

For Audra Martin D'Aroma, Location Is Everything

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Spanning a little over a century, “[The Galveston Chronicles](#)” (Rozlyn Press, February 2012) is the story of four generations of women who feel an intense pull to the island of Galveston, Texas even though their lives continue to be interrupted by hurricanes. The novel opens in the stifling days before the Galveston Hurricane of 1900, when the wealthy Isadora Khaled begins to dream about catfish and murdering her daughter, setting off a chain of events that will not be resolved until Hurricane Ike in 2008.

Isadora’s descendants are defined by and eventually named after the hurricanes that shape their lives: Fatima, who enters into a doomed relationship with a visiting artist in 1961; her drug-numbered daughter Carla, desperate to get home in 1983; and Carla’s daughter Alicia, reunited with her heritage on a modern island embracing disaster culture in 2008.

Though she and her family were from Houston, author [Audra Martin D'Aroma](#) visited her grandparents’ house in Galveston throughout her childhood, developing a strong attachment to the island and an interest in how the people responded to hurricanes. Interested in what these reactions say about the places people are from, D’Aroma has maintained a lifelong fascination with the psychological landscape of the Gulf Coast.

This University of Texas alumna ([English](#), '99) and up-and-coming author chatted with ShelfLife@Texas about “[The Galveston Chronicles](#)” and what the future holds for her writing

career.

How did you develop such a strong love for Galveston and hurricane culture?

When I was younger, my grandparents had a vacation house on the West end of Galveston and we spent a lot of time there. It was way less developed back then. I think Galveston is a really fascinating place because it has an interesting mix of characteristics that make for strange bedmates — a Victorian aesthetic mixed with an existential, end-of-the-world feeling.

I was also fascinated just how much the island lives in the shadow of the 1900 Storm. In that way it is almost polar opposite of its neighbor Houston, where I come from. We take pleasure in tearing down any signs of our history and starting over while Galveston at some point made a decision that it was better to be defined by a tragedy than to risk having no identity at all.

As for hurricane culture, I think that the way we react to hurricanes says a lot about us — about our ideas of private property, our inherent distrust of government and our nervous energy. In fact, sometimes I think that if an anthropologist were to come to this region 1,000 years from now and try to dig up signs of what we were like as a culture, they might think that hurricane season was a religious season like Lent.

Why did you choose to major in English and Art History instead of Rhetoric and Writing? How do you feel this selection of majors prepared you for your professional writing career?

Sadly, I think I chose English because I wanted to be able to read as much fiction as possible while getting my degree. I was originally a political science minor but then switched to art history after taking an introductory class freshman year and falling in love with Caravaggio. I think that, through the direction of my studies, I developed an idea about craft as something to be learned from the Old Masters, either in the visual arts or in writing. I took one writing class at UT from Peter LaSalle, and it had a huge effect on me. I think he's writing some of the most interesting and experimental fiction, but in the class nothing was about finding your own voice or tapping into your own creativity. He just taught the fundamentals of the craft. It instilled in me the idea that one thing had to come before the other was possible.

What gave you the idea for the unique plot of “The Galveston Chronicles?”

I can't really remember. I started writing it in 2005 (before Hurricane Katrina), and I think the whole story came to me in a flash and then it took almost seven years of backtracking to try to hammer the plot down. I didn't want to have a single character carry the story like a lot of people suggested, so I relied on this idea of ancestral memory to link the episodes. I've always noticed that on Galveston, people frame their stories using the hurricanes as markers.

Did you do a lot of historical research on the city throughout the writing process?

I did, but I also relied on a lot of other people. My mother is a history buff, so she helped a lot with it. There are a few writers, namely Gary Cartwright and Stan Blazyk, who did a great job of

capturing the history. My editor was ruthless in taking out historical details that didn't add to the story.

Diane Wilson, author of "Diary of an Eco Outlaw," reviewed "The Galveston Chronicles," and said that you "weave Galveston Island and those hurricanes into [your] story like Faulkner wove Yoknapatawpha County into 'Absalom, Absalom!', where the land was always not far behind in any dealings that the characters hatched up." How do you think giving agency to a setting or location affects your novel, and do you have any other locations you feel could serve as the basis for a novel?

I would almost go as far to say that the entire reason I write is to explain to myself what it means to come from East Texas-West Louisiana, meaning the 360 or so miles between Houston and New Orleans. I think we have three of the ten largest oil refineries in the world in that area, and so you grow up in this environment where nature and industry are almost inextricably combined. I am interested in how that affects both our ideas of beauty and our personality. I can't really tell you how that is, but I do know that I like to write about people watching oil refineries being lit up at night and missing hurricane season more than positive holidays.

What do you hope readers take away from this book?

An idea of the mood and the sense of place that made me write the book.

What are you working on now?

I am working on a novel about the reverse immigration of a down-on-her-luck young mother in Lake Charles, Louisiana who is accused of a crime and escapes to Beirut and [of the immigration] of her great-great grandmother who escaped the Ottoman Empire to Lake Charles a century earlier.

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