

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Lauren Kirshner's debut novel takes readers back to 1990s Toronto

By **SHERI SHEFA**
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Lauren Kirshner

back to Toronto in the 1990s, where Lucy Bloom struggles to come to terms with her own identity while growing up as the only child of a Jewish couple stuck in an unhappy marriage.

Her father, a failed photographer turned travel agent who never travels, and her mother, an aging, overweight former Bulgarian "first runner-up in the Miss Sophia West Beauty Pageant," separate shortly after Lucy's 11th birthday.

In addition to moving out of her home to live with her mother in a run-down apartment with "shaggy blue carpeting and a cot that pulled out of the wall" with a mattress that was "grey with a few round yellow stains," Lucy is also struggling with her body image, mean girls, maintaining friendships and her self-consciousness around boys.

Despite her challenges, Lucy maintains a strength and sense of humour that keeps the reader pulling for her.

Kirshner said that while Lucy Bloom and her story are total fabrications, there are certain aspects of Lucy's experience that she resonates with.

"I was a kid that felt on the sidelines. I was an observer. I wasn't bullied like Lucy was, but I wasn't the girl who got a partner first when it was time to go on field trips and I always felt like I was on the side. I understand what that feels like," Kirshner, who is the daughter of *CJN* staff reporter Sheldon Kirshner, said.

She added that she also drew from her experience as a

child of the 90s in Toronto, where she was born and raised.

"I guess I was pretty heavily influenced by pop culture in the 90s and that kind of stuff really resonated with me as a kid, so I was really able to call up that stuff most vividly," said Kirshner, who was mentored by Canadian author Margaret Atwood.

"There were certain tangible things like Lite-Brite [a toy] – we never had enough pegs because someone had lost most of the pegs – or like the snap bracelets or the novelty shoelaces... It was such a time of material acquisition, sort of getting lots of stuff, so it felt right to put a lot of pop culture in the book."

Other references to 90s pop culture in the novel

include Lucy's infatuation with *ALF*, the main character on a sitcom that ran until 1990, and actor Charlie Sheen, after whom she named her cat.

The city of Toronto, as it was 15 years ago, plays another important role in the novel.

"I was able to walk and ride my bike around Toronto and see just how much the city has changed in only 15 years, and it was kind of a sad experience because I see a lot of history being eroded," Kirshner said.

"There are condos going up everywhere. There used to be really cool little shops and stores and it's all a part of the underlying theme of the book, which is that our lives are moving on and the things we've cared about and were familiar to us are getting eroded."

Lucy's Jewish identity is mentioned periodically throughout the novel, but doesn't seem to weigh too heavily on her experience.

"Lucy's identity as a Jewish girl... it is more cultural than religious," said Kirshner, who also grew up in a Jewish family in Toronto.

"I think it's fair to say that when we're that young, our social iden-

tity is not so much wrapped up in culture and religion, and it is more just searching for any identity we have on an individual level."

Kirshner said what she loves about Lucy is that even when her situation seems bleak and hopeless, she never stops fighting.

"She refuses to be a victim and in any situation she is able to find the humour and really call on the humour. It's not like she passively waits for solutions or to feel better about life. She makes it happen."

She added that thinking about Lucy makes her recall the time she got stuck in a subway car shortly after the 1995 subway crash in Toronto that killed three people.

"The subway that I was on suddenly stopped on the track, and all the lights went out and people were scared. You could just feel this electric energy moving through the subway," she said.

"Suddenly, after about a minute, this man out of the dark just began telling jokes. It was like the most soothing sound in this time of darkness, and all that anxiety in the subway immediately dissipated and we were calm. When the lights went on, we didn't know who told the joke... We all had a sense that this was a kind of gift that we just got.

"From Lucy, just spending two years with her while I wrote the book, I thought that life is serious, but that doesn't mean that everything has to be taken too seriously. There is humour that can be found in hard times and that will be what gets us through sometimes."

Kirshner, who is thrilled with the attention her debut novel is generating, said that *Where We Have To Go* (McClelland & Stewart) will be translated into German and sold in the Netherlands and Germany.

