

I was obsessed with reading history about people who looked like my girls – people of color, of mixed race, in America, and that led me to hundreds of books about Louisiana and California. I read an account of mixed-race woman in 1800s Louisiana. She was a slave until she was thirty, then was bought and freed, but had to buy her own son, and she owned him. The concept of owning your own child, legally, was frightening and fascinating. According to the law then, he could not be freed until he was 21, and so his mother had to come up with ways to raise him in that state. I wanted to write a novel about a mother and son like that, set in the past, to understand how presently it is still hard to love each other, and raise each other, with that kind of legacy.

It is part of a trilogy. The first book, "A Million Nightingales," is this novel. The second is a story collection about the descendants of that freed woman, people who now live in southern California. And the third is another novel about her descendants raising an abandoned child of a Mexican migrant worker.

What is it about and how long did it take you to write it?

Some of this is above. It took me five years to write the novel

What surprises you about Riverside? Southern California?

Even after living here all my life, what still surprises me is the way we meld cultures. I still love the fact that at our family reunions, we have cousins who are Mexican and black, Haitian and black, and that my daughters have friends who are mixtures of every race. Filipino and white, Mexican and black – girls of every possible color play on our basketball teams. My neighbors and friends and I share food that would seem impossible elsewhere, I believe. Gumbo and fried rice and tamales and barbecued ribs go really well together. Our corner market is owned by a couple who moved here from China fourteen years ago, and we have kids the same age, and I love giving Wendy, who works all day behind the counter selling malt liquor and candy, a copy of Lan Samantha Chang's novel.

Given the popularity of TV shows devoted to Orange County youth culture, like "Laguna Beach" and "The OC," do you think a similar fate could be in store for Riverside? What would a soap opera about Riverside look like?

I wrote [about the "The OC," and how it makes fun of Riverside, for Salon](#). I can't see us having any kind of TV show!

Did you do a lot of research while writing about a character who is a Mexican Indian in "Highwire Moon"? Where can one find communities in Southern California that are comprised of Mexican Indians? What's an example of Mexican Indian culture in Southern California?

I did a lot of research in just living and listening here all my life, in the orange groves, and at my brother's grove. Our there, in his rural area, all the workers were from southern Mexico and the supervisors were from northern Mexico. Workers lived in the arroyos and groves, and they barbecued on the weekends with my brother. It was a strange world. They ate a lot of carne asada. My daughters' elementary school is largely Mexican immigrants from Michoacan and northern Mexico, but other neighborhoods are largely Oaxacan. There are huge Oaxacan communities in San Diego County and near Santa Monica, I learned when I went to Oaxaca to research Highwire Moon.

The news reports try to make Riverside sound like a den of meth addicts. What is the media missing about Riverside?

I think people are making methamphetamine everywhere now, everywhere someone has a stove and need and lack of common sense and Sudafed. But for a long time there, it was Riverside.

Are you daughters interested in the Coachella music festival? How do residents relate to it?

They're too young for Coachella just yet. I don't know much about it.

What are some bands they like from the City of Riverside music scene?

They used to love Blink 182, and they used to love that we lived in the 909. Near our house was some 909 [recording studio](#). My neighbors used to be connected to The Skeletones. But they're still too young to be out in the scene yet.

What's your favorite movie(s) or TV show(s) that are based in Riverside and/or Southern California?

Now you know there aren't any TV shows in Riverside – just bad Julie Cooper from "The OC," who's supposed to be from here. But my favorite southern California movies are *Chinatown*, *La Vida Loca* and *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

Best SoCal-themed book(s) or authors?

Too many to list. Carolyn See, Walter Mosely, T. Jefferson Parker, Janet Fitch, Michael Connelly, Gary Phillips, Jervey Tervalon, Nina Revoyr, Mike Davis, Jo-Ann Mapson, and I'm still leaving out too many.

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What's the best place to walk in Riverside?

On [Mount Rubidoux](#), where you can see three different mountain ranges. In the riverbottom, where you can hear wild pigs if you're unlucky (they're huge and mean) or see a fox. In my neighborhood, where there are carob and pepper trees and fog hangs in the arroyos like cotton batting.

It's 9:30 pm on Thursday. Where are you coming from and where are you going?

Coming home from basketball practice or a game. Buying burritos for dinner again.

Describe your best dining experience in Riverside.

Eating ribs and hotlinks in my father-in-law's driveway, next to the oil drum worked by our cousins. My relatives are the best cooks ever. We all have a signature dish. Potato salad, green beans, lime jello cake. I make dirty rice with black beans and hot sausage.

Do you find the threat of earthquakes preferable to the threat of hurricanes and long winters?

I have always been afraid of earthquakes. They are in my dreams. I always imagine a big truck rumbling past my house is the next earthquake. But I can't imagine a hurricane.

Where do you want to be when the Big One hits?

Under my mother's dining room table, which is in my kitchen now, and which I have crouched under for every earthquake since I was eleven, when the 1971 quake scared me.

By Adrienne Crew in News on March 27, 2006 11:40 AM 0 Recommends [Share +]

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