

A Conversation with Deborah Goodrich Royce About *Reef Road*

*As you share in your author's note, **Reef Road** takes its inspiration from a true crime: the horrific murder of a childhood friend of your mother. Why did you decide to explore this unsolved case in a work of fiction?*

Deborah Goodrich Royce: While it seems like I have always known about the murder of my mother's best friend, I'm sure my mom didn't tell me when I was little. But at some point, it was there, existing as a fact, a part of our history, even though it wasn't actually ours. My mother is not nearly as damaged by the childhood event as The Writer's mother is in *Reef Road*, but it has affected her life and her sense of security—or lack thereof—ever since it happened. It was all of this that drew me to explore this syndrome through the lens of fiction.



I had become aware of it as a syndrome—the ripple effect from violence on those who are not the victim—when I saw the movie *Mystic River*, based on the novel of the same name by Dennis Lehane. In it, Lehane vividly portrays the cycle of injury that comes from a childhood trauma and carries forward in the life of the victim *and* the people surrounding him. I was struck by recognition of the shared scars we bear from incidents we weren't even a part of, and I needed to explore it further in my writing.

*Why did you choose to set **Reef Road** in Palm Beach in 2020, at the height of the pandemic? How do the oppressive fear and isolation of the Covid-19 lockdown permeate your story?*

DGR: I wrote *Reef Road* in real time as I quarantined in Palm Beach. Friday, March 13, seemed to be the moment that sealed us in our spots. At that point, I was touring for *Finding Mrs. Ford*, editing *Ruby Falls*, and making notes on another book idea. But when life came to a crashing halt, something about the isolation allowed me to delve into this research project that had called to me for years. As the world closed down, time opened up. I found the setting to be conducive to both the true crime and the noir elements of *Reef Road*. The heat and humidity of Florida—combined with the constraints imposed by the lockdown—pressed in on my characters in an appropriately maddening way.



I have heard a writing teacher say that if you just write down what is happening *as it happens*, you are writing history. When I go back and read *Reef Road* now, I am struck by forgotten details of that time. For example, there is a moment when The Writer is watching TV news and the ship Comfort motors into New York Harbor, right past the Statue of Liberty, carrying mobile hospital beds to the overburdened city. The juxtaposition of the image of that ship on its mission of aid against the backdrop of that symbol of freedom was emotionally wrenching. I am happy this scene is in the book because, for me, it instantly conjures everything I felt—and feared—at the time.

Your novel centers on two women—The Writer and The Wife—who share a startling traumatic bond. Based on your research and your personal experience, how can an act of violence affect not only the victim’s immediate survivors but continue to haunt and scar family members and friends for generations?

DGR: Generational trauma was first identified in the 1960s by a Canadian team of doctors studying the children of Holocaust victims. I don’t claim to have any professional knowledge of why this is so, but—anecdotally—I have both lived and observed it.

As I learned more about the real crime that inspired this book—which remains unsolved to this day—I knew that I could not write it as nonfiction. First of all, I did not wish to throw my opinions on anyone’s guilt or innocence into the mix. Secondly, I did not wish to be encumbered by the many factual details that have to be one hundred percent correct in nonfiction. I was, instead, trying to probe the spirit of the syndrome of generational trauma, rather than burrowing into the details of a true crime.

Both The Writer and The Wife, Linda Alonso, are complex, deeply troubled women who ultimately do terrible things—yet, you somehow make readers feel empathy for each of them. As their creator, do you have a soft spot for one of these characters over the other?

DGR: People often ask which character represents me in a book. The answer is, really, all of them—or pieces of all of them. Coming from an acting background, I always use parts of myself to gain access to the emotional truth of a character. For example, most of us have never murdered anyone. But if we had to play—or write—a murderer, we would need to explore the motivation of that character. Let’s say it is jealousy. Easy! Who among us has not felt jealous? So, we find a time when we felt it and then use that as a starting place. A well-known acting exercise deals with sense memories. By using an object—say, an old ring from a boyfriend who inspired that jealousy—you can tap into a vein of gold in creating that character. It is the same with writing, but it applies to all the characters in the book.



