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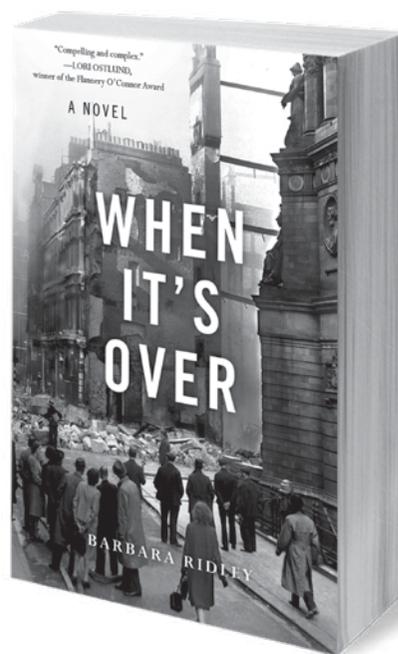
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# ONE *to* WATCH

## *Interview with Barbara Ridley* *by Sejal H. Patel*



Barbara Ridley is the author of *When It's Over*, a historical fiction novel set in Prague and England in the 1930s. The book is based on a true story about Ridley's parents. When I heard Ridley read at Green Apple Books in San Francisco, I loved hearing how fact and fiction intertwined in her writing.

Ridley worked as a nurse practitioner for over thirty years before she retired. She had special expertise in caring for patients with disabilities. She began writing later in life when a life coach at a nursing conference engaged the attendees in an exercise: turn to a stranger and share a bold, unfulfilled dream. At first, Ridley scorned the exercise as glib. But when she turned to her conversation partner and said, "My dream is to write a novel," she surprised herself with the answer. She has since published numerous short stories, alongside the many articles she wrote for professional nursing and medical journals over the years.

In her debut novel, Ridley shows us the interiority of life in times of war. War is big, but life moments in families, marriage, and friendships are small and relatable. Her prose is, at once, patient and firm, fictional and authentic.

**It is a great pleasure to talk to you, Barbara. I know that your book is based on real events. Can you begin by telling us why you chose to write this as a novel and not a nonfiction book?**

I was inspired to write the novel after the death of my mother—really as a way of preserving her extraordinary story, and the memory of those she had lost. I didn't want all that to die with her. But I soon realized there were a lot of gaps in my knowledge. I regretted not quizzing either her or my father—who lived for two years after her death—for more details. I tried to get more information from some of their contemporaries who were still alive, but their memories were failing. So I thought well, I love fiction, I'll write it as a novel.

**Why did you feel compelled to write a story about your family history? Did writing the book make you feel like you had arrived at some answers about who you are, or did the process leave you with many more questions?**

Although there are thousands of books, both fiction and nonfiction, about World War II, I felt this story could offer a fresh perspective on some little-known aspects of life in England during the war: specifically, the experience of refugees who had fled the Nazis, and the progressive political movement that led to the defeat of Churchill in the 1945 election, immediately after the end of the war in Europe. These seemed like stories worth telling.

Writing the novel involved re-living what my mother had suffered, in a far more intense, emotional way than she ever shared with me. She was usually very reserved and held her emotions in check. I think this was typical of many in her generation. This was how she coped with her grief, but probably, too, she didn't want to "burden" me with her pain. I had already become aware in my young adulthood of how this had made it difficult for me to express emotions, and I felt critical of my parents for that aspect of my upbringing. But writing the novel made me appreciate what she had lived through, at such a young age herself, and how deep her pain must have been. It also made me reflect on how I must be carrying that legacy within me, the inter-generational legacy of trauma that Elizabeth Rosner and others have described. I think my experience, my "personal inheritance," is probably different from someone raised with two parents as Holocaust survivors. My father was English, and after her marriage to him, my

mother assimilated into an upper-middle class English lifestyle as a typical 1950s housewife, and her past was not often mentioned. So I feel as if I am still trying to make sense of the impact on me. It's interesting that now the novel has been published, I have English cousins writing to me that they are amazed to learn the details of my mother's background. It's as if the topic was off-limits for all those years they knew her; with good English politeness, they never wanted to "pry."

