

READER'S GUIDE



Glass Voices by Carol Bruneau

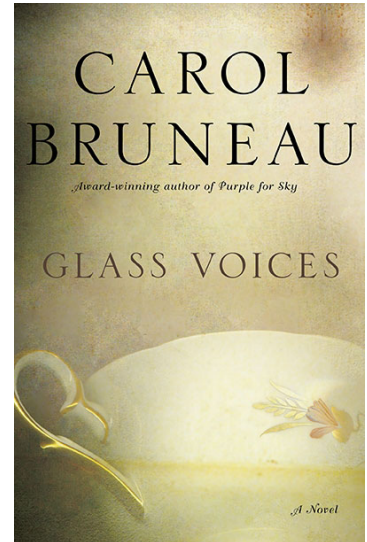
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INTRODUCING *Glass Voices*

Her husband's severe stroke makes seventy-one-year-old Lucy Caines reexamine the past. Lucy and Harry Caines' house was destroyed in the 1917 Halifax Explosion, a catastrophe in which they lost their first child, Helena. With their second child, a boy named Jewel, the young couple carve out a life for themselves amid a survivor's village of ramshackle houses, gambling, moonshine, and rum-running.

Fifty-two years later, Lucy's son Jewel is married to the daughter of Lucy's worst enemy, and her grandson Robert wants to quit school to go on a hippie pilgrimage. Forced to work together during Harry's long recovery, the family gains a new perspective on the past, as a mysterious stranger is more than she seems, and a fresh loss is countered with the emergence of a new hope.

Glass Voices explores the interior life of a woman who has always worked hard for her family and taken little for herself. At the thought of losing her husband, Lucy confronts her dependence on a man whose self-destructiveness has frequently isolated her. Award-winning author Carol Bruneau's moving portrait of a mother and her family traverses personal tragedy, two world wars, and the social tumult of the '60s, tackling the necessity of moving on, and celebrating the possibility of finding salvation in the unlikeliest places.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Dependence

Lucy has always been dependent on Harry, despite his wayward ways. When he has his stroke, Harry is not there to protect Lucy from her perceived fears — such as the knife sharpener Benny, at the beginning of book. Harry's stroke forces Lucy to confront her past reliance on him and the loneliness that was forced upon her by her resentment and Harry's neglect. "The loneliness just deepened, a mossy well to be climbed out of. Harry wasn't much of a ladder."

The Times They Are A-Changing

It's the 1960s and Lucy has trouble with her grandson, Robert, and his behavior. Robert, an aspiring hippie, is seen by Lucy as contemptuous and rude. Seeing through Robert's "act" is like "fighting a current." And Lucy questions her son and daughter-in-law's unwillingness to enforce discipline upon Robert. "Robert's hissy fit is water under the bridge, as if it had never happened. Harry would have something to say about that, she's pretty sure. But, she'd ask, why not? Maybe that's how parents should behave." Lucy wonders about the reading material and music the Robert enjoys: "Rebecca's laxness, no doubt, allowing such trash in the house."

Saints and Martyrs

"Don't be a martyr, now ... It used to come from Harry, now it's from Rebecca and Jewel ... What's a martyr, anyway? As if Joan of Arc asked to be burned at the stake, and her very own namesake, St. Lucy, blinded." Lucy does not see herself as a martyr, but others do, and she does evoke the comparison as she tirelessly cooks, cleans, and takes care of her family, rarely complaining. Her devotion to religion means she is loath to admit to her hardships out loud, especially because "compared to the Virgin's sorrows, what were hers?" Saints are a theme throughout the text. After winning a trip to see a relic in Quebec, Lucy embarks on her much-anticipated trip

only to get off the train before making it there. She finally does make a pilgrimage to a different site, only to have much go wrong.

