

late night library

Late Night Interview with Lisa Birnbaum – *Worthy*

Our lives are single-perspective. How then have we ever understood anything outside our immediate realm? Stories are one way.

In Lisa Birnbaum's *Worthy* (Dzanc Books), we see the power of stories, how they can help us understand those around us, and perhaps even more importantly, to perceive different and new versions of ourselves. Narrated in the unforgettable voice of Ludmila – known as “Worthy” to some – this novel takes us into our very own hearts and minds, through the singular window of another's. We follow the joy and fear of globetrotting subterfuge, as things (and people) are found and lost, and as Ludmila discovers and redefines truth. What is true? Our own lives are, and they connect us to all others, which *Worthy* shows with great compassion and depth.

AUSTIN WILSON: The first person narration in *Worthy* is coupled with a never ending exploration of Ludmila's voice, both figurative and literal. How early into writing did you know even the dialogue would be Ludmila speaking?

LISA BIRNBAUM: The novel grew out of a five-page monologue that I used to perform in the nineties, one of several I wrote in women's voices. They told their stories in little slice-of-life pieces I'd do in an array of voices. I grew up listening to people and doing voices, not so much in mimicry but to transform my personality and tell surprising stories. (Sometimes my family fell for strange phone callers—a lost art now, the crank call.) Anyway, *Worthy* was the title of one of those monologues, the one everyone liked best. A few people suggested I keep her talking, and I finally tried it, kind of reluctant, a little afraid. When I read the first new pages at a festival, a departure from the old character but in the same voice, they had me read it again the next hour and then several times through the day.

That was all I had, those three pages or so. So I kept writing, so I'd have more to read the next time.

I realized I didn't know what she'd say but the whole world of her story would flow through her. Ludmila would do all the voices and they'd all sound like her. And it made sense, since we all tell our stories that way, sometimes really "doing" the voice but in any case representing other people talking in all kinds of scenes. Ludmila does it with her own range as a speaker of English, her error patterns as evident as her impassioned style. I attended to her as her life kept expanding, both the complications and her thoughtfulness about what she owed—or didn't *yet* owe—her listener.

AW: Did her story originating as a monologue lead to you reading drafts of the novel out loud, more so than you may have normally?

LB: Yes, because audio is such an important part of this work—in conception a kind of hybrid, its performance really built in. I always meant Ludmila to be heard, since her sound is its soul. So the audiobook of *Worthy* is definitely on the way, and I think it could follow or precede anyone's reading of the book.

AW: Was Theodore there from the beginning?

LB: Theodore was there from the beginning, but of course I never heard his voice, only his words in her mouth!

AW: Ludmila establishes herself very early on, in the first paragraph in fact, as a trickster. Was your aim to disarm readers, or put them on guard?

LB: Both! And as simultaneously as possible! Right away, I knew she'd *want* to be worthy but not be essentially *trustworthy*. Her nature was established from the start, slippery but full of conviction. She's confessing, or promising to, which we know often feels like truth when it isn't. She's a mix, always coming back to love, truth, and goodness—after leading us into dark places. This is the seduction of trust, the art of confidence—we're drawn yet fearful, and the risk seems worth it when we decide to follow, say yes.

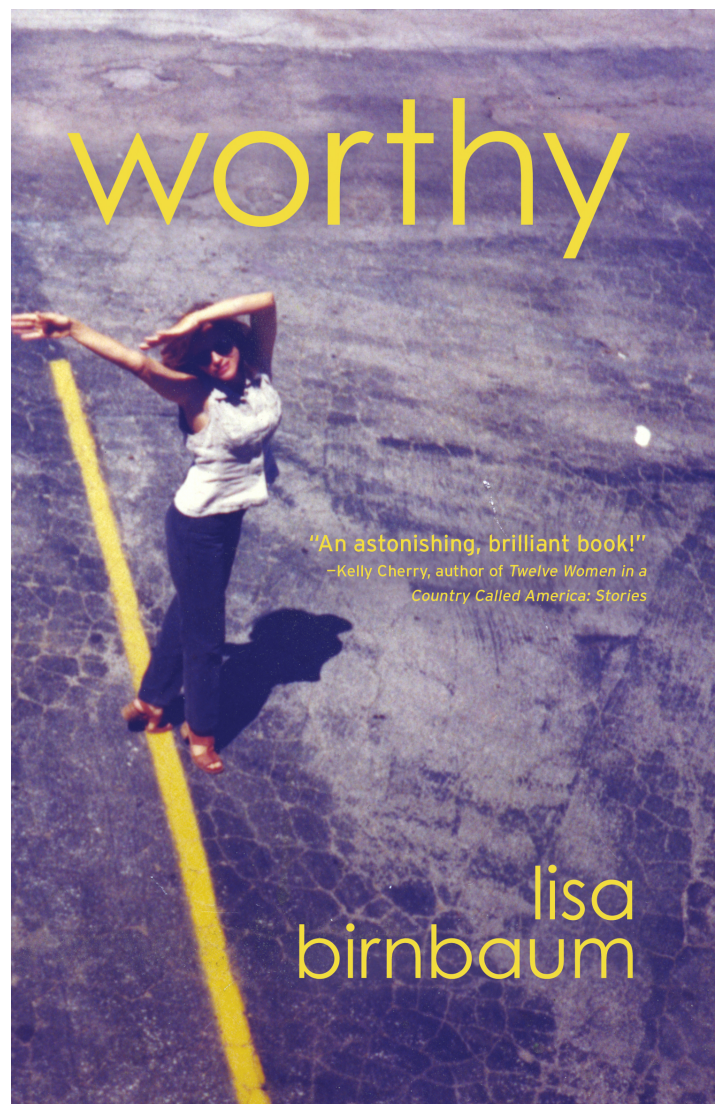
AW: And that seduction of trust is used over and over in the book too, where Ludmila literally tells the listener she is lying, but will also double back and essentially say, perhaps coyly, Am I lying though? Even she's not sure

