

CARVE

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FICTION

Becky Mandelbaum
JP Kemmick
Chelsey Grasso
J.E. McCafferty

POETRY

Matt McBride
Suzannah Russ Spaar
Rachel Kaufman
Bill Neumire
Holly Wren Spaulding

NONFICTION

E.E. Hussey
Sara Mang
Brandi Bradley

PLUS

Illustrations
Story Statshot
One to Watch
Decline/Accept

CARVE

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Contents

SHORT STORIES

<i>Other People's Bodies</i> Becky Mandelbaum.....	05
<i>Pinkies, Fuzzies, Hoppers</i> JP Kemmick	18
<i>Goose</i> Chelsey Grasso	37
<i>Saint Bus Driver</i> J.E. McCafferty	47

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT

Becky Mandelbaum	11
JP Kemmick	29
Chelsey Grasso	42
J.E. McCafferty.....	55

DECLINE/ACCEPT

<i>Get Your Feet Wet</i> Peter Beckstrom	61
--	----

POETRY

<i>Today I Was So Happy I Wrote This Poem</i> Matt McBride.....	64
<i>Terraform</i> Suzannah Russ Spaar	65
<i>Starfish</i> Rachel Kaufman	66
<i>Getting Trashed</i> Bill Neumire	67
<i>Starling & Crocus</i> Holly Wren Spaulding.....	68

NONFICTION

<i>Monstrum</i> E.E. Hussey	71
<i>Table(s) of Content</i> Sara Mang.....	75
<i>Good Ole Boys Like Me</i> Brandi Bradley	78

ONE TO WATCH

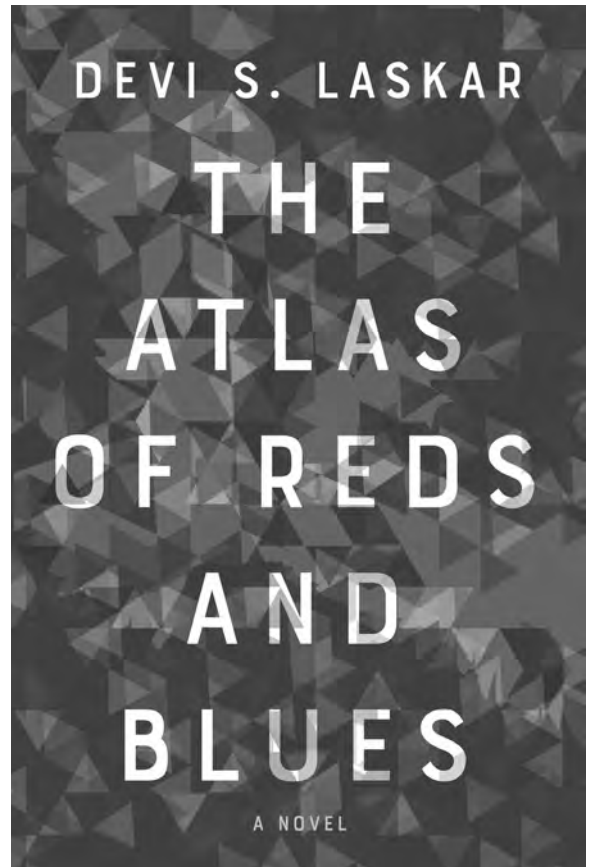
<i>Interview with Devi S. Laskar</i> Sejal H. Patel	83
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ONE *to* WATCH

Interview with Devi S. Laskar by Sejal H. Patel



Photo Credit: Anjini Laskar



Devi Laskar's poem "Paint By Number" appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of *Carve*. This February marks the publication of her first novel, *The Atlas of Reds and Blues*. In reading her novel, it is clear that poetry and prose worked together to produce a work fresh in its form, yet timeless in its ideas.

In our interview, we discuss the concepts in her book that are universal but especially on our minds today. What does it mean to "get past" something? Can we really "change the game" when the odds feel stacked against us? On the atlas of our lives, do we ever really know where we are, or are we all—in one way or another—lost?

ONE *to* WATCH

It is a special thing to read fiction authored by a poet. Every word is sacred. Every line joins hands with its predecessor. Every idea feels, to me, sublime. We are meant to sit with the words.

Laskar's novel is about a woman referred to only as "Mother" who begins the novel lying on her lawn shot by law enforcement. We come to know through flashbacks that she raises her three children with whom she calls "her Hero" (or her husband) in a well-to-do suburb in Georgia. The Hero is Caucasian, while Mother is not. Mother is American but from India, a difficult concept that Laskar explores throughout the novel. She also delves into explorations of motherhood, race, body image, bullying, marriage, and the American identity. Barbie dolls and their history play a prominent part of the narrative, as Laskar examines Mother's life through the lifespan of the Barbie enterprise.

