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Interview with Alicia Erian

Abstract

Alicia Erian is the author of a novel, *Towelhead*, and a collection of stories, *The Brutal Language of Love*. Her writing has appeared in *Playboy*, *Zoetrope*, and *The Iowa Review*. She has worked as a film director and screenwriter and taught at Wellesley College. She is currently completing a memoir. In March 2011, Erian came to Butler University as a writer-in-residence and sat down with Susan Lerner to discuss her writing process, messy families, and sex.

Keywords

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Alicia Erian is the author of a novel, Towelhead, and a collection of stories, The Brutal Language of Love. Her writing has appeared in Playboy, Zoetrope, Nerve, and The Iowa Review. She has worked as a film director and screenwriter and taught at Wellesley College. She is currently completing a memoir. In March 2011, Erian came to Butler University as a writer-in-residence and sat down with Susan Lerner to discuss her writing process, messy families, and sex.



Susan Lerner: The protagonist of Towelhead, Jasira, is a thirteen-year-old girl. Her voice is so authentic. Where did the seed for her character come from?

Alicia Erian: Jasira is an autobiographical character. I wrote a book of short stories, and I wanted to keep writing stories, but my agent said no, that I had to write a novel. I felt like I didn't know how to write a novel, and I didn't have any ideas for a novel. But then I thought about that period in my life when my mother sent my brother and I to live with our father in Houston. It went poorly. He was abusive, and I felt very lonely and upset and I missed my mother. She had her own problems, granted, but I felt I could deal with those problems. My father was just scary. My brother and I moved in with him in July without a firm outline of what was going to happen. I kept wondering, 'When are we going to return home,' but my mother didn't have an answer. It was scary.

SL: It sounds terrifying.

AE: It was. My parents did this in a really bad way. I was scared of my father and now I was living with him.

SL: You felt like you had no home base?

AE: Yes, I didn't know where home was anymore. We got to Houston and moved in with my father, who was living in an apartment. My brother and I started school, and then he bought a house in the suburbs. We hadn't moved into the house yet when he left us for a week on a business trip to Washington D.C. My brother and I were 11 and 9. My father had arranged for a sitter from 7pm to 9pm each night while he was gone. Otherwise, we were alone in this apartment. My brother and I would lie in my father's bed and cry. When we came home from school we would stalk each other and fight and draw blood. It was horrible. Then my mother called and said she wanted to talk to our father. We said, "He's not here," and she said, "What do you mean Daddy's not here?" Every time I tell this story to people, and I haven't told it in a long time, they always ask why is it that she didn't immediately get on a plane and fly down? But she didn't. She was upset, she cried, but she felt she couldn't leave work. As a parent now, if I was in that situation, I couldn't imagine not going. My brother and I were alone. So that was one bad thing that happened. And then she came at Christmas to visit, just like she does in the book. In the book, Jasira has found Mr. Vuoso and Thomas, people who she believes love her, and she doesn't want to go back with her mother, but in real life I didn't have any of that. My mother asked us, "Do you want to go back?" and we said, "Yes, oh please." That is a very long-winded answer that the seed of the character is me. My

agent said, "Write a novel." This was something I found that was turbulent. Turbulent is what you need for drama. And then I asked the what if questions: What if I hadn't gone home to my mother? What if I had stayed living with my father? In what horrible ways would he have affected me as a young girl?

SL: Jasira's character took me back to being 13-years-old, which was both fascinating and uncomfortable. At 13 you don't understand things, but you pretend you do. How did you get that on the page?

AE: I wish I had a better answer as to how I got the voice. I think I tried to write simply and plainly. Maybe it was something I could do because I remember that time in such a negative way. It was painful and difficult and maybe that was how I was able to connect with it. I'm not sure. I don't know how to answer the question. It's a good question, but I don't know how it happened.

SL: That sounds logical.

AE: I think the voice is real because it was such an awful time. Perhaps finding the emotion of that time made the voice authentic. Maybe it is that when you have a terrible time at a certain age and you need to describe how it was, you naturally get into a voice that works. So maybe if I were to be writing a book – well, I am writing a book – about now, the voice of that is different than Jasira's voice, because I'm a different person. So how I describe my troubles as a 43-year-old and how I would describe them as a 13-year-old . . . the nature of the trouble is what allows the voice to be authentic. Maybe that's the right answer. So maybe whatever a 13-year-old's troubles may be, if you describe them accurately, the voice will follow. Because what are her problems? She's desperately lonely and she wishes somebody would love her and wishes her father wouldn't be mean to her. She doesn't have a full definition of what love is. Love, for her, is anything that feels better than pain, than being with her father. She makes terrible decisions because of her definition of love, which is anything that makes her feel good. It doesn't matter that it's this older guy next door who tricks her into having sex with him. It just matters that he seems to desire her. Perhaps the voice is authentic because of the way it conveys her limited knowledge.

