

Questions for Carol Edgarian **Author of THREE STAGES OF AMAZEMENT**

It's been more than a decade since you published your first novel, *Rise the Euphrates*. What have you been up to since then?

Let's see. Since finishing *Rise the Euphrates*, I got married, had kids, started *Narrative* magazine, taught innumerable classes, cooked dinners and wrote—often in the middle of the night when those other concerns weren't demanding my attention. Juggling multiple full-time jobs has been my norm. It's been a busy, busy time.

What inspired you to write *THREE STAGES OF AMAZEMENT*?

Oh, so many things. For example, a woman I know who's been married five times once said to me, "Listen, a hundred years ago it was a whole lot easier to promise 'Till death do you part' because back then everyone died in their forties." Well, the line made me laugh but it also got me thinking. I actually put it in the book but later cut it. That line had done its work. It made me think about how much longer people are living today yet our expectations regarding romantic love, fidelity, parenthood, friendship haven't adapted. Or have they? I wanted to think about the marriages I saw around me. Young, old; certain, struggling. To go behind doors where, of course, no outsider is invited. It seemed to me that most love stories chart the early stages—what I'd call the blush—or they narrow in on a cataclysmic end. But what about the long middle, I wondered. When despite every fine desire to connect, partners miss; they screw up, give up, put up; they abandon themselves and each other. And yet they keep coming back. They keep coming back! What kind of craziness is that? It interests me. Related to that, of course, are the external pressures of life, specifically money, ambition, and the view we have of immigrants today versus when this country started—those subjects interest me greatly. Finally, I wanted to write about this moment in time, as America, post-Great Recession, has been stripped of its persona. America having lost its face. If we're no longer the land of manifest destiny, of limitless resources, capital, potential, what are we? Where are we? 2009 was a pivotal moment in time worth capturing. Here we have Lena and Charlie, arriving at middle age, weathering their own hard knocks, at the same time that America hits the skids—that synchronicity, that frightening imbalance is where the novel begins. Lena's question—Where is the grace?—seems particularly relevant to me.

Do you see much of yourself in Lena?

There's a piece of me in all of the characters. To pull a line from the novel, my heart, like all our hearts, has many rooms. But is there more of me in Lena than the others? I don't think so. My process is slow and it takes me a very long time until I feel I know a character, and by knowing I mean encompassing his or her real desires. My job is to be both sympathetic and utterly discriminating. And my job is also to thwart my characters' desires so that something

unexpected happens. Every character in the novel *wants*; they want what they want very badly and they want it *now*. Put two or more people in the same room with that kind of combustible heat and you have the making of drama. That's when the fun begins. Writing **THREE STAGES OF AMAZEMENT** was a whole lot of work but it was also a whole lot of fun.

A lot of recent history makes its way into the book, and you have people like Al Gore and Norah Jones mingling amongst your fictional characters. What effect did incorporating these individuals have on the development of the story?

I can't imagine working on a story for years that doesn't strive to take a big bite out of the world. It simply wouldn't interest me. The characters I write about are *in* the world and of the world. They are affected by what happens in the news and on the street. Isn't everybody? I've never met a person, even a very small child, who doesn't feel they own their particular piece of turf, and given that, have strongly held views on love, music, money, presidents, polar bears and the weather. They are keepers of their time. I'm no different: I write about what impresses me, worries me, challenges me, inspires me—in short, what keeps me up at night. Call me old-fashioned, but I believe the novel ought to have that kind of urgency—of important news just in from the front. It ought to reward the reader on many levels and feel as earthy and essential as meat and potatoes. Excellent meat and potatoes, mind you. It ought to enliven the mind and nourish the soul.

THREE STAGES OF AMAZEMENT is a portrait of present-day San Francisco. What is your connection to the Bay Area?

When I came west to attend Stanford in 1980, it was with a promise to my family that I'd be returning to New England in four years. Well, that was over thirty years ago. I love San Francisco. I even love it in the summer when I seem to spend an inordinate amount of time complaining about the fog. It's a remarkable place: beautiful, diverse, and quirky as all get out. I admire the city's can-do scrappiness, its ridiculous optimism in the face of uncertainty. And I like that it's a city where a writer can be left alone.

How did you come up with the idea of Nimbus? Is it based on real technology? How did you go about your research for the medical, business and technological elements of your story?

I always start out not knowing, with lots of questions. In the beginning, I let my curiosity lead. It gets me into all kinds of trouble. I research widely. I cook up what I think are outlandish schemes and then I find out someone in the world is actually doing that very thing. So I follow that trail to see what it's about. I was fortunate in this book to find doctors and people in various businesses—generous, wonderfully industrious people—who were willing to share their stories and let me follow them at work and gave me piles of information to read. One of my great joys as a writer is that I get to touch down into all kinds of worlds. Basically, I am overly curious. I fill up pages and pages of notes until I'm a walking factoid, until I've got the phrases, logic and

rhythms that would make the scene I want to write plausible in that milieu. And then I forget everything I've learned. I sort of rinse out the mixing bowl and see what sticks to the rim. I use what's on the rim as inspiration for the story.

Did you always know that Lena and Charlie would be able to work it out? Do you have a future in mind for their family beyond the pages of the book?

Have Lena and Charlie worked it out? I'm not so sure. Seems to me they've recommitted themselves to trying— trying, if you will, wiser. I suppose that's the best any of us can do. "Happily ever after" exists only in fairy tales. That's all right. Otherwise, life wouldn't be nearly so interesting.

You have spent the last eight years building *Narrative* magazine. What have you learned about publishing?

Any writer and any publisher today will tell you that we are in a challenging period of change. My house in San Francisco is filled with bookshelves and many thousands of books, and what's more important than the books themselves is what's inside them. We're seeing new forms of books and publishing and, more than anything, I'm optimistic about the human nature of storytelling and the creative imagination. It's a belief shared with many. It's why I write and why we publish *Narrative*.

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