

A Conversation with the Author

What was your inspiration for *All the Winters After*?

When I made my first trip to Homer, Alaska, I immediately fell under its spell. The *mountains*. The *bay*. The *wildlife*. The *people*. Circumstances prevented me from hopping on a boat and moving there like Lettie did. But because I'm a writer, my mind, at least, can move anywhere it pleases. And my mind was already packing. At the Homer Bookstore, I came upon a book of autobiographical accounts from the area's homesteaders. I saw Old Believer women shopping at the Safeway, wearing long colorful skirts and head scarves. Intrigued by the place, the homesteaders, and the Old Believers, I had an idea for a novel. I wrote about fifty pages. But life got complicated, and my mind was needed elsewhere. So I put that novel away. For about, oh, twenty years. I wrote two other books before I finally picked those fifty pages back up.

Can you share how the actual Old Believers' villages became Ural and Altai and how Homer became Caboose?

By the time I returned to this story, there was a lot more information available on the Old Believers than there had been all those years before, both in print and on the Internet. There are several Old Believer villages on the outskirts of Homer. Altai and Ural are fictionalized versions of two of those villages; I created them from what I've read and imagined, but they are not meant to be factual representations. They were seeds of inspiration mixed with my imagination. That is also true for Homer in its transformation to Caboose. I borrowed heavily from the town, especially its location, but I also had fun making things up and altering them. I combined real history and locations with creative license.

One more inspiration: One of my favorite books as a child was *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, about a woman stranded on an island, completely independent and cut off from civilization for years. Although Nadia's situation is different, I think the seed for her isolation probably sprung from my early fascination with that kind of ongoing solitude.

***All the Winters After* has a stunning setting in Alaska, and as a reader, I felt your love and enthusiasm for it as a remote and exhilarating destination. What type of research did you do?**

I have a lot of ties to Alaska. My first husband grew up on the Kenai Peninsula, and my oldest son went to college in Anchorage. In addition to family trips, I traveled there for my work as a creative director. For a long time, I wanted to live in Alaska, and I subscribed to *Alaska* magazine and read everything I could on the subject. A few years ago, while working on the book, I stayed in a log cabin on the Kilcher Family Homestead on the outskirts of Homer, right about where I'd envisioned the Winkel homestead to be and where they have a living museum in the old homesteaders' cabin. I also lost myself in the Pratt Museum in Homer for hours and hours, where I loaded up on more books and visited the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center and the beautiful Museum of the North at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. I have a pile of field guides, but if I couldn't find the answer I needed, I'd call my son, Daniel. He earned a degree in biology in Anchorage and spent five summers working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Alaskan wilderness. He was my go-to guy.

A lot of the characters in this book have unique names. How did you come up with them, and what is their significance, if any?

With the exception of the family name of Winkel, which I changed after many drafts and which was an intentional nod to Rip Van Winkle and his long nap, most of the names just came to me early on, and I'll admit that I didn't see their significance until later. Kache was always Kache, after the Kachemak Bay—but it's pronounced *catch*, and he is clearly caught, unable to move forward, as are Snag and Nadia. Aunt Snag stepped onto the page already christened, along with the story of how Glenn gave her the nickname, long before I knew what her problems were. And Nadia? I wanted something that sounded Russian, so I grabbed that one from the air. It wasn't until years later, when I was trying to write the song lyrics, that I realized Nadia sounds a lot like *knotted*. I must have known at some subconscious level, but I'm a bit baffled that I didn't notice that their names reflected their conditions.

I really yearned for Kache and Nadia to find some way to make things work between them. Do you know what happens to them next, and if so, will you share that? Or would you rather leave it to the imagination of the reader?

I don't know what happens to them next. (However, I do know what my mother would like to happen!) I would need to write another book about them in order to find out. I will say that Kache and Nadia freed each other, but, in choosing to be true to that hard-earned freedom, they had to lose each other too. And yet not entirely. The kind of change they brought into each other's lives leaves a significant and lasting impression, whether or not they reunite.

