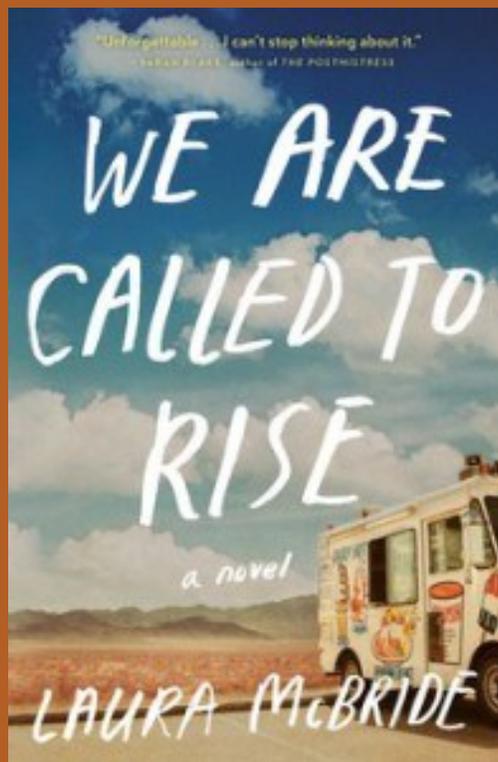




2015



**We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies—**

—Emily Dickinson

Biography of Laura McBride

Laura McBride is 53 and a graduate of Yale University. She lives in Las Vegas, Nevada with her husband, who owns a mortgage company. They have a daughter, 23, and a son, 18. She teaches English at the College of Southern Nevada, a community college, and completed a residency at Yaddo, an artist's retreat. *We Are Called To Rise* is her first novel, and she is proud to be a professional member of *PENAmerica*. **Up Next:** "I have been working on another novel, set in Las Vegas. It's a very different form, a very different style. I haven't written enough to give up my day job."

Conversation with Laura McBride

The heart of this novel is based on a true incident, though you have created a fictional story around it. Was it difficult to let go of the facts of the story and let your characters take over? How much did you think about the real people involved as you wrote?

I didn't want to write about the real people, so I took the three or four facts that were stuck in my head, and tried to imagine my way in. I like to work this way. I hear a snippet of a news report or an interview or a radio program, and I ask myself: Who would have done that? Why? And then what? It is something of a mental game that has amused me through dull commutes, and it was not difficult at all. I've probably been doing it since I was seven years old. So, in short, I didn't think about the real people. The parts of the story that are actual—those facts, the places, how certain things work in Las Vegas—were, for me, a way to keep the story anchored. I used all of those actualities to ground the imagined world in my head, not to create it.

You write in the author's note: "One thing that almost kept me from writing my story was that it was so unbearably sad. . . . So the challenge I set myself was this: could I write a story that accepted the full unbearableness, and still left one wanting to wake up in the morning?" How did you work to achieve that lightness and optimism which ultimately pervade such a tragic story?

I suppose it was a single choice, made on the first day I started writing. I decided that Bashkim had to be safe at the end. On the very last page, I had to leave him with a chance. That shaped everything. It's hard for me to think about whether the story ended up light or tragic; I don't have that much distance from my words. I guess I am someone who fully inhabits the way that life is painful, and I am also someone who is naturally a bit lighthearted. It doesn't take much to please me. So in fact my world is lighthearted and heavy at once. I don't remember choosing this. It seems I have always felt the sadness of others as if it were my own, and also, I have always been easily delighted. If these traits come out in the story, it might just be that they reflect my own temperament.

Which character was the most difficult for you to write? Which was the easiest? Which was your favorite? Avis was the most difficult! She was awful. I struggled and struggled to get the voice of a woman who is questioning and disappointed and confused and courageous at once. Some early readers liked her, but others found her self-pitying and small, which was not how I imagined her at all. Sometimes I thought that she suffered from what it means to be an aging woman in our society—which is that perhaps we don't like aging women very much—and so there wasn't much room to let her express unattractive qualities.

Bashkim was the easiest. I didn't think I would like to write in the voice of a child, but once I had it down, he just chattered away in my head. I couldn't get his words on the page fast enough. I would be typing, and suddenly laugh at something he said, or tear up at his sweet ways—and I was doing the writing! He was so real that I sometimes miss him. One day I saw a little boy crossing the street to school, and he was so very Bashkim-like; I drove to work with this odd sense of having left him behind me.

I suppose that I feel the closest in nature to Luis, or that might not be right, that we are close in nature. I feel closest to his predicament—a very young person who has done something irrevocable, for which he cannot forgive himself, and which he almost cannot bear. Bashkim loses his mother, and Avis has lived her life so alone, but Luis bears the brutal weight of an error that mattered.

You write with such depth and compassion about the inner workings of the foster care system. Is this something you have experience with, or did you have to do a lot of research? What was your experience writing about such a harrowing and challenging system, especially as a mother?

Well, I didn't do any research (so that's fair warning), but I did have some familiarity with the child welfare system in Las Vegas. I didn't find writing about it, or about Roberta's work, harrowing—perhaps because I have had a lot of years to accept what is. I think it is a truth of a place like Las Vegas that the systems can be very, very weak, but also that individuals can have a commensurately important role. Weak systems create chaos, which is generally bad, but they also allow for certain strengths. A better system might not have the flexibility to accept the sort of solution that happens in this story, but that solution is not so far from things I have seen happen here.

Both Nate and Luis come back from war with something akin to PTSD, and both make very bad choices because of it. Do you believe that war necessarily changes people? Do you have experience with veterans and the unique challenges they face?

One of my great-uncles fought in Italy in World War II. He went in early in the campaign, and he stayed to the end. He saw a lot of young men die quickly, and when he came home, he asked his mother to tie him to the bed at night. I used to love visits from this uncle. He was a cook in a hotel, an immigrant, and he would bring these huge cooking knives to our house, and coolers of fish, and—although he had very little—a silver dollar for each child. My mother told me the story about his being tied to the bed when I was quite small, and even when my uncle was singing or laughing, I would wonder about those nights with his hands strapped to the bedpost.

Probably more relevant to my novel is that I teach at a community college in a town with a large military presence, so I frequently have soldiers in my classes. My classes are not confessional—I teach academic composition and literature—but they are the sorts of classes where the truth sometimes will out. I had been paying attention to the overall arc of these students' attitudes about the war: from high patriotism to deep frustration to fatigue and confusion and difficulty fitting back in. I think the normal response of anyone witnessing this is to feel it, to have heart for the pain of those experiences. That was certainly playing in my mind as I was writing.

You set out to write this book after your children were grown and out of the house. Was writing something you'd wanted to pursue, or was this a desire that developed later on? What would you say was your greatest influence throughout this process?

Well, my son had started high school, and my daughter had left for college. It actually felt strange to leave my son at home for a month while I went off to a writer's retreat, but of course, he was just fine, and he had a lovely time with his dad.

