PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT

BOOKS

INSIDE STORY THE AUTHOR, PHOTOGRAPHED IN SANTA MONICA. LANVIN WHITE POET'S SHIRT. EARNEST SEWN JEANS.

twin peaks

Lori Lansens's second novel brings empathy, grace, and humor to the story of a pair of conjoined sisters.

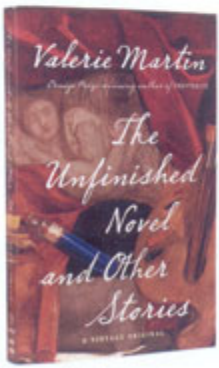
One novel sprang fully formed in Lori Lansens's mind after she read about the Bijani sisters, Iranian craniopagus twins who underwent failed separation surgery three years ago, as they were turning 30. Conjoined at the side of the head, "they expressed the desire before they went under the knife that they really wanted to look into each other's eyes," says Lansens, a Canadian novelist and screenwriter. "I found that such a poignant notion."

The Girls (Little, Brown) centers on Rose and Ruby Darlen, craniopagus twins who live out lives both circumscribed and rich in rural Ontario. Written as a concurrent fictional memoir by each twin—Rose, a natural writer, dominates; Ruby interjects her more spontaneous commentary—the novel quite literally gets under the skin of its characters. Rose and Ruby, though they can see each other's faces only in mirrors, can feel the tug of each other's smiles, the burn of each other's blushes, the throb of each other's headaches. Rescued in the maternity ward by an imaginative and compassionate nurse and her Slovak husband, the twins are raised on a farm to be as independent—or, more accurately, codependent—as possible, adapting their relative strengths to each other's needs and confronting the dangers of the outside world, whether mockery, curiosity, or superstition, from a safe starting point. "They don't find their conjoinment burdensome," says Lansens. "They don't wish that they were a different way. They really see it as a gift."

Their resulting stories are extraordinarily moving: joyous, heartbreaking, and shot through with moments of dark humor as we follow the girls through childhood and adolescence, with its attendant mishaps, and into maturity and self-awareness. Lansens deliberately resisted researching conjoined twins, preferring to intuit her characters' responses. She attributes her ability to inhabit them with such imaginative empathy in part to the physical connectedness she experienced as the mother of two young children; in part to a brief earlier career as an actress. "My first job was playing one of Al Pacino's blind dates in *Sea of Love*." So blind, it turned out, she landed on the cutting-room floor.

Her writing career seems destined not to blush unseen, however. Her first novel, 2002's *Rush Home Road*, "was rescued from a slush pile," she says, and went on to become a best-seller in several countries. The voices of Rose and Ruby likewise cry out to be heard for their glorious celebration of humanity. Although there is much they cannot do, "the novel is really about all of the things they did do," says Lansens, "about their accomplishments and dreams and desires."—EVE MACSWEENEY *books >130*

TRUE COLORS



Orange Prize winner Valerie Martin has a gift for claiming familiar literary ground as her own. Consider her 1990 best-seller, *Mary Reilly*, which retold Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde novella from an unexpected new perspective. With **The Unfinished Novel and Other Stories** (Vintage), her remarkable second collection of short fiction, she does it again, this time taking on the cliché of the tortured artist, from the painter who will never be as successful as his mentor and romantic rival to the writer who fears his ex-girlfriend may have written the brilliant novel he can't. By subtly exposing her characters' vainglorious attempts to transcend the trappings of reality—grocery shopping, gainful employment, relationships—she brings them back down to earth. After all, she writes, "an artist has to live in the real world."—MARGARET JOHNSON

Lansens: JIM JORDAN; Sittings Editor: LAUREN HOWELL; hair: Enzo Laera for celebrityagency.com using Redken Hair Products; makeup: Barbara Landra using Stila for Exclusive Artists. Still life: JEFF HARRIS. Details, see In This Issue.