled with intrigue, politics, and passion--than most other books that deal with the Holocaust. How did this pivotal landscape evolve in your consciousness as you were creating this book?

### Richman:

I was lucky enough to be able to visit the Czech Republic and meet with survivors of Terezin, some of whom had been artists in the Technical Department there and knew many of the real-life characters depicted in the book. Their testimony really enhanced my

writing of the novel and breathed life into it that would have been impossible without hearing about their actual experiences. When you think of the Holocaust, you immediately and rightfully imagine those haunting images of tragedy and death. But through my research, I learned another aspect--the ability of the human spirit to defy great odds just to live--as well as to still be able to love and to create, even under great duress. I remember listening to one survivor of Terezin who said: "We thought we were going to die... so what choice did we have. We still wanted to love and laugh. We still wanted to live."

Alyson Richman is the author of: *The Mask Carver's Son*, *The Rhythm of Memory* (previously published as *Swedish Tango*), *The Last Van Gogh* and *The Lost Wife*. Her novels have been published in more than fifteen languages and have received both national and international critical acclaim. She is a graduate of Wellesley College and a former Thomas J. Watson Fellow. She currently lives with her husband and children in Long Island, New York.

#### Other Books

*Journal of East Asiatic Studies*,

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ . The following parts are the story of the husband who seeks after the lost wife or of the bridegroom who undergoes the tasks set by the father-in-law or mother-in-law. VI. The husband goes up to heaven to be reunited with his wife. ..."