This is also a very sad story in a lot of ways—the death of Kache's family and the subsequent fracturing of relationships for those left behind, Nadia's self-imposed isolation, Nadia's family's rejection of her. As an author, how do you leave that emotion behind when you're not writing?

Most of my angst comes beforehand, circling around a tough scene before I delve in. I know what it's going to require, so there's this pondering and buildup, but the actual writing of it can be cathartic. I'll admit to a transitional period after, a reentry from the world in my head that I'm trying to get onto the page, back to the world on which I try to plant my feet. I can be a bit distracted and foggy-headed when I first step out of my writing room. It's good that I'm not a surgeon. I do have a very understanding spouse. That helps.

Lettie is irresistibly drawn to Alaska and changes her whole life, possibly sacrificing an element of her relationship with her husband, to achieve her goal. Have you ever felt drawn to anywhere in this way?

Oh yes. I've already hinted at this, but I guess I'll come out and call it what it was—my obsession. My first husband and I had planned to move to Alaska, where he was from, but we ended up in San Diego instead—practically the polar opposite, so to speak. I remained obsessed with Alaska for years, and Lettie's story grew from that. Unlike me, she made it happen.

These days, I no longer obsess about moving north, but I do live in a house in the woods, a remodeled and expanded cabin, not far from a bay where we kayak and my husband goes crabbing and salmon fishing. I joke that it's the closest I can get to living in Alaska and still get to live in California. My son has plans to finish his doctorate and return to Alaska, so I'll probably get to spend a lot more time there in the future.

Are your characters based on anyone in particular?

No. I wrote a lot of material in my twenties and thirties that was never published, and much to my family's relief, most likely never will be. After excavating my childhood, my writing process changed and became more imaginative. Now I excavate my obsessions, my fears, my observations, certainly my sense of place and, yes, my characters. But they're not thinly disguised people from my real life. I definitely borrow from stories friends tell me, as well as lines of dialogue, and I'm sure there are traces of me and people I've known in characters, but that's as far as it goes. I enjoy making stuff up.

The story of Kache's dog and the butterfly that led to his end was a story that really stayed with me. What inspired this incident?

Here's an example of one of the stories mentioned above that inspired a story in the book. While I was staying at the homestead, the host pointed to the cliff and told me about her childhood dog chasing a butterfly right over it. As a dog lover, that vision haunted me. As a writer, I had to include a fictionalized version of it in the book. In fact, at one time, the title was *The Dog and the Butterfly*.

The homestead is filled with books that likely save Nadia's life. What books would be on your shelves if you had to live in a homestead for a decade?

Well, first of all, every how-to book and field guide ever written! After that, I would include my favorites—the complete collections of Annie Dillard, Barbara Kingsolver, Ann Patchett, Anne Tyler, Geraldine Brooks, Jane Hamilton, Alice Munro, Elizabeth Strout... I could go on all day. More novels I love, sitting on this shelf next to me: *Middlesex*, *The History of Love*, *The Sandalwood Tree*, *Never Let Me Go*, *Cold Mountain*, *Let the Great World Spin*, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, *The Snow Child*, *Beautiful Ruins*, *Room*, *The Signature of All Things*, *Life After Life*, *The Hours*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Awakening*. I would need volumes and volumes of poetry—Mary Oliver, Billy Collins, Emily Dickinson, Ted Kooser, Walt Whitman, for starters. Books on travel to help any wanderlust I'd likely experience. This list is obviously off the top of my head and nowhere near complete. But I would also want all those books I've been meaning to read and haven't. And lots of big, thick classics. A decade isn't nearly long enough, but I could make a serious dent.

What would you like the reader to take away from your novel?

I'd like the reader to experience a deep sense of place and of time well spent—of escape and connection, longing and fulfilment, recognition and discovery. The feeling of having walked in these characters' boots. And maybe a cramp or two from sitting and reading too long. That's a lot to ask, but I can hope.