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us, Devi. I noted that your biography and the details of this book bear some parallels. You were also a crime reporter, you also grew up in North Carolina and lived in the suburbs of Georgia, you also have three daughters and a spouse, and you are also a writer. In working with this story, can you tell us how you went about fictionalizing your reality? What big questions did you set out to explore about yourself when you were writing?

I had the great privilege of working with Lucille Clifton in graduate school in New York. I was a fledgling poet and fiction writer back then, and her advice and instruction remain invaluable to this day. Her friendship is something I'll always treasure. One of the first classes I took with her, in 1994, delved into the "oral tradition" of reciting aloud poetry, and how storytelling began before language was written; and because stories were told aloud, much attention was placed on cadence and tone, and on word choice.

One of the first assignments was to attend a talk by her friend, the poet Stanley Kunitz. Professor Kunitz spoke at length about the idea of making a myth of oneself, to take the confessional reality of one's own life and make it stand for something else, something big. I wanted to write about racism and identity, I wanted

to write about America. I'm a poet first, this book is one big pantoum: an examination of ideas from different angles. Rhythm and repetition. I'd been tinkering with this story for a while, and I returned to it during one of my last revisions and read each page aloud, and cut everything that didn't fit into the myth-making. As for the "big" questions, I was interested in placing a strong character in an untenable situation, and there's so much in this novel that isn't me. I wanted to write a story where the reader couldn't tell the wholly fictionalized sections apart from the autobiographical parts.

Mother, the daughters, and Hero have no names in the novel. Other characters do have names. I appreciate how we all have names but can feel like we exist only as we are in service to others—as parents, friends, siblings, caretakers, and so on. Why did you refer to these main characters only as they related to one another?

The Mother and her family are invisible in society, except as stereotypes in the white imagination, the dominant culture. Everyone else, even the other minority characters, have names because in some ways, however small, they are seen and counted. Also, I wanted Mother and her family to stand in for every marginalized family. Finally, in Bengali, the people in a family have titles for one another, no one is addressed by their given name. I wanted to pay homage to what I heard growing up.

Mother refers to her husband throughout the book as "her Hero." To orient the readers, the husband travels often for work, leaving Mother alone with moves, pregnancies, and in the raising of her three daughters. She loves him, to be sure. But she also refers to him as "her Hero" in ways that sometimes read as dark. Can you tell us about what marriage as a partnership means for these characters? I note that Mother refers to her husband not just as "Hero" but "her Hero"—possessive. Why?

Everyone has a role in society. In this story, the husband has a job that takes him away from the family. She refers to him as "her Hero" because that's what he is to her—he is a good man who, in the times of her extreme need, comes to her aid: when she miscarries, when she's about to take a bite of her lunch and possibly choke, when she's at the park and the stranger mom is discounting the value of daughters. Sure, Mother

wishes her Hero was around more, but she recognizes his contribution when he's present. But because her Hero is part of the dominant culture, he sometimes doesn't "see" her—I made that conscious decision to make her Hero part of the mainstream, because this is Mother's story.

The way you tell this story is beautiful. It is layered. We are in the present moment—when Mother has been shot and law enforcement is cruel and callous about her condition. We flash back to her youth in North Carolina. We also look at her life just before the shooting. Every part here is necessary to tell us the story of who Mother is. Our memories are obviously non-chronological, and we assign depth to moments that may not reflect how things actually happened. Why did you decide to tell the story in this non-chronological way? And do you think that we all somehow do this in recalling the stories of our own lives?

Thank you. More than eight years ago, the state police in Georgia raided my house at gunpoint. I was not shot. But one in the group of heavily-armed policemen did point his assault rifle at me for a long, long moment. I had been out of the newsroom for about a decade by this time, but I still believe it was my journalism training that saved my life that day. I kept silent as much as I could and I watched them, and I remember their behavior, and I remember all that flashed through my brain. It is true that the life you've lived and the people you love appear before you, like puzzle pieces, when you're in the middle of a dire circumstance. I wanted to recreate that feeling, the way only the important moments and the closest people come forward, how the brain tries to make sense of a series of disjointed memories. I think we all do this in a way, it doesn't have to be traumatic. Take an old song on the radio, for example. When we hear it, we instantly recall a memory, a fragment of the past.