I'm one of those people who has always thought of myself as a writer. Writing is a very natural form of communication for me; I have used it daily all my life. So, yes, I always planned to write a novel—and in fact wrote an earlier one when my children were quite small—and it was more or less just finding the window in

my life when I would sit down and do it again. Writing a novel was much in my mind when I was choosing a new career mid-life; I wanted work that would allow me the flexibility to write. (I was, however, a bit naïve about the demands of a community college teaching job!)

Why did you choose the quote from the Emily Dickinson poem for the title of this book? How do you feel it captures the essence of the story? It was chosen in a burst of chaotic energy. I woke up on a Monday morning to an email from my agent saying she was ready to market the book; all she needed was a new title and a bio—in the next couple of hours. Ha ha ha. A new title and a bio that morning? I cranked out a two-line bio that I hoped would make me sound smart and fascinating, and then I grabbed a textbook thinking that I might be able to use a line from a poem. None of the lines I found seemed right, but I sent them off. My agent liked two, and her assistant liked just one, so there we were with “We Are Called to Rise.” At first, I was worried that *We Are Called to Rise* sounded a bit sententious, and also, I had trouble remembering it, but I have come to love the title. I think my agent’s assistant intuited how effectively that line expresses the heart of the story; I’m grateful to her for that strong sense. I like Emily Dickinson’s work very much, and I particularly like the thought behind that poem. I hope my story does it justice.

What are you working on now? Are there more novels in the works? I have been working on another novel. It’s also set in Las Vegas, and it also relies on the strange convergence of people’s lives, but it’s quite different from *We Are Called to Rise*. I’m working with characters that are far removed from my own experience. This should scare me, but it doesn’t. (They are just words on a screen, and if they turn out badly, I will delete them.) This novel also has a different narrative path. It ends with why the story exists, so the challenge is whether or not I can engage a reader long enough to get there.

"We Are Called to Rise." - *Reading Group Guide*. Web. 9 Jan. 2015. <http://books.simonandschuster.com/We-Are-Called-to-Rise/Laura-McBride/9781476738963/reading_group_guide>.

Laura McBride speaks about where the idea for the novel in this interview with *Kirkus*:

Six or seven years ago, McBride was devastated by a short news story about a mid-day traffic stop in a suburban Las Vegas neighborhood, not far from where she lives. After the stop, a police officer, who was also an Iraq war vet, shot and killed an immigrant mother in front of her children. “I knew instantly who the woman was,” McBride says. The woman’s family owned an ice cream truck and had sold treats to McBride at Little League games.

In January 2012, still haunted by the story, still trying to figure out why it happened and wondering why one can’t take back such mistaken acts, McBride took the kernel of the shooting and wrote it into *We Are Called to Rise*. “In my mind, I said this is a really sad kernel that I chose, and I don’t know if I want to put out a really sad book, because I’m 50, because life can be really hard, because if it’s what I’m doing with my life, I don’t necessarily want to make someone’s day worse,” she says.

“At the same time, I’m the opposite of a Pollyanna. I’m incredibly cynical and negative at times. And I thought, ‘I don’t want to write some treacly story,’ so I always kind of sat on what I thought of as kind of a creative razor’s edge,” she acknowledges. “How do I take this sad story and at the end of it a reader still wants to wake up in the morning, but have it be something that I can accept as honest.”

Spencer, Suzy. "Laura McBride | *Kirkus*." *Kirkus Reviews*. 14 June 2014. Web. 9 Jan. 2015. <<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/laura-mcbride/>>.

The heart of the novel is based on a true incident. The news article below is about that incident.

Fatal shooting by Henderson police raises questions about volatile situations

By Alan Maimon © 2011, LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Zyber Selimaj knows his emotions tend to get the better of him. So if he had it to do over, this time he would react differently.

He wouldn't break down in tears like he did when Henderson police pulled him over for his second speeding ticket in one day as he made his rounds in his ice cream truck. The Albanian immigrant wouldn't call his wife, Deshira, to help him protest. He would simply sign the citation and go on his way.

Instead, just minutes after he summoned her to the traffic stop, near Coronado High School on Feb. 12, 2008, she was shot and killed by a Henderson police officer after she brandished a knife.

Nearly four years later, Zyber's life — and that of the couple's three sons — has unraveled.

"I am now father and mother to them," he said. "I lost my heart. I lost my wife. There is no medicine for that."

The Henderson Police Department undoubtedly would like a do-over, too, and not just because of the public outcry over one of the most controversial police shootings in Southern Nevada history, or the \$700,000 wrongful death settlement paid to the widower.

Jutta Chambers, who became police chief six months after the shooting, said she feels for the Selimaj children, two of whom saw their mother's death, but her officers did what they were trained to do when confronted with an unstable and armed person.

The shooting did, however, spur departmental reforms to help officers handle volatile situations and to be more accountable for the use of deadly force. The reforms cover everything from training and equipment to post-shooting outreach, both to families of those shot and to the officers.

A QUICK ESCALATION

Many officer-involved shootings start in mundane ways, and so it was with this one.

When Zyber was pulled over the second time that February day, he pleaded with officer Patrick Gilmore that he couldn't afford another ticket, and said he just wanted to die.

He refused to sign the citation, and Gilmore let him phone his wife. She arrived a short time later with their oldest and youngest sons, then 11 and 5, in the ice cream truck she operated.

Deshira, 42, became equally emotional and similarly commented about wanting to die. There's not much of an Albanian community in Clark County, so it's no surprise that officers would mistake a common Albanian figure of speech for a suicide threat.

Thinking he had two unstable people on his hands, Gilmore called for backup.

His concerns were validated when Deshira got out of her truck with her sons and a kitchen knife with a 4.5-inch blade. In the next few minutes, she repeatedly threatened to kill herself, her sons or police officers.

Soon, 10 officers had arrived at the scene, including Luke Morrison, 23, an Iraq War veteran on the force for two years.

Several passing motorists saw the drama unfold and offered different stories or opinions.

One witness said Deshira was "screaming and hollering" and looked like a "raving lunatic" as she scolded police. Another said she "would have been an easy target to wrestle to the ground," even with a knife in her hand.

The police officers would later say they worried most for the safety of the Selimaj children. But when the two boys were able to walk away from their mother, seemingly out of harm's way, the dynamics shifted again. The question became whether an irate Deshira and her knife posed a threat to officers.

Still unsure of her intent, Officer Anthony Pecorella tried to incapacitate her with a stun gun, but one of the two probes missed. Officers said she then lunged at Pecorella, which prompted Morrison to fire his .40-caliber handgun once.

"There was nothing else anybody could have done," Morrison later said of his decision to shoot.

Chambers agreed: "Luke Morrison did what he had to do. He was put in a horrible situation, and I feel very bad for him that he had to go through that."

After the shooting, Zyber Selimaj was charged with obstructing police.

