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MYSTERY REVEALED

INSIDE THE WORLD OF BESTSELLING
AUTHOR LAURA LIPPMAN

BEHOLD A STARRY NIGHT

THE UNIVERSE, THROUGH A
MARYLAND LENS

POTOMAC RIVER.
PHOTO BY EDWIN REMSBERG



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building a mystery

how laura lippman spins her charm city whodunits

Like Tess, Lippman draws on her background when she works, using her investigative skills to research and write her novels.

just love [Baltimore] the way you love a member of your family,” says award-winning writer Laura Lippman, who brings Charm City to life through the pages of her mystery novels, including her popular

Tess Monaghan series. “It’s imprinted on me. I only grew up in one city, that was Baltimore, and I’m fascinated by it.”

Although Lippman left Maryland for a few years to pursue her journalism career at Northwestern University and in Texas, she returned in 1989 to work at the *Evening Baltimore Sun*, which eventually folded into the *Baltimore Sun*. It was while at the *Sun* that she began writing books, becoming a full-time novelist in 2001.

“Her work has a sparkle to it,” says Carrie Feron, vice president and executive editor at William Morrow, which publishes Lippman’s work. “The plotting, even in her first book, is really exceptional.”

Like Lippman, the fictional Tess Monaghan is a former journalist. But that’s where the similarity ends, the writer insists.

“Tess is my intellectual double, but otherwise, she’s her own woman,” says Lippman, the wife of David Simon, creator of HBO’s *The Wire*. “She has a lot of qualities I value. She’s funny and loyal, with a mind that makes funny and quick transitions. Also, she likes to eat.”

Monaghan is a private investigator who uses her journalism background to solve crimes. In Lippman’s latest installment, Tess is working for a television production filming in Baltimore.

DANA KLOSNER FOR
 THE MARYLAND
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"This is a completely manufactured show for a manufactured network," Lippman says. "While the writers behind the show are very hopeful that it will be picked up and run for many seasons, the production is beset by strange and mysterious problems. Things have been stolen from their offices, small fires have been set near where they are filming, and one of their stars is behaving erratically. Tess is hired to watch the star, who may or may not be under threat from a stalker."

Like Tess, Lippman draws on her background when she works, using her investigative skills to research and write her novels.

"One thing about journalism is that the world is sort of yours for the asking," she says. "Not that you can own it, but you can go out there and find out pretty much whatever you want."

Lippman's mystery novels have garnered more than readers' praise—they've earned several prestigious awards, too, including Edgar and Shamus awards, the Agatha Award, the Nero Award, and the Anthony and Barry awards.

She takes the accolades in stride.

"When you win an award, you should be happy the same way you would be happy if someone paid you a really lavish compliment, and you should get over it," she says. "There are so many great writers who have never won awards, so what does an award mean? An award means that a group of people or the majority of fans at a convention thought well of one's work, and that's lovely."

Lippman writes a book a year, she says, but does so in small bites.

"I begin my books right around the first of the year," she explains. "I put my laptop in a knapsack and walk about a half mile to a local coffee house in Federal Hill, and I sit there all morning and I write. My rule for myself is that I have to write a minimum of 1,000 words. If [I] write about 1,000 words a day five times a week, I'm going to have a first draft in four to five months. And if I have

a first draft by Memorial Day, that means I'll have the summer to do a second draft, and usually I'll have time to do a third draft before I turn it in in the fall.

"I'm a tortoise. I've got to go a little bit every day."

And despite what people may think, Lippman doesn't have her plots mapped out before she begins writing.

"I call it the 'distant shore' school of writing," she says. "I'm on one side of a river and I need to get to the other side, and I think I know where I'm going. I try to work myself toward what I call an organic solution to the problem I've presented. Given this set of facts that I assigned myself, what could really explain what's going on?"

"I don't think I've ever written a novel where, in the end, you found out it's some character that you barely know that you have barely seen that suddenly showed up and proved to be the link to all the things that were going on. I think that's cheap."

But why does Lippman write at all? It's something she's always been compelled to do.

"I tried to write my first book when I was 4 or 5 years old," she recalls. "I sat down at my father's manual typewriter and I didn't know how to read and write, so I just banged away at the keys and pulled the pages out of the typewriter and stapled them together and drew pictures. I told people it was written in caveman language."

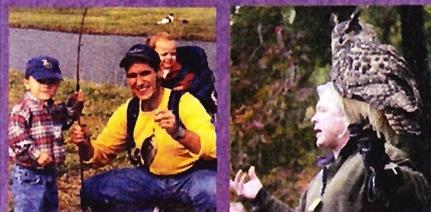
Now happily writing in English, Lippman, who teaches workshops at Baltimore's Goucher College and at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, admits that, "if I had known how long the odds were against actually being able to have a successful career as a novelist, I might not have started."

But when it comes to encouraging wannabe authors just starting out, the Baltimorean offers advice as profound as it is simple.

"Put your head down and write." ☀

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