You are constantly in scene here. We witness the indignities of small moments that carry giant emotional weight. For example, you tell us how Mother wears the same black pants and Garfield t-shirt when she is pregnant because that is all that fits. We also see how a cashier at the grocery store makes Mother feel ashamed over buying junk food. In a later scene, an Indian dry cleaner passes Mother flag stickers and tells her that it may help her to display them on the back of her car. In these and many other moments, I felt Mother having to defend her sense of self. Can you tell us why you think that small interactions like this, even if they are with

strangers, carry such power over us in how we see ourselves? Why can we not just shrug this off and say with confidence that we just don't care? We do care, which is why Mother is such a relatable character. Why?

We all want to be a part of the conversation, we all want to be seen and heard. Former Texas governor Ann Richards once famously said of women, "If we aren't at the table, we're on the menu." As a woman and a person of color, Mother is doubly discounted, especially in the Deep South. Every act of micro-aggression accumulates to the moment that she's on the driveway. If Mother had been acknowledged by America as human at any time before then, then maybe she wouldn't be in the position she finds herself in at the opening. These days, especially, in real life, there's a lack of civility and civil discourse. It's always been there, but it's heightened these days with the rise of white nationalism.

Barbie dolls occupy a central place in this book. We learn not only how Barbie dolls look but how popular they were and how they evolved over time. Tell us what Barbie dolls symbolize to you and what you think the merchandise did to the characters in your book. Did these playthings create unrealistic and unhealthy expectations in the three children? In Mother?

Barbie dolls are the iconic symbol of America and American childhood. I wanted to take a clear symbol of America and turn it upside down, and dissect it. So many girls have grown up revering their Barbie dolls, and I remember what a coup it was for the neighbors' daughters to get a Barbie accessory, how that changed the dynamic in the friend circle. I also remember how most of these neighborhood girls had brothers and dads. Everyone knew about Barbie dolls, and yes, this created unrealistic expectations in everyone. Yes, the dolls' proportions are impossible; and yes, the materialism that is being touted as ideal creates very unhealthy expectations. For everyone in society.

There are four layers of "home" in this book—Mother's ancestral home in Calcutta, India, life in the South, the neighborhood in the story, and then the interiority of Mother's home itself. In all four places, Mother feels isolated. She asks at one point, "What does it mean truly, to be invisible?" It is an interesting paradox to think that a person who is so busy and so engaged in "home" on these four levels can feel so utterly alone. Tell us about how Mother copes with this feeling of loneliness, especially because the plot that frames the entire book is Mother lying in front of her house,

bleeding from a bullet wound, entirely by herself even though she is surrounded by people.

I think Mother is accustomed to loneliness. And because she is numb, and busy, she doesn't have time to reflect on the loneliness very much—with the occasion of being shot, she has time to reflect.

How do you write such powerful images? There are many I can reference, but for starters—a cul-de-sac as a “dead end lung,” blood as ketchup “blooming” in Mother’s mouth, and missing slats from house windows as a house losing its “baby teeth”?

I am a poet first, and I was a reporter for a long time. I am also a photographer. I'm always trying to compress my characters' observations into small spaces.

The title is very provocative because of the idea of an atlas and the colors red and blue. Tell us why you chose these images and colors for this story.

As a poet, I've enjoyed a bit of success. This book had a different title originally, but that was more of an inside joke in my family and my circle of writing buddies. When it came time to present this novel to the public, I wanted something that could be construed as political, reds and blues; but also I wanted something that could lend additional meaning—red is the color of marriage in West Bengal, and blues is a genre of music in America. I took the title from a line of the very first political poem I wrote, in 2008, as a student in Squaw Valley. The poem was never published, no one wanted it, but now the line will live on.

We meet in the book an African-American boy named Henry, the only other minority in Mother’s school when she was young. A classmate lumps Mother and Henry together because their skin color can't “rub off.” Why does Mother invoke this memory as she thinks about her life in Georgia? Are there episodes in our lives that we never will “get over”?

Yes, there are moments in our lives, especially when we are young, that never “rub off.” These moments shape us, and shape how we view the world.

Mother tells us that her family was “forced to leave” when the India-Pakistan partition happened. There is no such political upheaval in the novel, yet Mother does feel “forced to leave” in how shunned she feels by her neighborhood. Explore this idea of how political turmoil and social turmoil can yield similar feelings of displacement. If Mother’s family had no agency in their situation, what agency does Mother have?

As hyphenated Americans and children of immigrants, we have all heard stories from our families' lips about exile and being forced to leave, about being unwelcome. Mother is no different, she has heard these stories (that is the background noise in the book), and she's pitting her own experiences against the rhythm.

The sweet dog is very important to this story, perhaps even as a missing harbinger that could have warned Mother about the police raid. Why is the pet so crucial to this narrative?

Greta is the soul of the book, the symbol of pure unconditional love. Greta sees Mother.

