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Let's Have A Round for These Friends of Mine

by [BLOGGER Jill_Dearman](#) on 11-04-2009 04:43 PM - last edited on 11-04-2009 05:00 PM by [ADMIN Jon_B](#)

Joanna Smith Rakoff has pulled off quite a feat. Her debut novel *A Fortunate Age* feels at once contemporary and classic, perhaps because it focuses on, among other things, the eternal subject of friendship. My interview with the talented author of this very New York story.

JD: Tell us about the conception of and the journey towards completion and publication.

JSR: *A Fortunate Age* started out as a short story about three characters who share a rather dramatic evening in the East Village. Over the course of a year, it kept getting longer and longer, until I saw that it was not, of course, a short story, but the seed of a novel. I wasn't sure, however, what form that novel should take and so I just kept plugging away at my non-story, developing the original characters and adding new ones. Then, in the spring of 2002, I read Mary McCarthy's novel *The Group* and was struck by the similarities between her characters' experiences-with men, with work-and those of my friends in New York. I decided to, in a way, fit my characters into McCarthy's form: To make my novel a contemporary re-telling of *The Group*.



Many drafts later, it veers quite sharply from *The Group*-which is as it should be-and I've realized that while I hugely admire McCarthy's writing, my style and worldview and, mainly, attitude toward my characters is quite different from hers. *The Group* is ultimately a comedy-the status quo is affirmed and everyone gets their just desserts-while *A Fortunate Age* is really a tragedy. McCarthy satirized her characters to a much greater extent than did I.

In terms of completion: I spent about two years drafting the novel-including three months at MacDowell, during which I wrote probably half the novel-Oh, then gave that draft to a couple of trusted readers a month before giving birth to my first child. When he was perhaps four weeks old, those readers sent me back edits. I spent the next two months cutting and rewriting, then gave my agent a draft. A couple of months later, she gave me much more substantial edits and I then spent the next two years taking the book apart and putting it back together again. I'd been a freelance journalist-with a part-time job editing features for a magazine-and I wasn't making enough money to afford a ton of babysitting, so I squeezed much of my paid work, as well as the novel into my son's naps, and woke up extremely early in order to secure the time to write. Eventually, I was took a full-time job at the magazine and wrote mostly at night (my husband has many photos of me in bed, having fallen asleep on my manuscript, a pen clutched in my hand). In order to finally finish the thing, I actually took a two-week leave from work and went to stay at a friend's house in the country by myself. For those two weeks, I holed up and did nothing but work on the book, stopping occasionally to eat or go running.

A few months thereafter, my agent sent it out to a bunch of editors and an auction ensued. This is, of course, a good thing, but it was also strange and nerve-racking. I didn't sleep for the duration. In the end, I had to choose between editors, which was difficult, too. I went, ultimately, with the editor whose thoughts on the manuscript made the most sense to me, and with whom I felt genuinely comfortable. And it was certainly the right choice. She's brilliant and has become a good friend.

JD: How did changes in the world and in your own life affect the book, over the years that you spent working on it?

JSR: This is a difficult question to answer. To start with the world: I began working on the book before September 11, during the waning days of the go-go 1990s, when we were still in a serious boom economy. It's not a coincidence that the novel truly began to take shape after September 11. Somehow, the shifts in the world-economic, political, social-allowed me to see the larger picture, to see that what I really wanted to capture was the particularities of what I saw as New York's most recent gilded age-and the peculiarities of coming of age as an artist during that time. (And yet, at the same time, I was hoping to capture something very universal about coming of age in New York.)

At the same time, the actual plot of the book was very much informed by the way the world was changing as I wrote it. Toward the end of the novel, for instance, the Sadie Peregrine character-who's a rather self-possessed, confident gal-has become almost pathologically afraid of random violence. She won't get on a plane. She's afraid to send her son to school. She's had to force herself to stop reading the paper, as she's too deeply affected by the brutality that dominates the front page. To an extent, I suffered (and still suffer) from similar anxieties. It's really hard for me to fly. Even on the subway, I get nervous.

In terms of my own life, well, I'm not sure. I can share a funny anecdote, though: I live on the Lower East Side, the neighborhood to which Sadie moves toward the end of the novel, right around the time she has her first child. Sadie finds the neighborhood somewhat unfriendly, and the neighborhood mothers clique-ish and petty. When the book came out, my neighbors-and perhaps everyone-assumed that Sadie's experiences were based on my own, but in fact I'd written that section before having a baby, just kind of guessing at how a very private, rather intellectually-inclined person might feel when faced with playground conversations about diaper brands and organic baby food. (As it turns out, I felt similarly to Sadie, after my son was born.)

JD: Your dialogue is very astute; any advice for those who struggle with it?

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JSR: Thank you! I love writing dialogue.

I did a lot of theater work when I was younger-and I still see plays as often as I can-so this may be why dialogue comes naturally to me, at this point in life. For those to whom it doesn't, I'd say the best thing you can do is read your work aloud. Read it as you're writing, as you're revising, as you're cutting. If the dialogue doesn't sound natural to you when you read aloud, it's not going to read as natural on the page. And seriously think about contractions. This is a minor obsession of mine. So much fiction that fails on the dialogue front does so, in part, because the writer has some misplaced idea about characters speak "correctly" rather than naturally, and, thus, makes an Evanston teenager say, "It is going to rain" rather than "It's going to rain."

JD: What writers have influenced you the most and how?

JSR: I've been very affected by comedies of manners, so writers like Dawn Powell, Edith Wharton, and E.M. Forster. George Eliot also loosely falls into this category, for me. From such writers, I learned much of my approach to narration, which is basically a high, all-knowing omniscient narrator who deeply penetrates the psyches of the characters (but still has a bit of fun with them). Some more contemporary writers who have affected me similarly: Alison Lurie, Thomas Pynchon, Diane Johnson.

JD: Anything you'd like to share about your next project?

JSR:My next novel is another big, sprawling thing, about a trio of siblings, the children of an ailing neocon artist and critic, all of them wrestling with the hold their parents have over them. The main plot, right now, has to do with the younger daughter, who goes to North Africa with the Peace Corps and gets involved with a Marxist insurgent group. No good comes of this, of course, and her brother, in Germany on a fellowship (discovering some dark spots in their father's past), ultimately comes to her rescue. The third sibling leaves her husband and goes home to live with their parents. No good comes of this either. But as I said, I'm still in the early stages. Much research to do.

JD: How has your work as an editor influenced how you write and how you self-edit?

JSR: Working as an editor-particularly in the intensive way I did while writing the novel-was invaluable, as it really allowed me to gain a bit of perspective on my work. A journalistic story or essay is, of course, different from fiction. But it's still a story and I found that the more I edited magazine pieces, the easier it was for me to shape the novel and the various small stories within it. It became very easy to say, "This is an interesting detail but not necessarily crucial to the larger story." Every writer, I think, should work as an editor at some point.



Writers take note! For more thoughts on craft check out my new book, [Bang the Keys](#), and stop by the salon at:<http://www.bangthekeys.com>

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by [Vermontcozy](#) on 11-05-2009 04:46 PM

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