

## Interview with Linda Rader Overman author of *Letters Between Us*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar is pleased to interview Linda Overman, who is here to talk about her new book, “Letters Between Us.”

*Linda Rader Overman’s work encompasses fiction and nonfiction consisting of a collection of multifaceted elements including photographs, narrative portraits, images, texts, personal and social history, poetry, letters, and diaries. She writes that “photographs of my intersection with self and history are images that have a profound impact on the way I remember my past.” She takes much of her inspiration from the works of former screenwriter, novelist, and TV producer Paul Rader, along with the photographic works of former San Francisco-based portrait-photographer William James Rader, respectively, her uncle and her father both now deceased.*

*Overman was born in Hollywood, California in 1951, graduating from Hollywood High in 1968. After a nine-year career at KNBC-TV, where she met and married her husband, and had a son and a daughter, Overman returned to school and received a B.A. in English Literature in 1997, an M.A in Creative Writing in 2001, followed by an M.F.A in Creative Writing in 2003. [Her work](#) appears in many anthologies and magazines. She currently teaches English at California State University, Northridge.*

**Tyler:** Welcome, Linda. I’m glad you could join me today. To begin, will you tell us about the main character, Laura, and the situation she finds herself in when the novel opens?

**Linda:** Thank you Tyler. Well, we know immediately that Laura has a heavy burden in the novel’s opening, one that many baby boomers have these days, dealing with a parent who suffers from Alzheimer’s. And that is kind of a misnomer, really, because it is not the parent in the midst of the disease who suffers so much as the caretaker for that parent as we learn as the novel develops. So, Laura is going through the motions in her life, an existence of sorts, cultivating a nascent writing career, administering her mother’s care, while at the same time struggling in an unhappy marriage. We understand quickly that Laura questions whether she should leave her husband or not, a successful television studio executive who has no time for Laura, and furthermore, dismisses her as a writer. And then she receives the phone call that no one wants to receive, news that someone she loves has died.

**Tyler:** The novel begins with rather depressing events. What do you think happens to redeem the story so readers will find it enjoyable?

**Linda:** I have always found it fascinating how death and grief affect people. Sometimes people fall apart under the heavy burden of such a loss, and sometimes that kind of tragedy is a catalyst for change for the better. In the midst of extreme heartbreak Laura, has an opportunity for self-examination in a way she might never have had otherwise. From this painful sense of loss, she has the opportunity to come to a deeper understanding about the girl she actually was versus the very different and disconnected woman she has become. Similarly, Laura discovers after twenty-six years that Katharine was not at all who Laura thought she was. Laura was under the impression

they had shared everything while weathering the storms and rainbows of growing up, but in truth neither of them had. I find the idea intriguing that the person we think we know in life becomes, in death, a stranger whom we must rediscover completely. And I trust readers will also be intrigued.

**Tyler:** What made you decide that Katharine's letters would be Laura's way of reconnecting to her past?

**Linda:** Often connections to our past and the act of self-discovery are not possible without the occurrence of some kind of catastrophe in our lives. And what better way than through the process of reading old letters and diaries written by a dead friend left untouched for decades. It's like discovering little treasures that contain within them the very smells, touch and feel of a forgotten and/or misremembered past.

The sheer act of writing a letter to a person, placing it in an envelope, and mailing it, sadly, appears to be a dying art. We have email, blogs, instant messaging, and texting now: so much faster, quicker, and more efficient. And yet, there is something to be said about the act of holding a pen in your hand and writing to friend or family member, even if only to share a brief hello, a thoughtful remembrance, a declaration, or something more. It is embedded with the careful process of cogitative thought let alone leaves a palpable imprint of the writer's energy. In addition, it brings to light a voice distinctively different from other genres of writing.

For example, what would we have done without the letters of Jane Austen for instance to fill us in on how she really sounded in comparison to her brilliant novels. We know her witticisms were part of her daily speak and not just affected for her fictional narrative. Without Austen's letters, and we don't have all of them certainly for history tells us that her sister, Cassandra, destroyed many, but what a loss it would have been to have had none of them.