"It's pretty rare these days, I've been told, because it is a first book and because it takes place in Toronto. I never expected it to go outside of Canada, so it's a really nice surprise."

In addition to the novel, Kirshner has published poems, short fiction, and also wrote a chapter in *I Live Here*, a "paper documentary" her sister, actress Mia Kirshner, authored and edited.

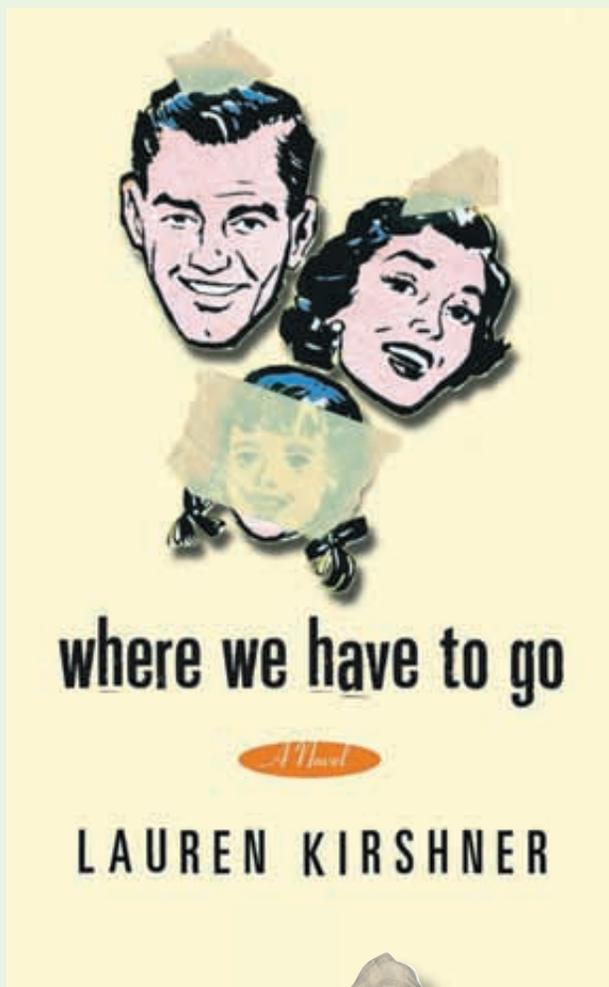
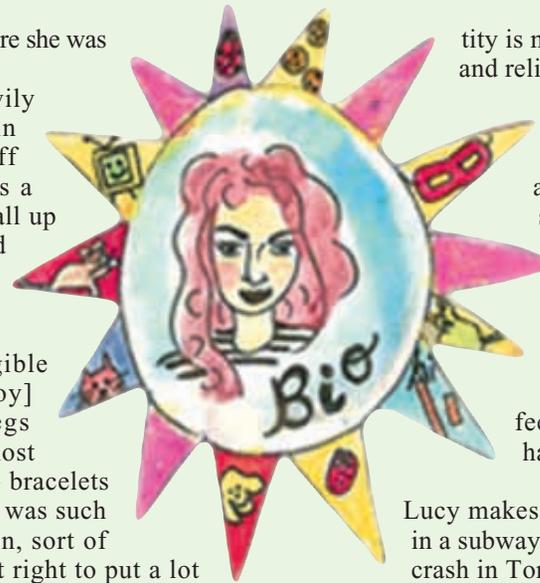
"It was on the Maquiladora factories in Juarez, Mexico, and this was where thousands of young Mexican women go every year to basically work in these multinational factories and are basically dreaming of making better lives for themselves," Kirshner said.

"*Twenty Poems for Claudia* is about just one of the hundreds of women who have been raped, tortured and murdered over the past 15 years in the area."

For the rest of the year, Kirshner said she'll be busy promoting her book and working on a second novel.

On Sept. 22, Kirshner will be at the Winnipeg International Writers Festival and nearly a week later, on the 27th, she'll be back in Toronto for the Word on the Street festival.

For more information about Kirshner, visit www.lauren-kirshner.com.



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