VERY DIFFERENT PICTURES

The Selimaj shooting received far more scrutiny than most. Part of the public outcry was a result of the perception that police did not need to use deadly force to subdue a middle-aged, modestly sized woman, regardless of her behavior. Then there was the story of the Selimajes.

Advocates portrayed them as hard-working immigrants who came to the United States to pursue the American dream. What could be more American than the chimes of the ice cream trucks both drove through the streets of Henderson?

Zyber spoke of spending two decades as a political prisoner in communist Albania, dreaming the whole time of coming to the United States to live in freedom.

The Henderson Police Department painted a different picture, recounting past domestic disturbance calls at their home. They said Deshira spent a month in a psychiatric facility not long before the shooting, and they dug up two reported altercations between Zyber and children at his ice cream truck. He pleaded no contest to misdemeanor battery stemming from one.

In short, police said, Zyber was a hothead and a troublemaker. And Deshira? She was plain crazy.

Lost in the back-and-forth were important questions: Would things have gone differently if Henderson police, like many other departments, used crisis intervention officers trained to defuse tense encounters? What if the officers had a beanbag shotgun as well as stun guns? And most fundamentally, what is the most effective way for officers to gauge whether lives are in jeopardy?

At the coroner's inquest, officers testified Morrison fired only after Deshira lunged at Pecorella. But a recon-

struction of the incident strongly suggested that she was in a crouching position when Morrison shot her. Did that mean she posed little threat, or that she was poised to spring at Pecorella? The answer remains in dispute.

An inquest jury unanimously ruled the shooting justified. Zyber filed a federal lawsuit, which Henderson settled for \$700,000 — the largest known payment stemming from a fatal police shooting in Southern Nevada.

...

LITTLE SOLACE

He (Zyber) lives with his three sons — 15, 11, and 9 — in a home he bought after the settlement. He still drives his ice cream truck a couple days a week, and said that he still frequently gets pulled over by police.

Nearing 70, he remarried last year, to a family friend from Albania who he hoped would help raise his children. But after three weeks with him, she made a domestic violence call to police. Selimaj went to jail; she left Las Vegas.

Based on that complaint, child welfare workers took away his sons for several months. The boys were returned to him this spring, but he still goes back and forth to hearings at which he must convince a judge he can adequately care for them.

He isn't sure where he wants to raise his sons if he is allowed to keep them.

"They cry every day missing their mother," he said. "I don't want to stay here, but where am I going to go?"

Maimon, Alan. "Fatal Shooting by Henderson Police Raises Questions about Volatile Situations." *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. 29 Nov. 2011. Web. 22 Jan. 2015. <<http://www.reviewjournal.com/news/deadly-force/quick-shoot-slow-change/fatal-shooting-henderson-police-raises-questions-about>>.

PTSD

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can occur after you have been through a traumatic event. A traumatic event is something terrible and scary that you see, hear about, or that happens to you, like:

- Combat exposure
- Child sexual or physical abuse
- Terrorist attack
- Sexual or physical assault
- Serious accidents, like a car wreck
- Natural disasters, like a fire, tornado, hurricane, flood, or earthquake.

During a traumatic event, you think that your life or others' lives are in danger. You may feel afraid or feel that you have no control over what is happening around you. Most people have some stress-related reactions after a traumatic event; but, not everyone gets PTSD.

Symptoms: Avoidance, Anger, Reminders/Anniversaries, Stress, Sleep Problems and Nightmares, Substance Abuse, Depression, Suicide.

Reactions to a trauma may include:

- Feeling hopeless about the future,
- Feeling detached or unconcerned about others,
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions,
- Feeling jumpy and getting startled easily at sudden noises,
- Feeling on guard and constantly alert,
- Having disturbing dreams and memories or flashbacks,
- Having work or school problems.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are the longest combat operations since Vietnam. Many stressors face these Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) troops. OEF/OIF service members are at risk for death or injury. They may see others hurt or killed. They may have to kill or wound others. They are on alert around the clock. These and other factors can increase their chances of having PTSD or other mental health problems.

For many service members, being away from home for long periods of time can cause problems at home or work. These problems can add to the stress.

Many Veterans with mental health problems have not received treatment. Reasons that some Veterans have given for not getting treatment include:

- Concern over being seen as weak.
- Concern about being treated differently.
- Concern that others would lose confidence in them.
- Concerns about privacy.
- They prefer to rely on family and friends.
- They don't believe treatment is effective.
- Concerns about side effects of treatments
- Problems with access, such as cost or location of treatment.

"PTSD: National Center for PTSD." *Home*. Web. 7 Jan. 2015. <<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>>.

PTSD

War Follows Too Many Vets Home

American soldiers are bringing the war home: 22 veterans and one active duty soldier are said to commit suicide every day. Some estimate that more than 30 lives are lost every day, points out Jane M. Orient, executive director of the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, Tucson, Ariz. According to Stop Soldier Suicide, veterans commit suicide at a rate two to three times higher than civilians.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is diagnosed in about 15% of soldiers, and may drive them to end their lives, says Orient, adding that many more probably suffer from PTSD in silence, fearing that the stigma may end their career or keep them from finding any gainful employment.

“What a tragedy and scandal it is for America to send its strongest, bravest and most dedicated and capable young people off to war—and then abandon them when they come home,” laments Orient. “How many spend years alone in a dark room, or wander homeless, or become addicted to drugs or alcohol? Maybe they don’t commit suicide— but their lives as a member of their family and society may be over or blighted.

“Since World War I, there has been a perception that PTSD— ‘shell shock’ as it was known then— is a sign of mental weakness, or of not having the ‘right stuff.’ The manifestations resemble psychiatric illness: sleeplessness, nightmares, flashbacks, irritability, and inability to concentrate and control impulses. Veterans may get little sympathy— they have not lost a limb; they may have no visible scars; they may not even have had a concussion or loss of consciousness. Their brain CT scan or MRI may be completely normal.”

If they are able to get into a Veterans Administration treatment program, they probably will receive drugs: anti-depressants, anti-psychotics, perhaps opioids. While there is little to no evidence that this treatment helps, it does generally carry a Federal Drug Administration “black box” warning— of increased risk of suicide, indicates Orient.

“What can we do? We could start by making the right diagnosis. Many of these veterans have an unrecognized traumatic brain injury (TBI), either causing or complicating their PTSD. The mechanism was elucidated, if not widely acknowledged, in the early 1900s. Explosions create a blast wave, whether from an improvised explosive device (IED) or from firing high-powered ammunition. As might be predicted, the more firefights a soldier is in, the greater the risk of TBI/PTSD.”

“Our soldiers are repeatedly subjected to neurological decompression injury— the ‘bends,’ and what happens when they are rapidly evacuated by air, as opposed to staying on the ground for weeks as in Vietnam? They ‘crash’— or rapidly deteriorate— in flight. If you have taken scuba diving instruction, you know you’re not supposed to fly too soon after diving. How do we treat the bends? In a hyperbaric— high pressure— chamber. Do we have such things in war zones? We sent about 15 to the [Per-sian] Gulf, but only unpacked one, which was used to treat some divers.”