occasionally. How much did you try to separate her concept of dishonesty versus embellishment?

LB: Ludmila is a storyteller, so she can't help a bit of sprucing up and, of course, some decorating here and there. She wonders, too, how we can know what's true, so to some extent she has a sophisticated, contemporary distance from virtue. She looks sidelong at conventional morality. She's complex, so naturally she wants also to be seen as good, through her concern for old Mrs. Finch and for all the exotic dancers in the club. And she is good to these women—and good *for* them. So part of how she seduces is to let her listener see it *all*, but gradually, as we might in the best burlesque act.

AW: “Ahead is also behind—the past is in the future when we talk, you see, since there can be no other way for stories to be told. So please wait for yesterday in some case slowly to come.” This quote, a somewhat paraphrased version of a famous Faulkner quote, is relevant to how the book is structured, with timelines weaving freely, and Ludmila’s narration leaping back and forth. How important was it for you during writing and editing to have a grasp on her life chronologically?

LB: She started to get ahead of me—and behind me!—so by page 50 or so I was working with a timeline I drew and pinned on my bulletin board. New developments in her story had to fit into about two decades, and I needed to keep periods of time straight while weaving them. And I wasn't planning far ahead at all, feeling as though I was discovering what happened as she naturally talked day after day—but there were limits. If she was claiming to be “pushing on forty,” as I imagined her saying, it probably meant she was a few years older. She'd



come to New York in her early twenties, in the eighties, and by 2012 or so she's become a bigamist, a widow, a mother, a strip-club manager...could it all check out if she also had a teenaged son at the end? I kept an eye on that timeline, and when I was editing the book, I was happy to see it had worked. Of course, the benefit of working with an unreliable narrator is that flaws can be fine, luckily part of the fabric. My hope was that the leaps and retreats and stalls would drive the confession forward and also express her wayward character.

It's a little mystifying to reflect on this, because the excitement came from testing little branches I was stepping out on every day I sat down to write the next page. Her past was in the future, there to find for me as well as Ludmila. If she picked up some wisdom from Faulkner, it would have come through Theodore, her professor husband...myself, I don't remember passing that one on!

AW: Literature plays a role in the lives of Theodore and Ludmila, specifically four books that act as sort of guides for their criminal activity. What would Ludmila think of this book? Theodore?

LB: Marvelous question! I hope they'd find compatriots amid further plots to study and enjoy. I expect Theodore's scholarly eye would allow him to see the truth of the narrative and the flaws in characters' thinking earlier than many readers might. Still, he could easily be swept up, we know, in enchantment!

AW: Are Theodore and Ludmila capable of reading a book they may find frivolous? Or are they so constantly looking for life-changing experiences that a book not holding that potential outcome won't hold their interest?

LB: Theodore is taking lessons from the 20th century masters—Mann, Camus, Melville, and Nabokov—who wrote about the art of confidence. He is obsessed by their great novels, and he teaches Ludmila about life and language through them. Ultimately they want what those protagonists want, to be clever enough to dramatically escape life's traps. Their answers and their pleasures are in the Four Books, as they call them, and that's all they need. Neither exhibits a wide range of literary tastes as they pursue their happy adventures, some prescribed and others falling into their laps.

AW: How much of Ludmila is still in your mind? (She has stayed with me, and I think she'd like that, but I also think she'd see it as somewhat of a failure on her part, that she couldn't become someone new and make me forget that old version in preference of the new one.)

LB: She's here forever, I think, helping me keep in mind how we can be all kinds of people. The longer she stays with me, the more I understand myself—and that seems as true as it is impossible, since we are in most apparent ways not alike. I identify with her emotionally, in a way that opened the channel to this story. And that territory of the heart isn't so much shared as delivered to me by Ludmila. Very often, her heart is right. And as wrong as she is, I want to keep her near. Of course, this is what I hope readers feel.

Lisa Birnbaum's work in fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and spoken word performance has been supported by numerous grants and writers' residencies. Her writing has appeared in such journals as *Connecticut Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Quarter After Eight*, and *Kestrel*. She teaches writing and literature at the University of Tampa and lives in Tampa, FL.

Austin Wilson writes comics and prose, his first graphic novel is scheduled for publication in 2016, and he has a short story in the *Mythic Indy* anthology. Favorite authors include Nora Ephron, Michael Chabon, and Ray Bradbury.

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