SL: How did you choose Towelhead as the title?

AE: The first title of the book was *Welcome to the Moral Universe*. I loved the movie *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, and there's a part in the book where Jasira's dad says welcome to the moral universe. Nobody complained about the title until the book was done, and then my editor said, "Okay, change the title." I could see then that they had been holding back, that they did not want to upset me by asking me to change the title (before). So I said okay. I always think you can come up with a title in two ways. You can extract it from the text, or it can be about the book. Of the text is easier, so I started flipping through the pages. Jasira's not a particularly lyrical character, so there wasn't any kind of lovely phrasing that I could use. The only word that kept popping up as I kept flipping through the pages was towelhead. It's such a vulgar word, but as soon as I saw it I thought it could be snazzy. So I emailed my agent and my editor and asked them what they thought, and they liked it. It was absolutely chosen to be eye-catching, to get some attention, and I thought it was a perfectly fine title for the material.

SL: I read that some people thought it didn't necessarily convey what the book was about.

AE: It's about a girl who feels completely disconnected from her Arab background and goes to live with her father, who is an Arab. I don't see how it's not connected. The guy next door thinks she's exotic and beautiful and he wants to have sex with her, and all of this relates to her being an Arab. Part of her negative feeling about herself is that she's different, and she doesn't want to be. She is disgusted by her father. She thinks he's weird. She doesn't want to be connected to him. Everyone else seems to think he's weird, and he doesn't like her. I disagree with that assessment about the title. Those people just said that because they were mad I used an ethnic slur.

SL: Perhaps for many readers the sex overshadows the . . .

AE: What do they think I should call it? Sex? Sexy Towelhead?

SL: Well, I think that's where those comments were coming from.

AE: That's funny. After the filming, the Sikh community was very upset about the title. Alan (*Towelhead* director Alan Ball) was trying to be

sensitive to everybody, so he did this Q & A – it's on the DVD – with this guy from the Sikh community. I think his name was Raj. We did this interview, and I was very, very pregnant. My stomach's out to here, and I'm all bloated, and there's Alan and this guy, Raj, and we're talking, and during the breaks Raj would lean over to me and say, "I'm reading the book and I really like it." And then we would go back to filming and he would say, "How can you call this book *Towelhead*?!" It was funny. He liked the book.

SL: I'd like to talk about Mr. Vuoso. I had a Mr. Vuoso in my childhood, too.

AE: You did, really?

SL: I did. Your depiction of Mr. Vuoso fascinated me because it was so true to life. He wasn't just this slimy guy . . .

AE: No. He's a romantic character for me. I wrote the book and put myself in Jasira's shoes, and I was very much in love with Mr. Vuoso when I was writing him. It's very hard for me to think of him as a bad guy. He was very sexy to me.

SL: That's how I felt when I was 13.

AE: Was it a very involved relationship that you had, if you don't mind me asking?

SL: No, I don't mind you asking. It was at a neighbor's house, one of those funky neighborhood houses where everybody convened. I was lonely, and my friend had an older brother who had a friend who was a Vietnam vet. One of the matriarchs at the house noticed that I liked him, and that he was flirting with me. She called my house and told me I'd better stay away from him. Thank God she made that phone call, because I was 13.

AE: You know I have a friend who was molested by three of her four brothers, and she's still very close to these people. She's like *these are my brothers*. It's very complicated. I was worried about how she would respond to my book, and I kept waiting for her response. She called and said, "This is authentic. I was very worried when I found out what you were writing about, but this is authentic." It was the best compliment I got.

SL: Yeah. Well I had an uncle who molested me, and I let it go on for years and years.

AE: Why?

SL: Because he was part of this big extended family that we would visit every summer. I was lonely . . .

AE: So there was something in it for you? It wasn't one-hundred-percent bad?

SL: Oh, no. I was like a frozen, caged rabbit. Petrified. I knew if I were to say anything that I could lose my family, and that was the only positive thing in my life.

AE: That's so hard.

SL: So I get that, that Mr. Vuoso thing. Aside from the part that terrified me, I adored my uncle, the smell of his aftershave.

AE: There's something about being intensely wanted, the feeling of approval. Or desire.

SL: Yeah. It might be too big to put into words.

AE: Hmm . . . back to Mr. Vuoso. I didn't have anyone like that in my life, but I had the experience Jasira had with the *Playboys*. I found them very titillating. I'm not gay, but I liked to imagine myself as the women. That's what was titillating for me. They seemed to feel so safe. It was very exciting that they were naked and that they weren't scared. There was something about those images that really struck me as a kid.

SL: I can see that. They were so in their skin, in their beautiful skin. And maybe you, if you were feeling like Jasira, were feeling not so beautiful in your own body.