In *Reef Road*, The Writer's mother's friend was murdered like my mother's friend was. My mother and I are not as unhinged by the event as the mother and daughter are in the novel, but I used myself to find the core of what they are feeling. The Writer has an eating disorder. I had one in my youth. The Writer loves her dog. I am mad about my dogs. And so on. As writers, we find those points where we can enter a character and lend truth to who they are becoming on the page.

The same is true for Linda, a character driven by strong passions. In my own life, I have certainly felt passion, though I haven't taken it to the lengths that Linda does! What I love about Linda is her love for her children. It wasn't hard for me to conjure the smell of a toddler's freshly washed hair or the feel of a little one's elbows when she's tucked beside you for a bedtime story. Linda loves her children and sees the utter deliciousness of them. That is her humanity, even if it isn't enough.

Another character in the book, the suspected murderer of twelve-year-old Noelle Huber, goes on to live a full and seemingly normal life. Do you believe that even notorious killers, such as John List and Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer, have the capacity to be genuinely loving husbands and fathers?

DGR: I think there are many different types of murderers. John List and Dennis Rader were probably psychopaths just like Ted Bundy. People like that do not feel empathy for other human beings and their thought processes are unfathomable to the rest of us. Interestingly, I did the TV movie about Bundy with Mark Harmon when I was an actress, playing the woman who married him and had his child—a daughter. The only path I could find into her head was to decide that she simply did not believe he did any of it. But that is one kind of murderer.

The murdered girl and her brother in *Reef Road* are a different story. If it was the brother who murdered the sister—and it remains an *if*—I don't think he was a complete psychopath. That's not to say he was mentally healthy, but I think his issues were those of impulse control, rage, maybe some sort of personality disorder. I am not a psychologist, but this is how I envision the brother in *Reef Road* who may have murdered his sister and yet is able to go on and marry and raise a family as a seemingly good guy.

*In **Reef Road**, Linda's storyline is complicated by her husband Miguel's family in Argentina. What drew you to Argentina's "Dirty War" during the 1970s and the horrifying rapes and mass murders of young pregnant women?*

DGR: Years ago, I traveled to Argentina with my dear friend whose family comes from there. We spent time in Buenos Aires and in Viedma, Patagonia. While in Buenos Aires, we visited the site where the "disappeared" were held before they were killed. The absolute shock of it was that it was smack-dab in the middle of the city. Talk about hiding in plain sight! The tour showed us all of it, including copies of



the letters the young women were forced to write to their families before they were dumped from airplanes into the ocean. It was utterly chilling, and it stuck with me.

Throughout your novel, you give shout outs to citizen detectives and “murderinos.” Do you share their fascination with unsolved murder cases?

DGR: Oh yes, I have gone down many “murderino” rabbit holes! I think we are drawn to these stories partly because we are looking for reasons to keep them at a distance: horrific acts that may have happened but somehow could not happen to us. Or, if that illusion proves too hard to maintain, we hope to at least find resolution. Think about *I’ll Be Gone in the Dark* by Michelle McNamara and how satisfying it felt to know that the Golden State Killer was finally apprehended. Sadly, as we all know, crimes are not always solved. The murder of my mother’s friend was not.

*In **Reef Road**, The Writer tells her story in the first person, while The Wife’s story is told in a separate third-person narrative. As an author, what’s most challenging and most rewarding about writing a novel with shifting perspectives? Is it fun to create characters whose voices have an unreliable streak?*

DGR: I really enjoyed writing *Reef Road* in two voices. The Writer’s chapters are written like journal entries. She breaks the “fourth wall,” as it is called in theatre, and sometimes speaks directly to the reader. She reflects on herself in what we would now call a “meta” fashion. Her sections could be called “postmodern” in style. I very much enjoyed playing with that implied conversation with the reader.

Linda’s chapters are written like a book within a book. It is her voice we hear, but it is written in third person. So, it both lets us in and keeps us at a distance from who she really is and what she is really thinking. I liked creating her opacity.

*If you had to choose one theme or message, what would you most like readers to take away from **Reef Road**?*

DGR: Healing is possible. But healing doesn’t happen by itself. We have to help ourselves and help our loved ones, if we can, to release the grip these old traumas have on us. I believe that this kind of change comes from a combination of the psychological and the spiritual, in whatever combination works for you.