**How did you research the story, which touches largely on World War II, also on the Spanish Civil War, Hitler's Germany, Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, and England's involvement in the war?**

I started with a couple of autobiographies I discovered on my parents' bookshelves, written by fellow refugees of my mother's, people whose names were familiar to me. I also had a taped interview, an oral history I had recorded with my mother twenty years before her death. From there I read everything I could get my hands on, both fiction and nonfiction, to thoroughly immerse myself in the period. The opening chapter of the novel takes place in Paris, where Lena, the protagonist, is stuck at the start of the war, trying to get an entry permit for England. I couldn't write that scene without researching what Paris was like at the time: everything from what the weather like that winter, to how much a pair of second-hand shoes might cost at the flea market. So I read Hemingway, and other memoirs, and historical accounts. Likewise, for the sections that take place in Prague and London. One book I used extensively was Angus Calder's *The People's War*. And I did a lot of online research, of course; one of the most valuable resources was the BBC People's War Archives, compiled between 2003 and 2006, containing thousands of anecdotes, letters, and photographs from ordinary people, reflecting the whole spectrum of everyday life during the war. The Imperial War Museum in London is also incredible. I traveled to London, Paris, and Prague—all places I had previously visited—but returning with a researcher's eye.

**What was the most surprising discovery on your travels?**

I was astounded to discover that in 1940, the British authorities interned refugees from Germany and Austria. Having lived in California for over thirty years, I was familiar with the internment of Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor, but I had never heard about

the British internment camps. It was very controversial at the time: in the face of the threat of German invasion, people who had fled Nazi persecution, such as Jews and communists, were interned as potential “fifth-column” spies, in some cases for the entire duration of the war. I was also fascinated to learn about the wartime political activism in Britain. We tend to think the British “kept calm and carried on,” stoically sipping their tea in the air-raid shelters. And they did that, of course. But they also held mass demonstrations calling for the “Second Front”—the invasion of France—for eighteen months before D-Day, organized illegal strikes, and advocated for a socialist post-war reconstruction—the movement which led to the defeat of Churchill in the 1945 election.

**You take a hard look at the life of a refugee here. A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave his or her country. It seems to me that there is a dual displacement here—the displacement that comes with fleeing a homeland and then the displacement of coming to a place where a person feels they may not belong. Can you tell us how you thought about this when you were constructing your characters?**

I read about the internment of “enemy aliens” and thought about what it must have been like for these refugees, fleeing for their lives, leaving family behind, and then facing xenophobia. Britain was a very homogenous society back then, and was of course under great threat. So we know hostility toward outsiders increases in situations such as these. And individuals are going to respond in different ways. So in my novel, the character of Lotti for example, she never feels accepted in Britain and yearns to return home to Prague as soon as the war is over. But Lena is much more ready to embrace life in her adopted country. I also thought a lot about how cut off they were from their families left behind, with no communication. It’s difficult for us to understand this in today’s world. When I watched Ai Weiwei’s extraordinary documentary “Human Flow,” I was struck by the fact that today’s refugees are certainly in dire straits, and may have nothing to their name—but they all carry smart phones. They can talk to their relatives back in Syria or Afghanistan or wherever. In World War II there was no way to communicate with people in Nazi-occupied territory, no way to find out what was happening. So I wanted to try to portray that

in my characters. But I also wanted to include lighter touches, some of the small, humorous misunderstandings and confusions that any immigrant faces, such as being flummoxed by the currency or the food. And I have a scene, based on a true anecdote, where a small-minded bureaucrat can’t understand the Slav convention of adding *-ova* to a woman’s last name; Lena’s is *Kulkova*, while her father is *Kulka*.