AE: I was not an attractive kid. Jasira is a little bit of a fantasy. I was overweight. I had fuzzy hair. Everybody called me ugly at school. It was a bad experience. I only feel attractive as an adult, never did as a child . . . What was the question? Oh, did I have someone in my life like Mr. Vuoso?

The Mr. Vuoso character grew out of the idea of this kid I babysat for, and his army reservist father who had this huge stack of *Playboys*. We were never found out. The kid never looked at them. I looked at them when the kid was watching TV. I don't think anyone ever found out. But that was another what if . . .

SL: What if you were found out.

AE: That would have been bad. I was 12 or 13, way too young to be babysitting. I would never have hired me. Those were different times, thirty years ago.

SL: But people still do that.

AE: They do? I would never hire someone thirteen years old to care for my children.

SL: I wouldn't either.

AE: That's a big deal. Yeah, that's weird. So this kid was mouthing off to me one day and I hit him in the arm and I got fired. And I was very ashamed at the time. The woman called my mother, and she said to her, "I think Alicia is a very unhappy little girl." And my mother was very offended by this. And I remember thinking, "No, that's true. That's true! That lady is right! I am unhappy." I remember that struck me as very shameful, but I also remember feeling that's true, that someone knew something about me. It felt like a kind thing to say.

SL: She wasn't blaming you . . .

AE: No. I definitely think she didn't want me to babysit anymore, and I definitely did a bad thing. But she was able to say I think there's something wrong with your kid. And I would eat her out of house and home, because they had food we didn't have. They had potato chips, and chocolate and marshmallows, and I would go in and eat all these chips from this orange Tupperware, and then I would try to reconstruct the chips to make them look fluffier. She was writing me notes, like "Stop eating our food."

SL: Just like how Jasira swiped tampons from the house where she babysat. Is that where you got the tampon thing?

AE: It's probably related since Jasira doesn't eat there . . . That's funny, because I had forgotten about that. So I didn't have a Mr. Vuoso, but I like the idea of her getting caught looking at these *Playboy* magazines. I was always fearful of that. And I tried to put them back exactly as I had found them. And this is a little off topic, but pornography never offends me, because early on in life pornography was part of my sexual awakening. In a helpful way, I understood how my body worked. I think that pornography can be a bad thing, but I don't feel negatively about it. It's something that exists that can be meaningful to people in ways that are hard to articulate and could be shameful to articulate. I mean, I don't even like talking about this all that much, but I feel like I have a complicated response to pornography.

SL: It is complicated.

AE: I mean, we're animals. If you look at something, and you have a reaction to it, how can you help that? And does that mean you're bad because you had a physical response to a picture? So you should never look at that picture again?

SL: There's a grey area . . .

AE: I don't mean child pornography or anything. I mean regular old pornography between consenting adults. I think it can be a part of some people's sexual growth. I guess what I'm saying is that for me it was meaningful.

SL: Towelhead is explicit in some ways. Was this a conscious decision, to not leave much to the imagination?

AE: I like writing things that I find titillating. I like having a sexual response to stuff that I read. It makes me feel alive and invigorated. I always assume that when I feel some way about something there are other people who feel the same way. If I enjoy reading a good sex scene then other people will, and I shouldn't gloss over it. I mean reading is about engaging. And it's a good feeling to be able to write a good sex scene. It's not the easiest thing in the world. You know, I had a student at Wellesley ask, "Is it okay if I include a sex scene in my story?" and I wrote back and I said, "Do you know anything about me? Have you read anything I've ever

written? Do you know who I am? I don't give a shit if you write a sex scene!" In fact, I have an assignment where I make them write a sex scene. Because it's not just about writing a sex scene, it's about how writing a sex scene is a way for you to reveal yourself.

SL: How has your family received your work?

AE: I didn't speak to my father for about twelve years, starting in 1996. My father reappeared in my life when my first child was born. He's trying very hard. Before we reconnected his friends said, "We didn't know you had a daughter." And he said, "That's because she makes her living off of how much she hates me." So he's clearly aware of the book. I can assure you he's never read it. In a weird way he acts sort of proud of me, although he never supported me as a writer.

My mother's a librarian, so she was always thrilled with the idea I might become a writer. It never bothered her. I think my father thinks I'm vulgar. My father likes everything just so. He likes classical music and Monet. It's got to be nice. I know he hasn't read anything, but he tries to be proud now. He knows there was a movie. My mother, I don't speak with her anymore. I don't know that she's read that much of *Towelhead*. She said, "I read the firstpage and the last page and it seemed very nice."

SL: Interesting.

AE: Yes. I don't care. I don't spare them in my work. They didn't spare me, and I don't spare them. I have no loyalty or allegiance to them in my work. I'm glad my father is in my life, but they were terrible parents. They made a terrible mess.