However, isn’t it too late to treat veterans? It is not, stresses Orient, explaining that TBI and many other neurologic injuries, including stroke, may benefit greatly from a series of treatments, even years later. Hundreds of veterans have been treated in private centers, often reporting relief of constant headaches and insomnia after just a few sessions.

“Can they get this at the VA? No. The VA will not tell them about it, and may even discourage it. Is the VA afraid that it might not work? Reportedly, knowledgeable persons know that it does— but fear that making it available would ‘bankrupt the system.’ At \$3,000 per session charged by hospitals, it might, but free-standing centers charge more like \$150, and some offer pro bono treatment to veterans— and what is the life of a 20-year-old veteran worth?”

CASA - Court Appointed Special Advocate

The mission of the National Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Association, together with its state and local members, is to support and promote court-appointed volunteer advocacy so that every abused and neglected child can be safe, establish permanence and have the opportunity to thrive.

CASA volunteers are appointed by judges to watch over and advocate for abused and neglected children, to make sure they don't get lost in the overburdened legal and social service system or languish in inappropriate group or foster homes. Volunteers stay with each case until it is closed and the child is placed in a safe, permanent home. For many abused children, their CASA volunteer will be the one constant adult presence in their lives.

Independent research has demonstrated that children with a CASA volunteer are substantially less likely to spend time in long-term foster care and less likely to reenter care.

For more information visit their official website: <http://www.casaforchildren.org>

Albania and Immigration

Three Periods of Emigration

Generally speaking, Albanian emigration has had three key phases in modern times: an early outflow of emigrants before 1944, a more recent diaspora of those who left 1945-1990, and a significant outflow following the 1990 breakdown of the communist leadership that had been in place since 1944. Before 1944, the U.S. and some Latin American states were the main destination countries. There are only scarce data to measure the flow of Albanian migration before the 1990s. Most of the people who left the country before 1944 did so because of economic push factors, and the Albanian governments during that time were mostly indifferent to these flows.

Meanwhile, in the second phase, a sort of political migration took place. Most migrants from Albania in this period left because of political factors. These included disagreements with the country's communist regime and the political pressure they expected to be placed on them, in some cases because of their collaboration with Italian and German occupiers during World War II. The Albanian government heavily discouraged this migration by establishing political and legal barriers to migration and labeling it a crime.

Yet another phase follows, that of post-1990 migration. This can be broken down into the 1991-1992 stream, which was wholly uncontrolled, when approximately 300,000 Albanians left the country; the 1992-1996 stream, when a similar number migrated, most illegally, despite the temporary improvement of the economy and better border controls; and the 1996-1997 stream, immediately after the collapse of various pyramid schemes, which wiped out the savings of hundred of thousands of people. In the national unrest that followed, a combination of unemployment, poverty, and economic hardships led to the migration of around 70,000 people within a few months. Finally, since 1998, a gradual improvement in economic, political, and social conditions and favorable immigration policies in two key receiving countries, Greece and Italy, have increased legal migration and reduced illegal flows.

"Albania: Looking Beyond Borders." *Migrationpolicy.org*. 1 Aug. 2004. Web. 31 Dec. 2014. <<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/albania-looking-beyond-borders>>.



Albania

Albania is a small country in southeastern Europe. Situated in the western part of the Balkan Peninsula, it faces Italy across the Strait of Otranto, the entrance to the Adriatic Sea. Albania is one of the most ethnically homogeneous states in the world. Approximately 90% of its inhabitants are Albanian in origin and speech. The only significant minority is a large group of Greeks in southern Albania. Several thousand Vlachs, Gypsies, Serbs, and Bulgarians live in the country.

The Albanian people are divided into two groups, the Ghegs in the north and the Tosks in the south, with the Shkumbi River forming a natural boundary between their territories. Despite slight differences between the groups, both regard themselves as Albanians.

Albania is a largely a mountainous country. Approximately 70% of its area lies 1,000 feet (300 meters) or more above sea level. The remaining 30% consists of a marshy coastal plain (in the process of being reclaimed), rolling hills, and mountain and river valleys. Only 22% of the land surface is arable.

"Albania." *Encyclopedia Americana*. Grolier Online, 2014. Web. 31 Dec. 2014.

No Churn Mint Chocolate Chip Ice Cream

- 1 pint whipping cream
- 1 can (14 oz.) sweetened condensed milk
- 1 1/2 teaspoons mint extract (or whatever flavor extract you like)
- 3/4 cup chocolate chips

In a bowl, beat cream until fluffy (this took about 1 1/2 minutes). Set aside. In another bowl, mix together sweetened condensed milk, mint extract. Gently fold in the whipped cream. Pour mixture into a freezable container and place in the freezer. Once the ice cream has started to harden, mix in the chocolate chips. If you add chips before it goes in to the freezer, they will sink to the bottom. Serve when frozen.



Characters in the Novel

Four Main Narrators:

Avis Gisselberg - married to Jim, with son Nate and deceased daughter Emily.

Bashkim Ahmeti - 8-year-old son of Albanian immigrants. Arjeta Ahmeti (Nene) is his mother and Sadik Ahmeti (Baba) is his father. Bashkim's sister is three-year-old, Tirana.

Roberta Weiss - Volunteer for CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate), husband is Marty.

Luis Rodriguez-Reyes - Twenty-two years old and an Iraq war veteran. Luis's grandmother (who raised him) is Graciela Reyes (abuela).

Other Characters:

Nate Gisselberg - spent eight years in Iraq, son of Avis and Jim.

Lauren - Nate's wife.

Sharlene - Avis's mother.

Rodney - Avis's brother.

Darcy - Jim Gisselberg's girlfriend.

Corey Stout - police officer with Nate when shooting occurred.

Arjeta Ahmeti (nene) - mother to Bashkim (8) and Tirana (3).

Sadik Ahmeti (baba) - father to Bashkim (8) and Tirana (3) - saw a slaughter in the streets of Albania and he yelled at the policeman who did it. He was in prison for 19 years in Albania for protesting an act of the government; then granted political asylum in the United States.

Mrs. Monaghan - Bashkim's teacher; from Australia.

Dr. Martina Moore - Principal at Bashkim's school.

Mrs. Delain - Bashkim's foster mother.

Sam - Luis' friend in Iraq; he was a gunner on a Humvee.

Miguel Rodriguez - Luis's uncle (father's brother).

Mrs. Graciela Reyes (abuela) - Luis's grandmother.

Dr. Arjun Ghosh - Luis's therapist.

Sam - served in military with Luis.

Molly, Dawan, Lester, Teddi-Ann Mapes - homeless kids that Roberta worked with.



Discussion Questions

Title/Voice/Narrative Style

Discuss the title and the poem at the beginning of the novel. How do you see characters in this story rising? How does the novel reflect the message of that poem?

