

Q & A WITH AUTHOR LIAN DOLAN

Unlike your protagonist in Helen of Pasadena, you're not the daughter of pot-smoking Oregon fiber artists—you grew up in Southport, Connecticut. Isn't that a lot like Pasadena? How did you get that outsider's perspective that allows for such a witty and smart look at the more upscale side of the city?

I often say that Pasadena is like Southport with palm trees. There is a real sense of tradition and civic pride in Pasadena that is very familiar to a Connecticut Yankee. Many families have been here for generations, attending the same schools, belonging to the same clubs, raising money for longstanding organizations, and living in the same neighborhoods. Pasadena residents love their city and everything it represents in terms of arts, culture, education and sports. They can't imagine living anywhere else.

But even while I'm comfortable with Pasadena's societal workings, I'm not quite on the inside, having only lived here two decades! That leaves a lot of opportunity for observation.

Pomona College is what brought you to Southern California. What made you stay? And why Pasadena?

I left Southern California after graduation, but I guess it never left me. Six years later, I was back because I fell in love with a Pasadena boy. I was living in Portland, Oregon, and working in sports broadcasting when we got engaged. It wasn't much of a negotiation, because he was clearly never leaving Southern California to live in the Pacific Northwest. Plus, he already owned a house near the Rose Bowl at age 25! Everything I owned fit in a Volkswagen. It made sense for me to move. I stayed because the beauty and energy of the city really fit my style. Plus, once again, husband never leaving, so I didn't really have a choice.

You were a Classical Studies major in college and studied in Athens your junior year. Did you want to be Indiana Jones?

I was 16 when *Raiders of the Lost Ark* came out, so mainly I wanted to marry Indiana Jones. But the movie did inspire me to love archaeology. Plus, my parents forced me to take Latin in high school, which I ended up loving. In college, I studied Greek, plus history and archaeology. After spending a semester in Athens, I really thought I would have this very rewarding, romantic career digging up stuff in the Greek Isles. But, frankly, I wasn't smart enough. Advanced ancient Greek did me in. And so did the thought of spending ten years post-college in pursuit of a doctorate. Instead of grad school, I moved to Jackson Hole to be a ski bum for two years. I think that says it all about my academic fortitude.

But I still love history and am hugely jealous of people who can make a career pursuing the tiniest historical details with passion and scholarship. That is a dream job to me.

It's said that first novels are usually autobiographical. Is the title character Helen based on you?

Absolutely not. Hahaha.

Is Patrick O'Neill based on one of your college professors?

Don't I wish! Then maybe I would have found that academic fire I needed! Actually, I did have one archaeology professor that I had a little crush on... but he owned no nubby sweaters as far as I know. To create Patrick O'Neill, I researched actual archaeologists and modeled his fictional work and resume after the real Dr. Manfred Korfmann, a famous German archaeologist who managed the excavation at Troy until his early death. For the sizzle, I turned to the Facebook group "Bringing Sexy Back To Archaeology." Yes, such a group exists, and the women of Sexy Archaeology were very helpful in describing the sexiest professors they ever had. I owe Patrick's nubby sweaters, his tattoo, his tanned forearms and his quiet, thoughtful work habits to them.

You already had a busy enough life as a mother, columnist, podcaster, blogger, volunteer, wife, sister, daughter and dog walker—how did you fit writing a novel in there?

My writing teacher said that to write a novel, you have to give up something, so I gave up yoga to write in the morning.

But before I even got to that stage, I knew I had a novel in me—but with so much going on, I couldn't focus on fiction. Then when my radio show, Satellite Sisters, ended unexpectedly, I had an opening in my schedule. I was used to creating and performing six days a week on air, so I refocused that energy on writing. Unlike Helen, I jumped right in without overthinking the situation! I took an online novel-writing class and forced myself to write for the class critique group to stay accountable. I am a big believer in deadlines as a motivator. And announcing to the world that I was writing a novel and committing my energy to the process was key.

There's never a perfect time to write. If you wait for that, you may never get anything done. Plunging in was the key for me.

You've lived in Pasadena a long time and have a lot of friends and family there. Are you worried that they might be offended when you have some fun at their town's expense? Or if they see themselves in some of the more comic characters?

Should I be worried? Dang, I hope no one eggs my house. I think most people have a sense of humor about themselves and the lives they lead. I satirize with much love. Hey, I'm the girl who gave up her career in sports for a Volvo with a keyless remote entry. Plus, I was sensible enough not to use any one person wholesale as a character. Or one school or charity. Everyone and everything really is fictionalized—a hazy stew of the people, places and events I've experienced.

Has your teenage son read Helen of Pasadena? Does he think the character of Aiden is based on him?

No, he hasn't read it. There's one upside to having a boy who doesn't like to read! I could have made Aiden exactly like him and he never would have known. There are similarities between the two boys, but Aiden is not a carbon copy.

I made Helen's child a boy because I do know boys better, being the mother of two young men. For the plot's sake, I wanted Aiden to have that parallel with Merritt and the pressure that comes with that. Plus, contrary to popular belief, boys at that age are emotional and complicated. And they can still be very sweet to their mothers.

Is your husband anything like Merritt?

100% no! First of all, my husband is a UCLA fan, not a USC guy. Enough said.

In the novel, a lot of psychic energy is expended over education—specifically, the panic to get kids into the “right” school. Do you think American parents obsess about their kids' educations?

Of course we do! As parents, it gives meaning to our angst. I don't know why we've ratcheted up the stakes for our children, but we have. Pasadena is a town where a great number of kids attend private and parochial schools, so the jockeying for admission starts in pre-K and is out of control by college. That was new for me, having gone to public schools my whole life, only going through the admissions process as a senior in high school. But it's not just in Pasadena: Today the pressure on kids to perform academically and athletically exists in every community all over the country.

Having Aiden not attend the expected high school was my not-so-subtle way of saying that even though we may have expectations for our children, they have their own strengths and weaknesses, hopes and desires. Just a little parenting message in the fiction!

We hear you're working on two more novels in what's being called the Rose City Trilogy. Can you spill a bit about them?

Both books will combine contemporary women and their historical counterparts. Both books will continue to explore the many roles women play as wives, friends, sisters, mothers, daughters, patrons of hair salons. And, of course, both books will be set in Pasadena, using the city's rich cultural heritage as a backdrop. And you may see some familiar characters popping up again, because every book about Pasadena should include a former Rose Queen!