If you had to offer advice to a new novelist about something you did right or something you wish you had done differently when drafting your novel, what would it be?

I can only offer this piece of advice: Don't ever give up on your dream for your book, and don't let any voice inside your head distract you from your goal. When I started this story back in 2004, I had no idea about the twists and turns it would take, or the journey I would have to take, or the sheer number of people who discouraged me. But I had an idea about an unnamed woman and her kids and her dog trying to be “American” and I never let that dream go. ↪

Contributors' Notes

FICTION

CHELSEY GRASSO is currently an MFA candidate at UMass Boston. Her fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Mortar Magazine* and *The Harvard Review Online*. She placed second in the 2018 Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing Contest.

JP KEMMICK works as a middle school English teacher in Seattle. He has an MFA from the University of Montana and past work in *Beechers*, *Barrelhouse*, and elsewhere. He is at work on a story collection and a novel.

BECKY MANDELBAUM is the author of *Bad Kansas*, which received the 2016 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and the 2018 High Plains Book Award for First Book. Her first novel is forthcoming from Simon & Schuster.

J.E. McCAFFERTY (aka Jane McCafferty) is the author of four books of fiction. Her work has received awards such as The Drue Heinz prize, two Pushcarts, and an NEA. She teaches in Pittsburgh, at Carnegie Mellon, and for Madwomen In the Attic.

POETRY

RACHEL KAUFMAN will graduate from Yale University in May with a BA. in English and History. Her work has appeared in *The Yale Daily News* and *The New Journal*. She is now writing an archival poetry collection about memory of crypto-Jews in New Mexico.

MATT MCBRIDE's work has recently appeared in or is forthcoming from *Court Green*, *Map Literary*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Packingtown Review*, amongst others. His first book, *City of Incandescent Light*, was released by Black Lawrence Press in 2018.

BILL NEUMIRE's first book, *Estrus*, was a semi-finalist for the 42 Miles Press Award, and his second manuscript is almost ready.

SUZANNAH RUSS SPAAR is a poet from Charlottesville, Virginia, who received her MFA from the University of Pittsburgh. She co-authored the chapbook *Undone in Scarlet* (Tammy, 2018) with Lucia LoTempio. Read more at *Luna Luna*, *The Boiler*, and elsewhere.

HOLLY WREN SPAULDING's most recent book is *If August* (Alice Greene & Co., 2017). She is the founder of *Poetry Forge* and teaches at Interlochen College of Creative Arts. www.hollywrenspaulding.com.

NONFICTION

BRANDI BRADLEY was born in Bells, Tennessee, and raised by a rodeo clown and a snake-oil salesman. Her work has appeared in *Juked*, *The Lincoln Humanities Journal*, and *Louisiana Literature*. She is pursuing a PhD in creative writing at Florida State University. For more information visit brandibradley.com.

E.E. HUSSEY was born in the Philippines and raised in Japan and Italy. She is the recipient of a scholarship from Tin House Writers' Workshop and a grant from the Vermont Studio Center. She is an MFA student at the University of Alabama. Find her online at eehussey.com or [@eehussey](https://twitter.com/eehussey).

SARA MANG's prose and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *The New Quarterly*, *Canadian Literature*, *Room*, and *CV2*. In 2018, she was a contender for the Malahat Review's Poetry Award and the Bristol Story Prize. She is currently an MFA candidate at the University of British Columbia.

DECLINE/ACCEPT & ONE TO WATCH

A former Marine and current public defender, **PETER BECKSTROM**'s stories can be found in *O-Dark Thirty*, *Prime Number Magazine*, and *BlazeVOX*, amongst other print and online journals. He currently resides in Florida with his wife, two children, and their cat, Annabel.

DEVI S. LASKAR is a native of Chapel Hill, NC. She holds an MFA from Columbia University, an MA in South Asian studies from the University of Illinois, and a BA in journalism and English from the UNC-CH. A former newspaper reporter, she is now a poet, photographer, and artist. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming from such journals as *Rattle*, *Tin House*, and *Crab Orchard Review*. In 2017, Finishing Line Press published two poetry chapbooks, *Gas & Food*, *No Lodging* and *Anastasia Maps*. Counterpoint Press will publish her debut novel, *The Atlas of Reds and Blues*, in early 2019. She now lives in California.

SEJAL H. PATEL is a San Francisco-based writer and public interest lawyer. She is a graduate of Northwestern Law School and Harvard Divinity School. Her essays, reviews, and interviews have appeared in *Creative Nonfiction*, *the Rumpus*, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, *Literary Mama*, and *Brevity*. www.sejalhpatel.com.

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