Desire and Sexuality

Despite her faith in God, or maybe *because* of her faith and the tenuous nature of it, Lucy goes on “missions to the barn, missions of self-saving mercy.” Her intimacy with a man other than her husband is both satisfying and guilt-inducing. “Pleasure having fanned itself into shame, a hot, thick feeling moving up her throat and filling her ears.” Her fling with the German is something she is ultimately remorseless about, because it brings her relief: “Instead of running, fleeing, after grabbing at life – admitting her own craven, singing need; not only that, but letting it push inside her – what had she done but eaten biscuits?” She later reflects on her relations with the unnamed man: “The man’s gaze, his mouth on hers ... what the body remembered, the soul forgot?”

Feminine Virtues

Lucy values a clean house and a well-cooked meal, while Rebecca values her looks and “prattles on about this and that, which heels to wear with what, and what goes best with orange and lime.” Lucy does not think she makes a good wife and mother, and this is based on her judgment of Rebecca’s mother, Lil. Rebecca is an open book with her emotions, earnest and sometimes overly exuberant, while Lucy guards her isolation.

Q&A WITH CAROL BRUNEAU

1. Where did the idea for *Glass Voices* come from?

Growing up in Halifax, I’ve always been interested – obsessed is a better word – with the 1917 Explosion. Reminders of it are everywhere, if you know where to look. The accounts of survivors are a deeply entrenched part of local lore.

An image from the Disaster that has gripped me for years, and always will, is that of a blinded, orphaned infant on a relief train, which I read about in historian Janet Kitz’s wonderful book, *Shattered City*.

Where can you go with such an image of loss and desolation?

I guess my novel began as a humble attempt to “understand” the dimensions of such a heartbreaking image, and perhaps to make some kind of uneasy “peace” with the reality of it – the reality of lost children young and old that repeats itself again and again in our world.

While a lot of nonfiction has been produced about the Explosion, little fiction has been published, and none, as far as I’m aware, from a female or motherly perspective.

Imagining that nameless, sightless, speechless child on the train spawned a lot of obvious what ifs. What became of him or her? On the other hand, who were his or her parents, and had they actually perished? In the chaos after the Disaster, more than two hundred people went missing and were never accounted for, so it’s possible that some survivors, especially those without the means, were never reunited with their families. The natural extension of all this, in my novelist’s eye, was and is, oh my God, what if he or she were *my* baby?

2. The Halifax Explosion is a significant event for Lucy and her family, and for all of Halifax at that time. How did you go about your research for the book?

My research consisted of reading everything I could get my hands on, chatting with survivors and others old enough to remember the disaster, and continually revisiting some of the rubble. The neighbourhood where I grew up, and now live, isn’t far from the chunk of Mont Blanc’s anchor that flew several miles over the city. While I was working on the book – like rocks coming up in the garden every spring – reminders of the Explosion kept surfacing and presenting themselves: pieces of metal in the walls of public buildings, a friend’s

house twisted on its foundation, a concrete wall with coal melded to it like lava. The novel took eight years to write, so there were a lot of reminders. One of the most potent experiences, though, was taking a walking tour courtesy of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, and visiting some sites where many lost their lives. In some cases, entire families were killed in mere seconds. Many people were blinded by flying glass, while countless others burned to death in the rubble. Schools, churches, and most of the city's industrial infrastructures were wiped out. The astounding thing is how the city recovered, and stories and reminders of that process remain with me too. An aunt of mine, for instance, taught some of the blinded victims basketry at the Halifax School for the Blind.

3. How do you think the explosion continues to have an effect on the collective psyche of Halifax residents?

Halifax is a tough old bird of a place – but you can say that about most places, I think, that have endured terrible things. Life goes on, it has to, but disasters of this magnitude always remain somewhere in the collective imagination. They're a reminder of how we're all on the edge, that bad things happen randomly and always will – everywhere.