In "*Letters Between Us*," Laura really ends up being quite lucky to possess the letters and diaries of not only her own past, but that of Katharine's as well.

**Tyler:** Linda, where did you come up with the idea of "*Letters Between Us*"?

**Linda:** I started it about 18 years ago, after an old schoolmate of mine passed away earlier. She too had struggled with depression. We had not been in touch for a long while, but I recall how losing a friend I had known since adolescence felt like losing a part of my own childhood. That shared history with that particular friend is partially gone. We had enjoyed a writing relationship starting with passing notes in class and trying not to get caught by the teacher. So to fill that gap, I decided it would be healing to write a series of letters between two young girls the regular old fashioned way with pen and paper leaving in the mistakes, the scratch outs, and silly symbols kids often use for emphasis. I keep a journal and all my ideas start there. It became a challenge to recreate the voices of two hormonal adolescents. And to give them each a distinctive, and unique voice recreating the teenage-speak of the 1960s and 1970s. Then from there the novel grew. A year or two later, I sent it off to the Pacific Northwest Writer's Conference Contest and it was a finalist in literary achievement. That encouraged me to continue, but then I stopped writing it for almost six years. I hit a block and decided to leave it be. Occasionally, I'd pick it up again and add portions to it, but still I didn't really finish it until last year. Little things got in the way like—life. So this novel has taken its time to come to fruition.

**Tyler:** When you sat down to write the novel, what was your intention?

**Linda:** That question is a tough one. It is one I always wonder about when I read the work of other writers and now with it being asked of me, I am really not quite sure how to respond.

I have always been a writer, even when society may not have labeled me as one. I write, and have for over forty years in a journal, leather bound, lined, and embossed with my name on it. My reading audience for that, or so I thought, would only be my children, and my children's children's children. So with that intention I felt I would leave them a record of their family long after their ancestors were gone. By the same token when I wrote "*Letters Between Us*," I was merely trying to re-create a record of a childhood with all its indulgent innocence. I wanted to recall how the naiveties of such a time are poignant in their simplicity.

When we are little, we either want to be a good kid or a bad kid. The sad part is that in the midst of it, we have no appreciation for such infantile challenges and all their marvelous lunacy. When we mature and move beyond childish things, we pine for those days when we really didn't have much to fret about. Our parents woke us up, saw that we were fed, chauffeured us around, and made sure we got to school on time. We only had to make sure we didn't get into trouble with mom or dad, or our teachers. It was our playmates on the playground and who we hung

out with and shared secrets with who mattered. I felt the best way to recapture those formative years was to write about the process that leads two women, two young girls, to fashion a record of their lives for each other and those who loved them. And through such a record transformation, at least for one of them, is possible. It the same thing I hope for of my own descendants.

**Tyler:** Linda, a novel of letters is technically an “epistolary novel” as you refer to it in some of your publicity materials—the English novel started out this way with Samuel Richardson’s *“Pamela”* in 1740. Did you study any other epistolary novels in writing *“Letters Between Us”* and what was the biggest challenge in telling the story of the girls’ friendship by using letters?

**Linda:** I did study many epistolary novels prior to writing this book, but I didn’t do it per se for the purpose of writing the book. I was drawn to the genre by reading many from that canon—as you mention *“Pamela”* and *“Clarissa,”* in addition to Fanny Burney’s *“Evelina”* and Choderlos de Laclos’ 1782 *“Les Liaisons dangereuses”* and Mary Shelley’s *“Frankenstein,”* among others. Also, I returned to college following a seventeen year hiatus having to drop out in my twenties due to work reasons. Finally, when my children were in elementary school I had the time to finish my B.A. in Lit., and then went on to graduate school. And, of course, as a Lit. major, many of these texts were required reading. But even before that, I was attracted to the form of keeping a journal through reading Anaïs Nin’s published diaries. The first one I read was *“Henri and June”* and from that as well as her others, I was inspired to write in the white heat of the moment. And this was how I approached the letters in my novel. Laura and Katharine write their letters unabashedly even in the heat of their foolish fragility. The genre of letter writing is one the best modes to represent the complexities of human frailty, in my opinion.

