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11 QUESTIONS WITH LINDSEY ROGERS COOK

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digital: What was your inspiration for this book?

Lindsey Rogers Cook: I started with Memphis—I'll talk about that in question three—and with the idea of writing about a powerful friendship, even love, that wasn't romantic love. I've read many books that dive into the complicated and beautiful world of a sister-like friendship between two girls, but I'm not aware of many books that focus on a friendship between a boy and a girl when both identify as straight that doesn't end in romance.

I started thinking about these two kids from very different lives, each lonely in their own way, who were friends above all else and without explanation, when everyone around them thought they would eventually be more than that. I grew up as "one of the boys," and many of my oldest friendships are with men. Grant is named after one of my best friends. Like Lex and Grant, we decided in middle school not to *like* like each other and have been close friends and support systems for each other since.

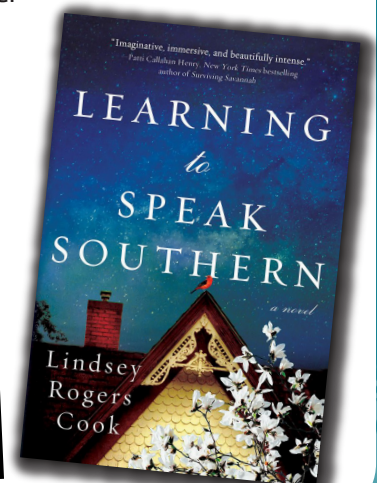
hd: Where do you start a story? Do you start with a particular character or scene? Do you know the ending when you begin?

LRC: I tend to start with several themes I want to explore, then try and figure out how to tie them together in one plot. In *Learning to Speak Southern*: male-female friendship, a mother and daughter who are more similar than they think, a love of language, Memphis. I started with Lex and the first pages I handwrote in a notebook now make up the beginning of the book. Those pages and the ending for Lex changed little from my first conceit of the plot. I'm not a writer who can painstakingly outline, but for this book, I at least had a one-page synopsis before starting, which was really helpful! A lot of the plot and character details come to me as I'm writing though.

hd: The city of Memphis takes on a personality of its own. How did you pick Memphis, and how well did you know the city before you started writing?

LRC: Before I started researching, I knew Memphis only from the stories my grandfather told. My mother's side of the family has a deep history there—my mother was born there, my grandparents both graduated from what is now the University of Memphis, where he "picked her out of a magazine," as Grant's father does with his mother, and I still have some distant family who live in the city. My memories of my grandfather have always been laced with Memphis, through the accent I'd study, different from my Georgia relatives, and through his stories about listening to the police blotter the night MLK was murdered, about BBQ from the Rendezvous, his school days at Christian Brothers High School, fishing at his uncle's pond, where he saw the Peabody ducks, his paper route for the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, and the portrait of Elvis his mother displayed proudly, which she got from one of her friends who worked as a maid at Graceland.

I also visited the city with my mother. I truly fell in love with Memphis while writing this book and while visiting with the people who live there. Unfortunately, COVID-19 interrupted my plan to travel there with my husband and force him to love it too so that I could convince him to move there, but I haven't ruled it out!





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WHY WE LOVE *Learning to Speak Southern*

hd: Lex is multilingual and has an obsession with language. How much research went into this book regarding the linguistics and historical context of language?

LRC: A ton of research! So much.

I took several years of Spanish in college, as well as some Arabic and a linguistics course. I've always loved language, but my talents align more with Margaret's own than with Lex. I'm deeply jealous of people who can be described as polyglots, who know multiple languages and can easily jump between them and see the connections between us all. I think it's quite beautiful, how many languages exist in the world and how similar they still are in many ways, the same as people.

The references to the *Dictionary of Word Origins* in the book are mashed together from several such dictionaries I have. I developed a nervous habit similar to Lex's in the book of flipping through these and reading random words while I was writing. I also read a lot of books (of course). A readable one that I enjoyed was *The Story of English in 100 Words* by David Crystal, a linguistics writer I highly recommend. I also hired a linguistics master's student to fact-check the language aspects of the book, to help ensure they were accurate.

hd: All the characters in the book feel like real people. Do you ever base your characters on people you know?