**The political unrest and war in this novel pose a basic existential threat to your characters—they are uncertain about their safety and the safety of those they love. How did you as a writer put yourself in Lena’s mind emotionally without having gone through this experience yourself? What tools did you use to “be” Lena?**

I drew on some material I had from my mother. She didn’t talk much about what this experience was like for her emotionally, as I said, but I remembered tidbits she let drop over the years, such as her fantasy of having her little sister come live with her after the war was over. I sprinkled the narrative with small anecdotes of hers or phrases she used. But although Lena is a character based on my mother, she is not her. She is *Lena*. She is a young woman I invented, a woman coming of age and falling in love and falling out of love, and I immersed myself in that character for years, and wrote scenes that emerged from that imagination.

**Lena and her father have a strained relationship, but she harbors the hope that it will improve. How does the political theater here interact with the father-daughter dynamic?**

As a teenager, Lena is radicalized by the Spanish Civil War and becomes involved in the anti-fascist movement in Prague. This brings her into conflict with her conservative, authoritarian father, who is physically abusive, and when she leaves home to go to Paris, she vows to never speak to him again. But she later learns that he escaped Czechoslovakia after the Nazi occupation, fleeing over the mountains and, via a tortuous route, finally reaching the south of France to enlist in the Free Czech army. So she is forced to re-evaluate her relationship with him. She realizes “the old rules of engagement no longer applied.” Later in the novel, she has to deal with her anger that her father left her mother and sister behind in Prague, and find a way to forgive him.

**You write, “[Lena] would never go back to Prague. She didn’t want to think about Prague; she didn’t want to talk about it.” Why is silence a coping mechanism for Lena?**

One theme I wanted to explore in the novel is the tension between optimism and pessimism, between realism and false hope. Lena is optimistic, she holds out hope, and dismisses the pessimistic predictions of those such as Otto, the man who is her lover and who becomes her husband. She closes her mind to facts that might belie hope and optimism, and her attraction to Milton is based partly on the appeal of his more cheerful, positive disposition. Yet when she is with *him*, she can allow her more skeptical side to emerge. But she never gives up hope. At the end of the war, she has to confront the failure of her optimism, and her world view is shaken to the core. She closes down and retreats emotionally as a protective mechanism. I think this was a common reaction in survivors of that generation.

**If we each process trauma differently, based on our past experiences and where we are stationed in life when we live through trauma, what did you learn about how friendships, family relationships, and marriages stay tied together? What allows groups of people to heal together instead of breaking into factions?**

I learned from my many years as a nurse, working with patients who have suffered devastating injuries and disease, that response to loss and grief is so individual. We can identify factors that make it easier, and resources that help someone cope, but why some people or relationships or groups succeed and others fail remains a mystery, I think. There is no magic formula. So this makes such fertile ground for fiction.

**The title of the book, *When It’s Over*, signals that something is actually over. In your view, is war ever really over?**

Well, clearly, when we look around us at the world today, war is obviously not over. There seems to be an endless appetite for violence and aggression. For me, “When It’s Over” refers to the longing, the hope that motivates us to continue, to survive. In the last chapter, the epilogue, Lena’s daughter discovers the picture book *Brundibár*, based on the opera performed by the children of Terezín, the Czech concentration camp. In that story, the children triumph over Brundibár the tyrant, but he has the last word: “Bullies don’t give up

completely.” The struggle for peace and justice has to be ongoing.

**I loved the story of how this book came into being, because it almost didn’t. Would you share your publication story with us?**

Yes, I almost gave up. I worked for about six years on the first complete draft of the novel, and then began sending it out to agents, all carefully researched. And initially I had a great response; eight agents requested the full manuscript over the next two years, and some seemed very enthusiastic. But one by one, they gave me the sorry-it’s-not-quite-right-for-us-at-this-time story. So I then worked with a developmental editor, and made some major revisions, and started sending out a fresh batch of queries, both to agents and small presses that accept unrepresented submissions. But this time I got no interest at all. I gave up for over a year and worked on other things, began to get short pieces published in literary journals. And then two friends separately asked if they could read the novel, and they both were very enthusiastic. “You have to get this published,” they said. So I started to explore other options, and discovered She Writes Press, a curated, hybrid press that allows women to finance their own work while having access to traditional distribution and quality editorial and design services. It was a good fit for me.