The novel is told from the perspective of four distinct voices. Which voices did you think were easier to relate to and understand? Why? What did you like or dislike about this style of narration?

We're more than halfway through the book before we begin to see how each of the characters' stories intersects with the others. What is the narrative impact of seeing each story unfold individually? What are the benefits of this story structure? What are the drawbacks? Do you think the way the stories come together is effective?

Setting

The setting, Las Vegas, is so pervasive it is almost a character in its own right. Talk about how the author uses the dry desert town as a backdrop and as an integral piece of the story. Could the story take place anywhere else? (Leader Tip: in chapter 2, Roberta describes growing up in Las Vegas)

How is the setting, the city of Las Vegas, similar to or different from Western New York?

Each of the characters describes Las Vegas. What did you learn about the city from the different characters?

PTSD

Luis, Nate and Sadik (Bashkim's father) suffer from PTSD. What are some of the symptoms that they exhibit and how do they cope or not cope? How do you imagine these characters in ten years?

How does the trauma that each of these men experienced in war affect their interpersonal relationships?

What other characters in the novel have symptoms of PTSD? How has the experience of PTSD affected their lives, or the lives of the people around them?

Immigration

Arjeta and Sadik immigrated to America out of necessity. Discuss the difficulties that immigrants must face when moving to a foreign country.

What do you see as some of the issues for educators of children with parents like the Ahmeti's (immigrants with limited English and knowledge of local customs)?

Parenting

Avis and Rodney grew up with a dysfunctional mother and no father figure. How was Avis able to rise above her upbringing? (Leader's tip: refer to pp. 196-97, p. 200 in the novel)

Luis carries guilt for his actions in Iraq and Avis struggles with how much responsibility she has for Nate's actions. How did Avis's childhood contribute to the parenting decisions she made with Nate? Did Luis's childhood experiences contribute to what happened in Iraq and his ability to cope after returning home? How much blame does Avis bear for what has happened to Nate throughout his life? When are parents accountable for the actions of their children?

Avis

The loss of Emily affected Avis in countless ways. Discuss this quote on page 26, “To always know how quickly life could change, how quickly everything important could disappear, to always be trying to feel this expectantly beautiful life to its core.”

Can you empathize with Avis’ distress and sadness when she learns that she must move from her family home? Discuss the feelings involved in making a change like this.

Avis is heartbroken over her husband’s infidelity and desire for divorce. But we find out that she, too, has been tempted, and that she even secretly kissed another man. When Jim says that Darcy was somebody he could talk to, somebody who “helped him think about things,” Avis wonders, *What does that have to do with ending our marriage?* Is she questioning why Jim thought he couldn’t just have a woman friend? Or is she saying that she’d prefer to go on not knowing that Darcy and Jim are now lovers? What do you think she means by this question?

How would you characterize Avis? What is her role in the novel? Read the “It all matters” paragraph on page 197 and discuss.

Luis

When we first meet Luis, he is recovering from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, and he suffers both mentally and physically. How does the act of writing to Bashkim help him with both?

Why do you think Abuela did not tell Luis about his Uncle Miguel?

Luis says that his “abuela always knew that some pain requires space.” What does she mean by this statement and how does she use it in parenting Luis?

“Things happen to us that are more than we can take. And we break. We break for a moment, for a while. But the break is not who we are.” These words are spoken to Luis by Dr. Ghosh. Do you agree that the break is not who we are? Or do you believe that what we do when we break shows who we truly are? How do you see each of the main characters reflected in this statement?

By the time Luis leaves the hospital, he wonders, “what to say to someone who gave you back your life, who believed that you still had a soul, who acknowledged how bad it was possible to feel.” Discuss how Dr. Ghosh breaks through to Luis and ultimately saves his life and gives him hope.

Dr. Ghosh tells Luis, “I believe that coincidences can be powerful...I believe the strangest coincidences are opportunities. There is something unusual about you having written that letter to Bashkim and about what has happened to Bashkim now. You have a great heart, and there is a child whose heart has been broken.” Do you believe in power of coincidence? If so, how have coincidences affected you personally?

Nate

Do you agree with the results from the inquest ruling for Officer Nate Gisselberg? Why or why not?

Do you agree with Avis’s decision to talk to the LVPD about Nate’s problems? Why or why not?

On pages 194-95, Nate describes what the war was like and how he feels now that he is home. Does this description of war have more impact than a news bulletin? If so, why?

Bashkim

How does seeing events through Bashkim's eyes influence our understanding of the story? Do you find Bashkim's narrative of the novel's more serious events to be reliable? Why or why not?

Roberta

Roberta is, in many ways, the narrator we know the least about. She has the fewest sections, and the parts of the story she narrates are almost entirely focused on other people. How is seeing this story through the eyes of a largely unknown character different from a character's life story that is more fleshed out?

Roberta is a CASA volunteer and takes the Ahmetis' case because she is thorough and wants to meet all the people involved in the child's life. What do you think of Roberta's approach and her unique solution?

In a *Library Journal* review of the novel, the question is asked: "How might children in crisis be helped if everyone—teachers, social workers, troubled parents, and the courts—worked together for their best interests? This is the big question at the heart of this well-written first novel by McBride, an English teacher in Las Vegas." Discuss this quote in relation to current social and legal issues in the U. S. today.

Foster Parenting

What do you make of the judge's decision to place Bashkim and Tirana with Graciela and Luis? Does that seem realistic to you? Why or why not? Do you think they would have been better off with their father? What solution would you have chosen for these children?

Violence and Suffering

At the final court proceeding the judge says, "If, sometimes, an unspeakable horror arises from the smallest error, I choose to believe that it's possible for an equally unimaginable grandeur to grow from the tiniest gesture of love. . . . Great terror is the result of a thousand small but evil choices, and great good is the outcome of another thousand tiny acts of care." Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

Anton Chekhov famously said that if a gun appears in the first act of a play, that gun must go off before the end of the story. This book opens with the discovery of a gun, but that gun is tossed away partway through the book. Guns, however, are an integral part of the plot. Discuss the role of guns in this story, both in actuality and as metaphor. (Leader's tip: refer to pp. 183-84 in the novel)

How does the novel explore violence and suffering? What does its message about them seem to be?

What responsibility does society have for the postwar experience of soldiers and veterans? What services should they receive? Who should pay for these services? Do we have the same responsibilities to people who experience traumatic events outside of the military or war? If so, what services and who should pay?

General questions:

How would you rate this novel with 1 the lowest and 5 the highest? Why?

Did certain parts of the book make you uncomfortable? If so, why did you feel that way?

Has this novel **changed you**—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

Is the **ending** satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it?

Further Reading

Fiction:

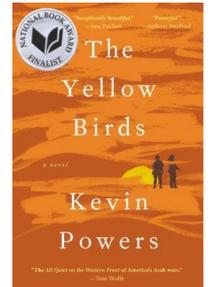
Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War by Karl Marlantes

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

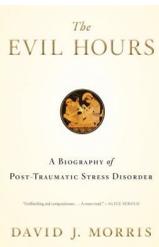
A series of 22 stories relating the exploits and personalities of a fictional platoon of American soldiers in Vietnam. The novel explores the truth about the things men carry into and out of war.

The Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers

In the midst of a battle in the Iraq War, two soldiers, bound together since basic training, do everything to protect each other from both outside enemies and the internal struggles that come from constant danger.



Nonfiction:



The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder by David Morris
Former Marine infantryman David J. Morris suffers from the PTSD aftermath of combat. To research the book, Morris interviewed PTSD experts from all over the world, recording over 100 hours of interviews with combat veterans, rape victims, tsunami survivors, mountaineers, political refugees, neuroscientists, psychiatrists, social workers, historians, poets, and philosophers.

Fiasco The American Military Adventure in Iraq by Thomas E. Ricks

Pulitzer prize-winning Washington Post senior Pentagon correspondent Thomas E. Ricks's *Fiasco* is an explosive reckoning with the planning and execution of the American military invasion and occupation of Iraq.

GRAEME SMITH



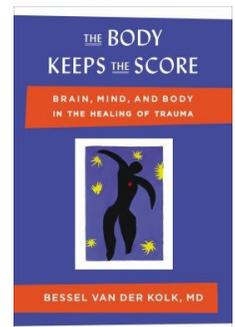
The Dogs are Eating Them Now: Our War in Afghanistan by Graeme Smith

From 2005, until he was forced to flee Afghanistan in 2009, Smith (senior analyst, International Crisis Group) covered the war in Kandahar province for the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper. Here the author recounts his experiences as a journalist embedded with Canadian military troops and includes stories of villagers, soldiers, and Taliban insurgents in gripping and often gory detail.

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

by Bessel van der Kolk

Pioneer trauma researcher van der Kolk's comprehensive book describes the causes and manifestations of PTSD, how large the number of sufferers is, and the toll that inadequate treatment takes on society.



More reading suggestions on pages 18-19.

We Are Called to Rise

by Laura McBride

Summary

Spoiler Alert: The following summary and discussion questions contain detailed plot information that some readers may prefer to encounter as surprises.

In *We Are Called to Rise*, the lives of wildly different Las Vegas residents intersect in a tragedy that changes all that they know. One of four main characters narrates each chapter. The first chapter introduces Avis, a middle-aged woman coping with her husband's infidelity. Roberta, a dedicated child protection services advocate, narrates the second chapter. Bashkim, the 8-year-old son of struggling Albanian immigrants, narrates the third chapter. Finally, the fourth chapter introduces Luis, a traumatized Iraq War veteran. Their thoughts, actions, and experiences are interleaved to depict the novel's larger plot.

After a troubled childhood, Avis is proud to have given her children a stable home and content in a thirty-year marriage to her husband, Jim. A daughter, Emily died in infancy. Their son Nate, always a brash and boisterous child, is grown and married; Nate has joined the Las Vegas police department after his recent return from service in Iraq. Although proud of him, Avis is troubled by how changed he seems. After Jim suddenly confesses to an affair and asks for a divorce, her life unravels. Shortly afterward, she catches Nate abusing his wife, Lauren. Despite their separation, Avis and Jim arrange dinner with Nate and Lauren: Nate dismisses their concerns, pacifying Jim; Avis, however, remains worried by Lauren's thinly-veiled anxiety.

Eight-year-old Bashkim Ahmeti, the novel's central character, was born in Albania. His father Sardik and mother Arjeta immigrated to the U.S. shortly afterward. Wrongfully imprisoned for years in Albania after witnessing police misconduct, Sardik is violent, reclusive, and paranoid. He beats Arjeta (who often laments that she'd be better off dead) and -- fearful of attracting attention from any "authorities" -- keeps the family isolated. They sell ice-cream from a truck and subsist on its meager earnings.

Bashkim is a sweet boy, who works hard to please his teachers and hides his bleak home life. He watches his baby sister Tirana and comforts his mother as best he can.

As part of a class project, Bashkim is thrilled to write to a soldier in Iraq, Specialist Luis Rodriguez-Reyes. Naively curious, he writes: "Have you had a hard time . . .? Do you have to kill people? Does it make you feel funny? . . . I feel funny when my baba [father] kills mice and things." The soldier's reply is shocking: he writes that he's killed a boy Bashkim's age, and that someone will probably try to kill Bashkim someday too, because of his name. Sickened, Bashkim must be led away from class. His principal and teacher call a meeting with his parents to discuss the incident, but Sardik's explosive temper ruins the meeting and Bashkim is left badly shaken.

Specialist Luis Rodriguez-Reyes awakens in a U.S. military hospital following his failed suicide attempt

in Iraq. While re-learning how to walk, read, and write, Luis talks to Dr. Ghosh, a psychiatrist. Luis sifts through his jumbled and painful memories: the beloved *abuela* (grandmother), who raised him in Las Vegas; his best friend in Iraq, Sam. The tragic day that Luis shot and killed a boy in the marketplace, thinking he carried a bomb. And -- not long afterward -- how Sam was blown apart before his eyes. For Luis, guilt, shame, and horror over events in Iraq are as crippling as the bullet in his brain. His beloved *abuela* visits, but he can't bring himself to share his thoughts. Dr. Ghosh shows Luis the letter he sent to Bashkim right before he shot himself. Luis remembers nothing about it. Horrified by having said such things to a child, he pleads to write to Bashkim again. With help from Dr. Ghosh and Bashkim's principal, Bashkim and Luis begin corresponding. Bashkim chooses not to tell his parents about it, however.

Meanwhile, Avis knows that Nate still abuses Lauren. She reflects on her son's troubled past (including his role in a high school drunk-driving fatality) and wonders how unstable he really is. The answer becomes tragically clear when Nate's partner pulls over the Ahmetis' ice-cream truck for a broken taillight. After a bad day selling ice-cream, Sardik is driving his silent, terrified family home when the police siren sounds. Because Sardik is belligerent, the first officer asks him to exit the truck while Arjeta brings over their registration. Bashkim grows fearful as his parents launch into a hysterical argument with one another over the expired registration. Bashkim runs to comfort his mother: she clutches him to her, dramatically, brandishing an ice-cream scoop from her pocket and wailing for Allah to kill her and her children. Nate (the second officer) fatally shoots Arjeta, saying he thought she had a knife and was going to kill her son.

In the aftermath, Roberta becomes the court appointed advocate for the Ahmeti children; it is clear that Sardik is too shattered by his wife's death (and his painful past) to care for them. Nate faces an inquest, but his innocence is a foregone conclusion in a system that favors the white, wealthy, and powerful. Despite this sour note, the novel concludes hopefully. Disturbed that Nate's inquest utterly failed to address Nate's psychological issues, Avis boldly confronts his police commander and demands that he get her son help he needs -- or she'll take her story to the media. Luis returns to Vegas to live with his *abuela*, Graciela Reyes, and learns what has happened to Bashkim. Roberta successfully persuades Sardik -- out of love for their wellbeing -- to relinquish his parental rights. Meanwhile, Luis and his *abuela* Graciela Reyes have come forward to help:

Roberta recommends that Graciela and Luis foster Bashkim and his sister, allowing full visitation rights for their father. The judge commends everyone for their diligence, and grants Roberta's request.