**Tyler:** Our reviewer, Paige Lovitt, used the word “clues” in revealing what Laura learns about her own and Katharine’s life. Would it be fair to say the novel is a mystery in some ways?

**Linda:** In a way it is because the death the reader learns about in the first pages of the novel is a hook that grabs the narrator, Laura, and is intended to grab the reader as well. Why did Katharine, the dead girl, die the way she did? Was she murdered or was it suicide? Why does Katharine leave a cache of letters for Laura? And why have they not yet arrived as Katharine promised they would in an earlier letter? What drove Katharine to be found in a heap of trash looking so tragic yet at peace? Why did Laura survive and not Katharine? Laura must pursue the answers to such questions, and in addition come to some understanding of such misfortune and how it affects one of the most important decisions in her life.

**Tyler:** On a less metaphorical level, is Katharine’s death ever really understood?

**Linda:** I wanted to create a feminine world where feminine values are validated. In this way Katharine’s death and *“Letters Between Us”* is truly a requiem to friendship, and an homage of remembrance, loss and liberation. I hope that when readers complete *“Letters Between Us”* they ponder carefully the joys and sorrows of their own childhoods and ask themselves what they learned then and think about how much of those lessons they have still carried into their adult lives. How much have readers forgotten about their childhood and how much have they really perceived of their pasts with clarity? How much, readers should ask themselves, can they fairly judge others unless they too have walked in another’s shoes? Katharine had to make a choice and Laura had to be transformed and enlightened by that choice, and I hope readers will see that also.

**Tyler:** Why did you choose for Katharine’s death to be so dramatic and even grisly?

**Linda:** I wanted to startle the other characters in the book as well as the reader with the power of such an image. We all imprint such dramatic images in our minds on a daily basis thanks to the many photographs and news footage overwhelming us nanosecond by nanosecond today. In 1989 or even in the 1960s, we didn’t quite have the power of the internet or the media intensity that we do now and newspapers still rendered news in an effective and far reaching manner, and what is more attention-getting than a beautiful blonde lying dead amongst a heap of every day discards? We take these things, and the civilization they represent, for granted, and yet, there they are providing a shroud for a fragile young woman dolorous in death.

**Tyler:** Paige also commented that the novel is very realistic and she had a hard time remembering it was a novel. Is there anything autobiographical or taken from real life events in *“Letters Between Us”*?

**Linda:** It is funny how people ask me that quite often about this book. I think as a reader myself that when I read a book that particularly strikes me I want to believe that it must be autobiographical. Having now written a novel

that does borrow from a small part of my life, I must say now that what reads like an autobiographical novel often is merely novelistic adventure.

However, I will admit that the character of Laura's mother is loosely based on my own mother. She died at ninety-six last year and had Alzheimer's for a long time, but it was undiagnosed until the last couple years of her life. Her phone calls to me were often long harangues far more intrusive than those of Laura's mother. So that battle I did give Laura because it was one I fought, especially when I had to put Mother into a nursing home. Because she was combative, they drugged a dynamic and vibrant woman into a state of passivity and numbness until she finally stopped recognizing me. That was very hard to ignore while I was writing the book so I figured best just to use it. In the same way there are many characteristics from a compendium of people I have known in the past, or met later in my life that I injected into both women. When I think of it, each character probably embodies aspects of dozens of friends, associates, and family members. So even trying to recall where the line between fiction and reality begins and ends would be like trying to unravel Charlotte's Web and put it back together exactly as it was.

**Tyler:** You mentioned your childhood friend above—would you say Laura and Katharine in the novel closely resemble you and your friend?