As long as there are survivors alive, the event will be remembered with reverence. But as history advances, it may already have begun to enter the realm of "fable," especially for people too young to have direct connections with the city's past. The edge will always be there, though – imagine, for instance, the name of a local indie music festival, Halifax's Pop Explosion, used in any other place. The Saskatoon Pop Explosion? It doesn't have quite the same ring.

Over the years Halifax has been a bit of a magnet for disasters, including, most recently, the SwissAir crash. Victims from the Titanic were brought here, and the methods devised for identifying the bodies were put to good use later, in 1917. Also, the city was directly affected by both world wars, in ways that other Canadian cities weren't. Maybe all this should make us nervous – but no. It gives us a certain stick-with-it-ness, I think, as well as great empathy for those in other countries and in other cities who suffer catastrophic things.

4. Are any of the characters based on people you have known?

None of the characters are based on people I know or have known personally. Lucy's flight to safety, however, was inspired by the stories of similar miraculous experiences of survivors that are well-documented locally in newspaper accounts and books such as Janet Kitz's. In an attempt to make the story feel as "true" as possible, peripheral characters have been given common local last names. But this is where any resemblances to real people end; those who live in the novel are purely products of my imagination.

5. How does Lucy find meaning in her life as a mother, housewife, and caregiver?

As a victim of great tragedy, Lucy is at times defined by her loss – but she refuses to be defeated by it. Through her trials and tribulations, she retains within her a kernel of optimism, a quiet spunk. It's this basic nature and a sense of purpose that gives her life enough meaning to get her through the days. However, it is in relationship with others – and in owning up to her need for connection – that this spirit of hers finds its true value.

Ultimately, Lucy's hope and forbearance in marriage and motherhood define her more, much more, than does her loss, which remains deeply personal. While such suffering isolates individuals, tragedy can also unite a family or a community. (Look at what happened after 9/11!) For better or for worse, marriage, motherhood and taking care of her husband eventually force Lucy to accept the fact that connection is better than disconnection. It's in accepting the fact that she is in some ways powerless – in accepting what she can't change, and being brave enough to deal with what she can – that Lucy's life acquires its fullest meaning.

6. Why did you choose to write the novel from a third-person point of view?

Given the novel's historical spread, it was important to me to take advantage of the descriptive scope offered by third-person narrative, while keeping the story intimately Lucy's. In its earliest version, the novel was in three

sections, two of them in different points of view from Lucy's, even though her story was the one crying loudest to be told.

In writing solely from her perspective but in third person, I hoped to capture the two sides of her character: the particulars of her small, at times preoccupied, even petty, self, and her better, bigger-hearted self, with its spirit of largesse. Many of us go through life, I think, with this double perspective: the way we are, and the way we could or should be.

7. As the story developed, were you surprised with the direction it took, or did you know the ending when you began?

As I mentioned before, the novel took quite a long time to write, which has meant a lengthy journey with each of the characters. This is a hard question to answer, since the story went through many versions and incarnations. The one thing that did not change, though, was the ending, the image of wholeness, such as it is, at which Lucy finally arrives. While the outcome was not a huge surprise to me — though it definitely is for *her* — the route by which she gets there was full of surprises. In fact, I kept being surprised, even astonished, right up to the final draft — and there were many drafts.

8. How do you think your own role as mother and wife affected the telling of *Glass Voices*? Are there insights into Lucy that you couldn't have gained any other way?

I've been married to the same person for nearly twenty-five years, so I guess I know marriage. Not that I would ever put up with a guy like Harry! Much more important to the novel is my insider's view of motherhood, at least when it comes to the mothering of sons. Without this I don't think I could've entered Lucy's perspective to the extent that I have. Having children has always been a complement to my writing life; a complicated but marvelous one. When I began writing fiction fifteen years ago, it was my kids who taught me the depth of empathy that's necessary in developing characters. Kids force you to get out of your own head, out of your ego, and at times, out of your own way. Jewel forces Lucy to move past her loss, and he forces her, eventually, to realize that no matter how much she wants to, she cannot control his life. One of the hardest lessons of parenthood is the need to let go of "desired results" — the way you the mother (or father) would have your kids turn out. The fact is, exactly like with characters, you have to love them unconditionally and let them go.

