

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

Lois Ruskai Melina, author

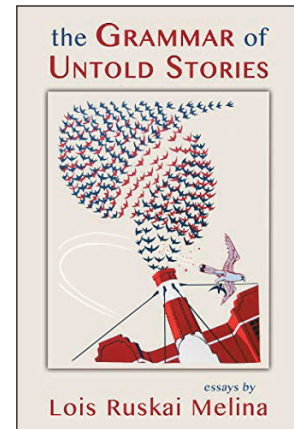
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interview by Carol Smallwood

After receiving a PhD in Leadership Studies, **Lois Ruskai Melina** taught in universities and her research focused on social movements and leadership. The word essay comes from “to try” and Melina’s collection with its touches of humor rises to the challenge on several contemporary issues. The author lives in Oregon with her husband where she enjoys rowing, and women’s soccer; she has a grown son and daughter, and two grandchildren.



Smallwood: The title essay, “The Grammar of Untold Stories,” was a Notable Essay in Best American Essays, 2018 and a finalist for the North American Review’s Torch Prize and the New Letters Prize for Nonfiction. What other prizes have you received?

Lois Ruskai Melina chose my essay, “Down in the River to Pray,” for the 2016 Best of the Net Anthology (Sundress Publications). “The Scent of Water” was a finalist for the John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize at Crab Orchard Review. My short story, “Goat-Song,” was a finalist in the Lamar York Prize for Fiction contest at The Chattahoochee Review and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

The essay collection as a whole was a finalist in contests by three publishers before it was accepted by Shanti Arts.

Smallwood: Your economical use of words—lyrical to narrative with deft dialogue, covers several contemporary issues. Please share with readers some:

Lois Ruskai Melina: For personal essays to be meaningful for readers, they have to explore issues or experiences that resonate beyond the author’s life. In “Bread and Roses,” I describe my efforts to start a union at a newspaper I worked at in the 1970s, but I weave my experience in with historical material about women in the labor movement—many of whom were also newspaper journalists and suffragists. Of course, in talking about unions and activism, one has to talk about power. I consider how activism—from labor strikes to the 2017 Women’s March—creates an awareness of how power is held in the body.

“Obstruction,” which is about the last weeks of my mother’s life, explores ethical questions about end-of-life issues (and also the power of the medical establishment—I often come back to “power” in these essays.) “Down in the River to Pray” describes my efforts to find a missing nephew who had been diagnosed with HIV after moving to New York City in the late 1980s.

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Smallwood: What are some literary journals you have appeared? Are they essays also? Do you write poetry, fiction? When did you begin writing?

Lois Ruskai Melina: I've had essays in some wonderful literary journals: Colorado Review, Lunch Ticket, Sport Literate, Literary Mama, and The Carolina Quarterly are just a few.

I don't think of myself as a poet, but a couple of these essays were published as prose poems—"Still Life with Birds" in Entropy and "Wings" in Eastern Iowa Review. I wasn't getting acceptances from journals that I'd submitted them to as essays, and I considered that perhaps they were more lyrical than some nonfiction editors liked, so I decided to submit them as prose poems. But I wrote them as essays so they are included in the collection.

I wrote nonfiction for so much of my life as a journalist that I'd never considered writing fiction until recently. Blood Orange Review and The Chattahoochee Review have published both my fiction and nonfiction.

I began writing for my high school newspaper, continued in college as a journalism major and after graduation worked in public relations a bit before taking a job as a newspaper reporter. After my husband and I adopted in 1980, I realized there was very little information for new adoptive parents, so I started a subscription-based newsletter, Adopted Child, which I published for about 20 years. During that time I also wrote three books on adoption published by HarperCollins. After that, I wanted to write about something different, so I followed nine of the top female swimmers in the United States for eighteen months leading up to the 2000 Olympic Trials and published their stories in the book *By a Fraction of a Second* (Sports Publications). I was happy with that book in a lot of ways, but I also realized when I was finished that I wanted to tell stories differently, and I began taking creative writing classes and writing personal essays.