Questions

The following questions and answers should spark discussion of this book, but are not all there is to say. Readers bring differing viewpoints to the story's characters, events, and what it all means; sharing those insights is part of what makes book groups rewarding. Enjoy your discussion -- starting with these ideas!

What are some of the ways that parents shape their children's lives in this novel?

The parent-child relationships in *We Are Called to Rise* range from fairly ideal to nightmarish, with parents influencing their children in unpredictable ways. Bashkim remains thoughtful, caring, and curious despite his father's abusive temper, his mother's timid passivity, and even her violent death. Similarly, Avis endures terrible neglect while her mother Sharlene drifts from one filthy motel to another, more concerned with her criminal, low-life lovers than her young children. Precisely because of this, Avis gratefully builds a life of respectability, love, and normalcy for her son Nate.

Although loved and supported by his parents in every way, Nate grows from a difficult child into a troubled young man. It is reasonable to think that Nate witnessed traumatizing events in Iraq, and that untreated PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) is the primary reason he shoots Arjeta. But is it that simple? He has a history of reckless self-interest long before going to war; in fact, Nate's enlistment was arranged to shield him from prosecution for causing a drunk-driving fatality. Nate absorbs a sense of entitlement from -- rather than gratitude for -- his privileged upbringing. Perhaps it is this character flaw that most contributes to his abuse of Lauren, and contributes to Arjeta's tragic death; we never hear Nate's perspective, so it is difficult to know.

Why is Las Vegas an appropriate setting for this novel?

For most of us, Las Vegas is a place to visit -- a destination famous for gambling, sex, glitz, and money. For those who live there, however, it is a unique place to call home. Avis proclaims that "making it all work in a boomtown" like Las Vegas is means that the people who live there have chosen to create a community "out of nothing" (p. 199). The city's notorious reputation as "Sin City" takes a backseat for the local families who focus on building everyday lives there: "We weren't a community anyone would predict. . . . We lived in a misunderstood city, in a place that thrives only by convincing outsiders that it is something it is not, and the magic is how free it leaves those left within." (p. 199). In a city where fortunes rise and fall abruptly, being resilient about joy and sorrow is essential. For example, Avis regains her resolve when she accepts that *all* the parts of her life -- loss and grief as much as joy -- make it meaningful. Luis (with help from Dr. Ghosh, his abuela, and Bashkim) reconnects with life by reaching out to Bashkim. And Bashkim feels best when he helps someone else in some way -- comforting his sister, his mother, or reaching out to another child.

Las Vegas has a diverse population that makes the story work, too: it attracts recent immigrants like the Ahmetis (and even Bashkim's Australian teacher, Mrs. Monaghan). Avis and Luis show us distinctive

facets of local life: the city's well-established Hispanic/Latino community, as well as the important presence of military personnel and their families. The city encompasses those who (like Sharlene) battle their inner demons at society's fringes, as well as those who (like Avis) find unexpected success.

Nevada's expansive desert setting also symbolizes both the freedom that Avis describes, and an intimidatingly wide-open, empty space (with dangerous elements, like the washes that flood quickly). It is also similar to the landscape of Iraq, as Luis notes and Bashkim learns at school; as a physical space, therefore, it resonates with the traumatic combat experiences that affect Nate and Luis so differently.

How does the novel explore violence and suffering? What does its message about them seem to be?

The novel touches on the ways that global violence trickles down into individual lives. Sardik, Nate, and Luis all suffer PTSD stemming from firsthand exposure to violent conflict. Sardik is angry, distrustful and violent: he beats Arjeta, terrifies Bashkim, begrudges medicine for his baby daughter, and alienates all external support for his family. However, even Bashkim -- who is just a child -- grasps that the violence Sardik inflicts is just an extension of the violence to which Sardik has been subjected. Bashkim tells us that his father "saw a slaughter right in the street in Albania, and he yelled at the policeman who did it"; as a result, Sardik is imprisoned for almost twenty years -- as well as starved and beaten: "when he came out, he was skinny like he is now, and his left arm didn't work anymore" (p. 24).

Luis first turns his suffering outward (in his hateful letter to Bashkim), and then turns it upon himself (with a near-successful suicide attempt). His psychological healing begins when he acknowledges that he has allowed his own suffering to harm another. Luis's determination to befriend Bashkim sparks a cycle of redemption that offers hope for both Luis and Bashkim by the novel's end. Meanwhile Nate's actions (causing a high schooler's death, abusing his wife, killing Arjeta) further drive home the novel's message that suffering is both a cause and consequence of violence: where one goes, the other follows -- and spreads outward.

Fortunately, the novel affirms that kindness, compassion, and healing can also be mutually shared outward. It is this positive lesson that Avis realizes and clings to when confronting Nate after the shooting:

It all matters. That someone turns out the lamp, picks up the windblown wrapper, says hello to the invalid, pays at the unattended lot. . . acknowledges help, gives credit, says good night, resists temptation. . . tips the maid, remembers the illness, congratulates the victor, accepts the consequences. . . removes the splinter, wipes the tear, directs the lost, touches the lonely. (p. 197)

Our simplest, everyday demonstrations of caring, kindness, and support are -- as Avis realizes -- the whole point: "What is most beautiful is least acknowledged. What is worth dying for is barely noticed" (p. 197).

The novel's is drawn from this Emily Dickinson poem, which appears at the front of the book.

How else does the novel reflect the message of that poem?

Like Dickinson's poem, Laura McBride's novel affirms that life *has* a "true plan," one which presents opportunities to rise to our best potential despite uncertainty or suffering. We tend to make immediate, broad judgments about our notable experience -- much as Avis does when Jim announces he's leaving. At first his choice negates everything she understands about the world: "Suddenly. . . all of those emotions and all of that pretending just came rushing at me, a torpedo of shame and failure and fear. Jim was in love with Darcy. My son had come back from Iraq a different man. My crazy mother had been right. And my whole life. . . had come to this" (p. 4).

