

G COVER

Cambridge's Lois Lowry, architect of the original young adult dystopia



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

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By Chelsey Philpot

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BRIDGTON, Maine — Two-time Newbery Medal winner Lois Lowry did not set out to be a trailblazer when she published “The Giver” in 1993. But without “The Giver,” there would be no “Hunger Games” trilogy by Suzanne Collins or “Matched” series by Ally Condie. “The Giver” is a precursor to these bestsellers and others in so many ways. It was a dystopian novel for young readers before post-apocalyptic settings became a trend; a title with adult appeal before parents started unabashedly perusing the teen sections of libraries; and beautifully written exploration of human connection when many thought children were not ready for such depth. Lowry, who has penned more than 40 picture books and novels, did not set out to become famous, but she has become just that — and no one is more surprised than she.

“People are starting to refer to ‘The Giver’ as a classic, but I don’t know how that is defined,” she says, leaning forward slightly out of a white wicker chair on the porch of her summer home in Bridgton, as if she could jump up at any moment. “But if it means that 10, 20, 50 years from now kids will still be reading it, that is kind of awe-inspiring.”

At age 75, the Cambridge-based author has plenty of books she still plans to write. But before she can move on to a new project she has to see one through that began almost two decades ago. Her new novel, “Son,” which is published today, will follow “Gathering Blue,” “Messenger,” and “The Giver,” to become the final entry in the “Giver Quartet.”

“The Giver,” the winner of the 1994 Newbery, has sold more than 10 million copies worldwide. It’s assigned reading in countless classrooms and has won Lowry devoted fans as well as ardent protesters. It was one of the top 100 most frequently challenged/banned books of the past decade, according to the American Library Association (ALA). “Ms. Lowry’s books are well-written and popular, and we find that books that get read are books that get challenged,” said the ALA’s assistant director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom, Angela Maycock, in an e-mail.

Writing the book to end such a beginning must feel a bit like launching a rocket to Neptune after walking on the Moon: Just landing among the stars is not an option. Margaret Raymo, Lowry’s editor, said in her office at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt on Berkeley Street in Boston that even though she is a 25-year veteran of the publishing industry she still had trepidations about the pressures surrounding “Son.” “I was very intimidated to work on this book, just the expectations about it, what everybody thinks about it, I wonder if Lois felt similar. I don’t think she actually did. She has got complete confidence.”

Confident, indeed, is one thing Lowry certainly is. She is also articulate, opinionated, and independent — good qualities to possess when you are asked to speak to crowds of thousands. At the same time, she can be charmingly self-deprecating, making jokes about spilling lunch on her blue jeans and struggling to heed her mother’s frequent admonition to “sit up straight.” During lapses of quiet, she gives the impression that behind

the veteran of numerous interviews is still the solitary child for whom “the most exciting thing I could do was to have a new book.”

Lowry was born in Hawaii. Her father was an Army dentist, and she, her mother, and her two siblings moved with him around the world, spending her junior high years in post-World War II Tokyo. She dropped out of Brown University after her sophomore year, married, and had four children before the age of 25. “So I was very busy those years,” she said without sarcasm, her unnervingly bright blue eyes sparkling and her short gray/blond hair spiky in parts as though she has just removed a winter hat. She made taking care of a houseful of toddlers and babies while trekking across the country with her Navy officer husband sound as easy as maneuvering a grocery cart. “And then the children one by one went off to school, and when the youngest one went to kindergarten I went back to college.”

Lowry, who admits a penchant for Scandinavian mysteries and Booker Prize winners, explains that her writing career was born out of necessity when she was 40 years old. She was going through a divorce and struggling to make ends meet as a freelance writer in Maine. Her first book, “A Summer to Die,” was published in 1977 and is based on the death of her older sister from cancer. In many of Lowry’s novels that followed, there’s an element of autobiography. “There’s something about her work that dares to disturb, that dares to take a complex look at what it means to be human,” said Cathryn M. Mercier, director of the Center for the Study of Children’s Literature at Simmons College, in an e-mail.

In “Son,” Lowry not only touches on the pain of losing her son Grey, an Air Force pilot who died in a plane crash in 1995, but she also draws on her love for her other son, Benjamin, to whom she’s very close. However the novel is dedicated simply “In memory of Martin.” Martin Small, Lowry’s partner of 31 years, passed away unexpectedly in May 2011 after a short illness. He was her friend, her traveling companion, and her first reader.

Early responses to “Son” — which follows a mother’s quest to find her child — have been positive. It has garnered three-star reviews. With the book “Lowry explores the complexities of love, longing, and loss in ways that underscore the power of fiction itself,” said Mercier. She also addresses many questions her fans often ask about “The Giver.” One particularly popular question from young readers is answered by Lowry’s T-shirt, which she designed herself. It reads, “Jonas Lives” across the front.

Lowry will need to trade the peace of her 1768 farmhouse — with its overflowing gardens, Adirondack chairs pointed toward the mountain view and cool, musty barn — for a book tour to promote “Son”: a whirl of hotels, airplanes, and signings. “The grand surprise has really been the fact that being an author, which to me had always implied being a private person, actually requires you to be a public person as well, and those are two separate entities to me,” Lowry says.

Since its publication “The Giver” has elicited a wide range of passionate responses. Lowry regularly receives angry letters and e-mails. “Your story, ‘The Giver’ is a sickening and twisted tale, obviously derived by someone with very deep issues,” wrote one person. But she also gets more fan mail than she can ever respond to from parents, children, teachers, and readers from all walks of life. She writes back to both groups whenever possible. “If somebody takes the time, a: to read a book that I have written, and then to b: care about it enough to write me and ask questions, surely I owe them a response,” she says.

As generous as Lowry is with the most precious resource a writer has, her time, she realizes that only in fiction can it go on forever. She has begun making quiet preparations for the day when her home in Cambridge will feel too large to keep, putting her name on a long waiting list for a retirement community and planning a much anticipated trip to Patagonia — a trip she and Small talked about even as he lay in the hospital.

“I have been fortunate,” she says, a slight smile pulling at her lips. “I have done so many things and enjoyed so many things and had such a great life, not to imply that it is ending, but that there aren’t many things that I feel I have left undone.”

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