**Linda:** Oh goodness no, not at all. I mean, I did grow up in Hollywood and attended Hollywood High School and so I used some of that teen experience in its broader sense in the novel. However, during high school many of my friends were neither as complex nor dysfunctional as the characters in *Letters*. We were rather boring and stereotypically predictable teens, really. Most of us were typical teenagers growing up in the sixties and struggling to come into our own during the raging Vietnam War and the counter culture movement. For example, some of the guys I knew were totally self-involved, not really caring about anyone but themselves, experimenting with drugs and protesting the war, in some cases by being social activists, hippies, and in other cases hiring lawyers to get out of the draft. Then there were those who volunteered to join the military and went to Vietnam never to return. Those who did were never the same again. But most of the girls I hung out with, and I think there were only about 3 or 4 I was somewhat close to, were mainly interested in wearing the cutest fashions (miniskirts and Twiggy were huge then), going to college, hitchhiking through Europe, marrying "Mr. Right," becoming a flight attendant, or, typical for Hollywood, having acting careers. Really we were just your basic 90028 rather than your basic 90210 (90028 is Hollywood's zip code).

**Tyler:** Do you think it was easier or more difficult to write a novel based however loosely on events from your own life? What makes it easier and what makes it harder to write fiction with an autobiographical element?

**Linda:** I like to think of it as just the process involved in writing fiction. I mean, I don't sit there and think with purpose: "Okay, now I am going to write about my life; or I am going to write a story that I heard someone talking about." I don't work that way. I just begin writing sentences that I see in the computer screen in my head, so to speak. It all begins with the construction of sentences. I think it was Don De Lillo who wrote that, "...the basic work is built around the sentence...there's a rhythm I hear that drives me through a sentence. And the words typed on the white page have a sculptural quality. They form odd correspondences..." So as my sentences become paragraphs, perhaps I will take something from a long forgotten memory that pops up and see if I can utilize it to create depth, to write what should not be forgotten and if that needs to come from something in my life I will use it. However, I have the luxury, as a writer, of shading, re-coloring, turning and twisting it any which way I want so the actual outcome will become quite un-autobiographical. We must remember that just as there is literal truth in writing there is poetic truth; the former may be more obvious and the latter may merely be composed of the energy of memory, yet both are true. Suffice it to say that the act of writing—any kind of writing—is like sweating blood on the page, so I don't necessarily worry about what shade of red it is. I just know that it's the life's blood of my writing self trying to bring to light that which is hidden, imperfect, and confused, in my attempt to communicate and bring change in the process.

**Tyler:** Linda, without giving away the ending, can you tell us how Laura's experience reading her and Katharine's letters influences or changes her?

**Linda:** Each of these characters is pressed into making important decisions in their lives. The exchange of the letters becomes the needed catalyst for them to act. Whether or not the choices they make are the right ones is for the reader to decide. In addition, one of the underlying themes in the novel is survival and who does a better job of surviving is also for the reader to decide.

**Tyler:** Linda, when your readers close *Letters Between Us* what is the reaction or feeling you hope they will have to the book?

**Linda:** Well, as a voracious reader myself, I know that I love to have a reading experience that engulfs me so that I can't put the book down. I love to lose myself in a literary world that pulls me to live and breathe the fictional "reality" that an author gifts us with, at times, in order to forget the burdens of our own. Reading should help us to transcend our peripatetic lives and in the process guide us to learn something more about our world and ourselves. I trust reading "*Letters Between Us*" will do the same for the reader. Crossing my fingers anyway!

**Tyler:** Linda, do you have plans for any more books? Will you give us a glimpse into what you're working on now?

**Linda:** There will be a sequel to this novel. One of the characters will continue on to the next stage of her life, and readers may be surprised just who that will be. Also, I have a fictional memoir that I have been working on for some time, but that will take a few more years to complete.

**Tyler:** Thank you for joining me today, Linda. Before we go, would you tell us about your website and what additional information is available there about "Letters Between Us"?

**Linda:** You're welcome, Tyler. Thank you very much for such challenging questions. Answering them was not easy. On my website, <http://lindaraderoverman.com>, you will find an excerpt from "Letters Between Us," a bit more about me and my writing life, the dates and locations of my readings/signings, and you can also see—short of buying the book—the beautiful artwork my son (a professional artist) did on the book's cover, as well as my book trailer, which I am very proud of. In addition, there is a mailing list readers can join if they wish to receive my newsletter. And of course my email address, [loverman.writes@yahoo.com](mailto:loverman.writes@yahoo.com).

**Tyler:** Thank you, Linda, for the informative interview. I wish you much luck with "Letters Between Us" and your future writing.

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