Smallwood: You include your grandmother and mother in your essay collection. How have they shaped your writing? What women writers have influenced your writing?

Lois Ruskai Melina: I loved to read when I was growing up—I think most writers say that. When I was little, the public library was at the end of our block, and my mother and I would walk there and check out books. I had two sisters several years older than I am, and I became acquainted with a range of books through their interests and recommendations.

The Nancy Drew mystery series was an early favorite of mine, probably because she was spunky and adventurous with a lot of agency. I didn't know until much later that the author Carolyn Keane was actually a pseudonym for a number of different writers, but most of the books were written by Mildred Wirt Benson. I still love to read mystery/suspense/thrillers—like those by Rene Denfield, which are literary and deal with contemporary issues in addition to being suspenseful.

When I read Lidia Yuknavitch's memoir, *The Chronology of Water*, it totally changed the way I looked at writing memoir and personal essay. She takes risks and pushes boundaries in a way that I hadn't considered

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as a journalist who was trained in a particular relationship with narrative. Roxane Gay has also influenced me in that way.

I've been fortunate to take several of the Corporeal Writing workshops with Lidia. Many of the essays in this collection started in or were revised in one of her workshops.

I've been a fan of Terry Tempest Williams' books for a long time, and I think my comfort with weaving the natural world into my writing is influenced by her writing.

Smallwood: The sixteen essays in *The Grammar of Untold Stories* are divided into Family, Work, Home. How did you decide on the title? How long did it take to write?

Lois Ruskai Melina: The title of the collection is also the title of one of my favorite essays in the book. But I also thought it represented one of the themes that shows up throughout the collection, which is how we make sense of what we don't know. Grammar is the structure that we use to make sense out of words, and stories are the structures that we use to make sense out of experiences. But sometimes we have incomplete narratives, secrets, missing information. My interest in this goes back to my writing about adoption and the awareness of how often children who have been adopted must try to piece together their stories out of incomplete information.

The collection took about three years to write.

Smallwood: Have you seen changes in women getting published, the questions they are asking?

Lois Ruskai Melina: I definitely think women are breaking barriers in publishing in terms of getting greater recognition for their work and in challenging some of the norms when it comes to forms, characters, and topics. Writers like Maggie Nelson and Rebecca Solnit are demonstrating that there is a big audience for smart writing. But at the same time, I'm aware that this is still a struggle—still requires effort.

What I would like to see is the age bias addressed in publishing—particularly as it relates to women authors and women characters. A literary journal recently announced a themed issue for writers over 60. To me, that's an admission that older writers are marginalized and require an affirmative effort to accept their work. Older women often feel invisible and I think this bias is alive and well in the publishing world. I'd like to see more older women as protagonists—without them being stereotyped as sexless, clueless, and frumpy. I recently read a mystery by a male author in which the detective was a woman in her 60s who had not advanced in her job because of sex discrimination. She was an active hiker and skier and involved in a new romantic relationship. It was so refreshing!

Smallwood: Please share what you are writing now, and how living in Oregon relates to your work:

Lois Ruskai Melina: I've lived in Oregon since 2008. Before that I lived in Idaho for almost 30 years. I've been an active outdoors person that entire time. So my writing reflects the natural world—rivers and mountains and hiking and rowing. A sense of place is important to my work. I hope

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readers of “Wings,” for example, feel the heat and dust and steepness of that hike. In “The Synchronicity of Healing,” I hope readers get a sense of what it’s like to row in the hours before dawn or in a race

I’m working on a novel that has three intertwined narratives set in France, Iceland, and the Pacific Northwest, chosen in part because of my fascination with each of those environments and how it shapes the people who live there. The protagonists are women of various ages who are in relationships with other women—as lovers, as friends, as sisters. It’s a lot to take on for a first novel!

Carol Smallwood, MLS, MA, Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award recipient, is a literary reader, judge, interviewer; her 13th poetry collection is *Thread, Form, and Other Enclosures* (Main Street Rag, 2020)