But these are generalizations. In some very specific ways, experiences with my kids allowed me insight into Lucy's emotions. For instance, imagining how she felt seeing Jewel off to war wasn't that hard after seeing one of my boys in uniform — albeit as part of an honorary regiment, never mind that my son's gun was a nineteenth-century rifle and his uniform a kilt. I can only imagine how the mothers of sons and daughters in the real military must feel. But I think I have an inkling of that too; my father fought at Normandy on D-Day, and it's not hard to imagine how my grandmother, his mother, must have felt. Everyone is somebody's child, and this is the one thing all of us share, regardless of the boundaries of time and place.

Lucy's longing to have her kids happy and safe is every parent's longing. The problem — for us as well as for Lucy — is that we can't guarantee happiness and safety for any of the world's children. All we can do is hope for the best, do what we can to affect these things, and pray a lot.

9. What are your favourite books and how have they influenced your writing?

I just re-read Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* after first reading it when it came out thirty-one years ago. What a blast! Atwood's subversive wit reminds me over and over how important it is to use humour in telling a story, even a tragic one like Lucy's. In all honesty, though, I can no longer identify which books are my favourites, since these change weekly. But I would have to say that, to me, Alice Munro's stories are utter magic, the perfect synthesis of plot, character and voice; technical and soulful perfection with that subversive edge. I like edge. I like writing that has heart and soul. I don't like writing that is technically brilliant but emotionally gutless. I loved and still love Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* and William Trevor's *Felicia's Journey*. I grew up loving Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and before these, long before these, Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne* and *Emily* books. I learned quite recently to love *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf.

But did any of these influence my writing? Not individually and not directly, I don't think — not in the writing of *Glass Voices*, which so stubbornly demanded its own way of being told. There's no doubt, however, that the cumulative effect of reading a lot of great books by these and other wonderful authors has helped, certainly indirectly.

10. What do you want readers to take from this novel?

I hope that readers will take away a spirit of hope and of possibility, even when things go wrong and don't always turn out as one would like them to. The book is about forgiveness — of others, and of oneself — even in the face of things that one can never and should never forget.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Lucy considers her role as a caregiver in the wake of Harry's stroke as a burden, but at the same time, "the thought of the room without him in it hums like a test pattern, a sound that would drive a person crazy if it persisted." How does Harry's stroke force Lucy to rethink her marriage?
2. How does Lucy cope with her grief in the present over her husband's stroke, and her grief in the past, over the loss of her daughter, parents, and sister?
3. Lucy's relationship with her husband has been tumultuous over the years, yet after he has the stroke, Lucy feels intense guilt. "She could stick a knitting needle down her throat for every bad thought she's ever had." Do you think Lucy ever finds the ability to forgive and forget?
4. What moral/ethical choices do the characters make? Which choices did you agree with? Which ones didn't you agree with? And why?
5. How does Lucy's relationship with her family change as the book progresses?
6. Does Lucy ever forgive Rebecca for Lil's transgressions?
7. In what ways do the events in the book reveal evidence of the author's world view?
8. What did you think about Elinor?
9. Were you surprised by the ending of the book?



ABOUT CAROL

Carol Bruneau is the author of *Berth*. Her novel *Purple for Sky* (Cormorant, 2000) won the City of Dartmouth Fiction Prize and the Thomas H. Raddall Atlantic Fiction Prize. She is also the author of two collections of short stories, *Depth Rapture* and *After the Angel Mill*, both published by Cormorant Books. She has taught creative writing in the continuing education departments of Mount St. Vincent University and Nova Scotia Community College; she is now on faculty of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, where she teaches writing. She lives in Halifax with her husband and three sons.