She questions the value of life on a grander scale -- "How could any of us think our lives have meaning? . . . Why do I expect anyone to act in a certain way? What difference does it make if there is anarchy and mayhem and murder?" (p. 61). The idea that *no one's* life has meaning almost overwhelms her:

If our lives really did mean something, would an Emily [her baby daughter] be dead? Would a child get raped? Would three toddlers drown slowly in a car rolled into by their mother? How can both worlds exist? The one where life is meaningful and the one where it means nothing? Does not the presence of one negate the other? (p. 65)

She is shocked into clarity by Nate's killing of Arjeta. In the wake of the shooting, she recalls her six-year-old self, fearlessly snatching up a gun to protect her little brother (p. 180-2). She listens as Nate angrily, tearfully sketches the horrors of war that have left him unstrung (p. 194-6) -- and finally sees beyond her own fear and pain to rise to her best potential. She "rises" to her full personal worth, seeing how an abusive childhood has made her strong and kind: not only a loving mother prepared to take difficult action to help her son, but also a woman that will not idly allow others' children -- Lauren as well as Bashkim -- to suffer further.

Despite the torment of his past mistakes, Luis also rises: by befriending Bashkim, Luis chooses to honor the *best* he has known in life -- his abuela's love, the value and innocence of childhood -- rather than the worst. Luis reaches past his own physical and psychological trauma because he has "a great heart," and recognizes in Bashkim a broken-hearted child (p. 253). Luis's anger that his abuela kept his father's family from contacting him dissolves quickly into humility and love: "Who am I to criticize her? . . . If she made a mistake, if she took something important from me, she also gave me everything that I am, everything that I ever had"; he hugs her close "just as if I were a man" and they "stand there, lopsided grandson and tiny grandmother, doing the best we can" (p. 275).

The novel concludes by showing a whole group of individuals that -- regardless of personal pain, tragedy, and fear -- answer the "call to rise." This is the ideal encouraged by the poem, and recognized in Bashkim's closing thoughts: "I let Luis say he was sorry. . . and that made Luis's grandma care about us. . . . I am the one who did the small good thing first" (p. 305).

How does seeing events through Bashkim's eyes influence our understanding of the story?

Some readers may be skeptical about how much a child narrator can be relied upon. Perhaps you recall telling made-up stories during your own childhood -- did your dog eat lot of homework? Was it *really* always your brother/sister who left all *your* toys out? You may also have had quirky (mis)understandings of situations that you couldn't really sort out at the time -- how can I child effectively explain what she doesn't understand herself? Yet children are equally well-known for their honesty -- which ranges from sincere to brutal; as American poet Oliver Wendell Holmes said: "Pretty much all the honest truth telling there is in the world is done by children."

With Bashkim, author Laura McBride gives us a perspective that is both knowing and innocent. Tension and poverty temper have tempered him into an unusually serious child. Bashkim occasionally loses himself in fun activities at school. First and foremost, however, he always thinks of how he must act to keep from making his father angry. Bashkim is constantly fearful that his father will take out that anger on his mother; as a rule, he is quiet, thoughtful, uncomplaining, and obedient because he cares deeply for those around him. At worst, keeps information entirely to himself or slightly alters it, if that seems the way to avoid upsetting others. He seems incapable of directly lying just for his own benefit. All of these factors draw us sympathetically into his perspective.

As readers, we perceive the injustice of Bashkim's situation more fully than he does himself. Hunger, poverty, violence, and anxiety mingle with love in the Ahmeti family. Terrible as it is, this is Bashkim's "normal," and he has developed imperfect but functional coping skills to handle it so far. Change is part of life, however -- inevitably, we face something terrible and unexpected. This is what happens when Bashkim receives Luis's hateful first letter. School is Bashkim's one safe space with primarily positive associations; in addition to the terrifying ideas that the letter conveys, what Bashkim really suffers is the loss of that safe space. The parent-teacher meeting is double-edged -- for Bashkim, it is the worst imaginable outcome; his principal's measured handling of events offers readers, in contrast, hope that she -- and his teacher -- may help watch over Bashkim. As a child, he has few words for what he feels; the simplicity of his expression makes his thoughts and speech that much more powerful.

Arguably, McBride's portrayal of Bashkim after his mother's shooting tests the boundaries of believability: Could an eight-year-old child (who witnessed his mother's violent death) -- while still standing in a courtroom where he has just been told that he and his sister will live with relative strangers (Luis and Graciela) instead of their father -- ever really reach the tentative hopefulness that McBride depicts? Knowing his whole story -- alongside those of Avis, Luis, and Roberta -- at least gives pause that maybe *he* can.

About the Author

At age fifty-three, Yale graduate and Las Vegas native Laura McBride published her first novel, *We Are Called to Rise*, a work of mainstream fiction inspired by real-life events in Las Vegas. It reveals the surprising everyday realities of life in that city alongside a poignant commentary on the unexpected aftershocks of war. She describes Las Vegas as "an embarrassment of riches," for a writer, confessing

that she worked to narrow the novel's range and avoid simply introducing "one tantalizing, surprising story after another" (<http://www.bookweb.org/news/qa-laura-mcbride-author-1-june-indie-next-list-pickwe-are-called-rise>).

Further Reading

Fiction

***In Case of Emergency* by Courtney Moreno**

Piper -- a childhood abuse survivor -- works as a rookie EMT in violence-riddled South Central Los Angeles. Her new lover, Ayla, suffers PTSD from service in Iraq. Well realized characters struggle with the violence of war, family, and urban crime.

***Redeployment* by Phil Klay**

A former Marine and Iraq War vet dramatizes soldiers' lives in Iraq and Afghanistan and the aftermath that follows them home. These stark, riveting short stories offer valuable insights into the human psyche at war, but are not for the squeamish.

***Homefront* by Kristin Hannah**

Joleen, a National Guard helicopter pilot is abruptly deployed to Iraq just as her marriage teeters on collapse. Shot down and severely wounded, Jolene returns suffering violent mood swings due to PTSD. Her husband Mark labors to rebuild their family, while defending another traumatized vet accused of murder. This novel focuses on family, trust, and healing in the wake of war.

***Sparta* by Roxana Robinson**

A Marine returns home after four years in Iraq, but remains unable to reconnect with daily life. His bitterness grows into a rage that threatens to explode with devastating consequences. *Like We Are Called to Rise*, *Sparta* explores how society fails soldiers with hidden wounds.

Nonfiction

***Thank You for Your Service* by David Finkel**

Drawn from soldiers' first-hand accounts, *Thank You for Your Service* exposes the government's ongoing failure to support thousands of Iraq and Afghan War veterans returning home with debilitating PTSD, severe brain injuries, and other devastating longterm "side effects" of service.

***The Things They Cannot Say: Stories Soldiers Won't Tell You About What They've Seen, Done, or Failed to Do in War* by Kevin Sites**

The author laments his inadvertent role in the murder of an Iraqi insurgent, and gives voice to veterans' first-hand stories (from his own father in WWI, to soldiers in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan) in a touching -- and healing -- narrative on the toll of war.

This NovelList® Book Discussion Guide was developed by Kimberly Burton. Kim brings over two decades of experience as a genre fiction specialist and library professional to her oversight of NovelList's Adult Recommended Reads Lists, Book Discussion Guides, and other innovative content in the NovelList databases. A reading omnivore, she loves offbeat thrillers, urban fantasies, and literary classics as well as pop-culture commentaries and DIY.

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