SL: So how did you become a writer, what was your path, the seed of it?

AE: I liked writing notes to my friend in high school. They were very involved, and we gathered the notes up at the end of the week and reviewed them.

SL: Like passing notes in class?

AE: Yes, but they were full of very complicated and interesting insults. We insulted each other. We insulted people around us, our family members.

The thing was to see how funny you could be with your insults. It was a rather involved process. Then we reviewed the letters and laughed at them all over again. So I always kind of wrote stuff, but when I went to college I had no plan of what I wanted to do or be. I looked at all the courses and I said, "I can't do any of these." At that time I hadn't yet been diagnosed as Attention Deficit and I knew I would fail at everything. So I thought, 'What's something I can bullshit my way through?' I saw a creative writing course, and I thought, 'I can write a story. Sure I can do that.' So I signed up for these classes. I thought 'This is what I'll do.' I had gone into therapy at age fourteen, so I knew something about myself. And when you know something about yourself, that kind of translates into knowing things about other people. You know things about what it is to be human. I felt that therapy was a separate university unto itself. And knowing stuff about why people do the things they do is a huge part of writing. And I just felt I could apply what I had learned in therapy to these creative writing courses.

SL: I'd like to talk about the non-fiction book that you read from last night.

AE: Did you like it?

SL: I love all your work, but I listened to your reading last night and I thought, 'Oh, she's found her sweet spot.'

AE: It is my sweet spot. I love this new book! I love writing it. I'm having a riot with this thing. I would be happy to never write fiction again. And I have this contract for this non-fiction book that I read from last night, and then I have to write another novel, which I'm not very invested in. *Towelhead* was really hard for me to write. I guess I'll write another novel. I have to, but I can't imagine it right now. I just keep hoping, well, I'll write this memoir, and then we'll see. And part of it, to be honest, I can't take my medication now, and I find that I could only write fiction when I was taking Adderall, because it's so hard for me to make stuff up. When I'm on the drugs, I don't panic when I get stuck. I sit and wait and then I solve the problem. I just panic too much. I need help.

SL: What is the title of the memoir?

AE: The Dragon Lies Down.

SL: In previous interviews you spoke of your ex-husband, who served as your

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editor, almost fondly. Is that the case?

AE: Oh, yes. He gave me this writing career. He did everything he could to help me with this.

SL: So he doesn't read for you anymore?

AE: No. It was the greatest loss of my life. If I had lost the marriage, okay, but to lose my editor . . .

SL: How does the editing happen now?

AE: I have friends. I have one friend, and I used to match her comments to my ex-husband's, so I know I'm getting 80-90% of what he said. But it takes 4 or 5 people to get what he did.

SL: You were not very involved in the making of the Towelhead film. How do you feel about it?

AE: I love the movie. I think Alan (Ball) did a great job. I think he did the best possible job that anybody could have done. He kept it funny. I felt disappointed that everyone felt so negative about it. I didn't understand why they said it was exploitative, and that the translation wouldn't work without Jasira's internal monologue. But I feel like you have to have a certain level of emotional intelligence to get it, and if you don't, you probably don't know what it's like to be a lonely 13 year-old. I was disappointed in the reception because I liked it a lot. And it just came and went. Just vanished. But some people really liked it. I think people are going to look back and revise their opinion of it. I think people found it shocking. I think they found unsettling the idea that a girl would have sexual feelings.

SL: Right. There's something about seeing that on the screen.

AE: Exactly. To see it is very disturbing to people.

SL: It's funny how shocking it is to see a girl with sexual feelings. Movies about boys are made all the time, boys with boners, boys jacking off . . .

AE: Yes. Don't we see movies like that all the time?

SL: I want to ask you about teaching writing. What does it bring to your life? And what does it bring to your writing?

AE: Well, in many ways teaching writing is a pain in the ass, because it takes away time from writing. Let me be honest and say that. Having said that, it feels good, too. Like this time here (at Butler), this is really fun. I really like teaching. I'm engaged and I like helping people write. I take pride in what I do. The problem is that it takes energy and then you've got to go and write. But it's doable. This is the best job. And teaching is good for your writing. It keeps you sharp. I sit in class and tell the kids what to do and then I go home and I make the same mistakes they make and I have to remember, You just told your kids not to do this, so don't do it. Editing their work keeps me sharp.

Susan Lerner, former pharmacist, is currently working towards an MFA in Creative Writing degree at Butler University. Her favorite (and most challenging) undertaking is her full-time job as mother to three teenagers. She satisfies her voracious literary appetite by reading and writing in her (parked) minivan while waiting at her kids' music lessons and soccer practices. Her blog of book reviews can be found at <http://booklerner.blogspot.com>

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