From June 2014 issue of Ingram ADVANCE

Laura McBride

**We Are Called to Rise**

**A novel of redemption and unexpected love**

Making her stunning debut, McBride introduces four disparate people living in Las Vegas—an immigrant boy, a young war veteran, and two women—each of whom suffer the effects of one cataclysmic event. A story of great tragedy and tremendous hope, *We Are Called to Rise* reminds readers that rescue from despair can come through compassion and charity—even in the darkest of moments.

Your book is getting a lot of buzz, with accolades from such authors as Sarah Blake (*The Postmistress*) and Carol Anshaw (*Carry the One*). As a first-time novelist, what’s your response to such positive reaction?

Hurray!!!!! I don’t think the deliverer of positive reactions changes my response much—I’ll take kudos from anywhere— but of course I am delighted when someone likes the book. I loved when Carol noted “the reluctance with which [my characters] become their best selves.” This was not a way I had thought about Avis or Luis, but I instantly recognized its validity. With that phrase, she took me past my own understanding of the story. As for Sarah, her “I can’t stop thinking about it” is perhaps the single best thing anyone has said. I could not stop thinking about the core issues I was exploring here, and that at least one person would have the same reaction is really satisfying.

Most think the entire city of Las Vegas is as glitzy as shown on TV shows and films, but you depict a very different side of Sin City—one that is gritty and less glamorous. How did you come to know this side of the city?

I’ve lived in Las Vegas for nearly three decades, so I could write another book in response to this question, but I’ll try to choose some central experiences. Not long after I came to town, and for seven years, I worked at a non-profit organization; for much of that time, my office was a converted bedroom in a tiny, run-down house just off Main Street. The sewage pipe used to leak under the carpet outside my door (I was pregnant when I worked there so this particular memory is quite vivid), and if I was the first to arrive in the morning, then I sometimes bumped into one or another of the homeless men who used our front porch as a place to sleep. I’d make a pot of coffee, and sometimes the man would stay and have a cup, but sometimes he would turn and leave the moment I arrived. I was a fundraiser at that organization, so in the way of non-profit fundraising, these sorts of daily interactions were punctuated with lunches in fancy restaurants, and visits to extravagant offices, and tickets to show openings. It was a visceral experience of the economic highs and lows any booming city creates.

I’ve also volunteered in different capacities with local non-profit groups and with the local school district, and for a while, I interacted regularly with the various agencies that serve children in trouble. Much of what happens to Bashkim and much of what Roberta does are rooted in those experiences. And finally, my community college is an economically and culturally diverse place. I teach composition and literature, courses in which the truths of people’s lives sometimes surface, and I have many students, so I have lots and lots of access to the various ways that people live and think and work in my town.

What prompted you to write this novel? Can you tell us about the real events you say inspired this story?

I read about the event in the local paper—it was a headline one day, and a midsection story a few times after that—and from the very first, it haunted me. It made me sad, it felt somehow typical of my community, it broke my heart. And so I started working a story around it. I imagined the disconnect between those people in that moment. I have witnessed these disconnects a thousand times in a city that has changed so much, so fast, and that constantly throws together people from different parts of the world—with different traditions, different ideas, different economic means. I developed my own vivid idea of what might have happened, and of how easily that tragedy might have been averted; I just kept wishing that it had been. I decided to write around that event because I thought that if it haunted me, it might haunt a reader too.

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my imagination, but I made a conscious decision only to write about it if I could somehow not leave it simply as a symbol of despair—which in some ways, in my own mind, it was.

Through the story of eight-year-old Albanian immigrant Bashkim, readers witness the apprehension Americans continue to feel towards immigrants—particularly Islamic immigrants. How did you decide to present that part of the story through the eyes of a little boy?

I was reluctant to try to write in the voice of a child; artistically, it seemed like a fraught choice. But I had decided to use the first person, and I needed a voice that could speak to the central climactic event, and by process of elimination, Bashkim was it. I don’t think I worried particularly about the fact that he was Muslim. My world of people is varied, so I wasn’t concerned that I had a narrow idea of what it might mean to be an immigrant or a Muslim. I have felt sensitive to the experience of anyone Muslim since 9/11, and as a mother, particularly sensitive to how it has felt to be a Muslim child. I’ve watched many children, including my own, react to the experience of being seen as a “something” before they are seen as themselves. There’s not much positive in that, in my opinion, and for a Muslim child after 9/11, I think that experience has been intense.

The stories of the other three principles—housewife Avis, social worker Roberta, and war veteran Luis—all converge with Bashkim’s after a heartbreaking event. What do you hope readers take away from the aftermath?

That event was what drove my imagination, but I made a conscious decision only to write about it if I could somehow not leave it simply as a symbol of despair—which in some ways, in my own mind, it was. Intellectually, I have to fight for even the measured sort of optimism that pervades *We Are Called to Rise*, but at a deep level, there was no way I was going to put something into this world that might make some reader feel less able to live through the next day. One could say a lot of things about that impulse—wearing my English professor’s hat, I could say a lot of things about it—but the bottom line is that I wasn’t going to do it. I think living takes guts. Some people are exceptionally lucky (and that makes me happy) and many of us have long periods of luck (and that gives me respite), but there are a lot of ways for life to break a heart, there are a lot of days when beautiful people just hang on and survive by the skin of their teeth, and there was no way, just no way, that I would put something into this world that could make that day worse.

So when I decided to write a story around that event, I committed myself to writing past it, and I fought for what I know to be true: that people are often their most beautiful in response to crisis, and that the generosity of some people is extraordinary. It is as extraordinarily beautiful as the cruelty of some other events is extraordinarily ugly. It rises as high as the other falls low. That’s what I’d like a reader to take from this book.

Are there any plans right now for a second novel?

Oh absolutely! It’s actually a third, since I have a novel sitting in a closet (which I will someday dust off and see if it merits public view), and I am a good way into that story. It’s fully blocked out, in chapters, and I have written my way into each of the four main characters’ voices. I have definitely challenged myself to inhabit the minds of people with quite different experiences than my own, and right now, that is going well, but I haven’t written enough to be sure it will work. Mostly, I’m longing for the time and space to write the idea out. I work best with long blocks of uninterrupted time—I’m very fast in that environment—but it’s hard to get that kind of time. Ordinary (and extraordinary) distractions are making me itch right now: stop, move aside, I have something pressing to do!