LRC: The characters I write are all composites—they include some characteristics of real people, both people I know and people I don't. They all include some of me. They include characteristics I've made up, dialogue I've heard on the subway, imagined histories I've concocted while watching someone standing in line at the grocery store. I always take inspiration from real life.

In my first book, *How to Bury Your Brother*, the main character's life circumstances and personality are very different from my own. Lex's personality is much closer to mine. I borrowed some characteristics from my real friend Grant for the character of Grant, as well as some of my brother, Davis, who is also a pilot.

hd: How did you balance the dual timelines of Lex's present and Margaret's past?

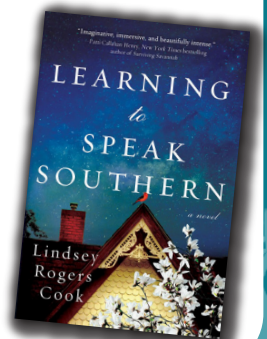
LRC: I wanted the reader to develop a full picture of both characters, but also to see a full picture of what Memphis was like in both time periods. I worked on their stories independently at first, to make sure that each had her own storyline, voice, and personal growth, so early on, I had two books—one for Lex and one for Margaret. After Margaret's story felt complete, I started the messy work of joining them together into one book.

hd: Did you have a favorite character to write? Was any character more challenging to write?

LRC: I loved writing the Margaret sections most—she cracked me up endlessly. And in another example of finding inspiration in the weirdest places, her character was first sparked by a family story I read on Reddit about a woman who said that getting all her belongings stolen while backpacking in Paris in the eighties was the best thing that ever happened to her. Margaret might say the same.

hd: *Learning to Speak Southern* deals with some heavy topics, including miscarriage and suicide. How do you strike a balance between such heavy topics and lighter moments?

LRC: My books deal with heavy topics, but I also aim for light sections, and hopefully, even funny moments. Just like life, no? Even after tragedy strikes, as it does with Lex in the





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beginning of the book, she can pick herself up, experience love and joy, like we all can. It's a lesson I remind myself often and one we all need after living through 2020/2021. The balance of light and heavy, indeed that a life and a story must include both, constantly dancing with one another to feel whole, is one thing I love about life in the South and about southern families, who always seem to find the humor hidden in pain.

hd: Did you have a hard time deciding on the “right” endings for Lex, Grant, and Cami after everything they had been through, separately and together?

LRC: I had the central part of the ending from the beginning of the book, but tying up those last loose threads is always a challenge. On one hand, I want the reader to leave the story with some closure, but also, with an ability to imagine what came next and, to some extent, to write their own ending for the characters. I went back and forth if I should include the very last chapter or not. Ultimately, I decided to keep it and that it was important to show the characters we've traveled with securely placed in the created family they spent the book forming.

hd: What are you hoping readers gain from *Learning to Speak Southern*?

LRC: Family can be about blood, but it doesn't need to be. I'm fortunate to be close to the people I'm related to by blood and also to people who I am not but still consider family. As I wrote in the dedication, I believe the best types of friends are those who feel like family, and the best types of family members are those who feel like friends.

I hope readers also come away with a new appreciation for language and a desire to visit Memphis!

hd: What books are on your bedside table right now?

LRC: As usual, my bedside table is crowded; I have a bad habit of treating my stack of books as a to-do list, though it's a fun one. Right now, I've got:

- *Girlhood* by Melissa Febos, which I'm reading for an essay I'm working on.
- *Bronte's Mistress* by Finola Austin, a delightful book about the original Mrs. Robinson that I'm refreshing myself on, for an event to celebrate the paperback release.
- *Queer Love in Color*, by my former *NYT* colleague Jamal Jordan.
- *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell. I frequently swap books with friends and tend to keep them separate from my own books, so they don't get mixed up. Don't be that friend who never returns books!
- *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. A classic I know I'll love but haven't read yet.
- Some short story collections, as I'm writing some short stories of my own right now: *PEN America Best Debut Short Stories 2019* and *Orange World* by Karen Russell.
- *The Highly Sensitive Person* by Elaine N. Aron.
- *The Things We Cannot Say* by Kelly Rimmer, which my book club is reading this month.

Ready to discuss *Learning to Speak Southern* with your book club? Find hoopla's exclusive discussion guide and meeting planner at theclub.hoopladigital.com. Then, let us know what you think on social using @hoopladigital and #hooplalbookclub!