**If you could tell a reader one thing to take away from this book, what would it be?**

Well, I think the novel resonates in different ways for different people, and that’s fine. Some see it as primarily a love story or a coming-of-age tale; others see a very political story, or a way to travel with the characters and experience what it was like to live through those tumultuous times. I guess what I like to ask people to reflect on is how hard it was for refugees then. Now we know and understand how important it was for them to flee, we know the terrible fate of those left behind. But they were not made welcome everywhere, and they faced tremendous obstacles in their search for safety. Currently, the world is facing the largest refugee crisis since that era, and today’s refugees are also fleeing horrendous violence and persecution. No one flees their homeland, placing themselves and their families in harm’s way, unless it seems safer than staying behind. Refugees always deserve our support. 

# Contributors' Notes

## FICTION

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**BECCA KROCK** is an ex-neuroscientist and works in science communication. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband.

**JOAN LI** is a Northeastern native living in the Midwest. Her work has been published and/or recognized in *The Seventh Wave*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *Best American Essays 2017*.

**GENA ELLETT**'s writing has appeared in *Slice*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Malahat Review*, and elsewhere. She was awarded the 2018 Charles Lillard Founders' Award for Nonfiction, was longlisted for the 2018 CBC Short Story Contest, and was nominated for a 2016 National Magazine Award. Find her at @heygenajay and genaellott.com.

## DECLINE/ACCEPT

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**KELLY HILL** is a novelist and screenwriter who grew up in Springfield, Missouri. She is the author of *Anywhere But Here* (2018) and writer/director of "Redmonton," an award-winning web series.

## POETRY

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**HEATHER CAHOON** received an MFA in Poetry from the University of Montana in 2001 where she was the Richard Hugo Scholar. "Death as a Lens" comes from her recently-completed manuscript, *Horsefly Dress*. Cahoon is from Montana and is a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

**JOSÉ DEL VALLE** is a Cuban-born writer living in Rockville, RI. Poems & stories have appeared in *The Saranac Review*, *The Acentos Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *The Mainichi (Tokyo)*, *Contemporary Haibun Online*, *The Heron's Nest*, the late Jane Reichhold's *Lynx* & other small haiku pubs.

**GEORGIA DENNISON** was born in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and now resides in Montana where she is an MFA candidate and writing instructor at the University of Montana. She hosts the Second Wind Reading Series and is a poetry editor for *Cutbank Literary Magazine*. Her work has appeared in *Pacifica Literary Review*.

**RENÉE CHRISTINE EHLE** is a writer and educator in the Bronx. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Common Ground Review*, *2 Horatio*, *Spark: A Creative Anthology*, and the *Diverse Arts Project Journal*. She holds an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and is a teacher-consultant with the New York City Writing Project.

## NONFICTION

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**MELISSA MESKU** is originally from Southern California, and now a writer and editor in New York.

**AVERY ERWIN**'s writing is also forthcoming in *Witness*. He lives and works in New York City.

**JONATHAN STARKE** is a former bodybuilder and boxer. He's harvested seaweed in Ireland, given free hugs in Spain, and flipped pancakes in Denmark. He loves riding trains and wondering about the lives unfolding outside the window. Founding editor of *Palooka*. Pro-wrestling enthusiast. Book editor. Vagabond heart.

## ONE TO WATCH

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**BARBARA RIDLEY** was born in England but has lived in California for over 35 years. Her work has appeared in *Writers Workshop Review*, *Ars Medica*, *The Copperfield Review*, *Blood and Thunder*, and *Stoneboat*, among other places. Her debut novel *When It's Over* (She Writes Press, 2017), won a Silver Medal in the 2018 IBPA Benjamin Franklin Awards and in the Sarton Women's Book Awards. Barbara lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her partner and her West Highland terrier, and she has an adult daughter, of whom she is immensely proud. She can be followed at [www.barbararidley.com](http://www.barbararidley.com)

## COVER ART & ILLUSTRATIONS

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**JUSTIN BURKS** is a graduate of the Art Institute of Dallas and currently runs Birdhouse Branding.