

NEWSDAY – TALKING WITH ADAM LANGER

Living in the '80s: Capturing a decade in the details

BY LAURA MOSER

Laura Moser is the co-author of "The Rise and Fall of a 10th Grade Social Climber."

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Over the years, Adam Langer has been a playwright, a magazine editor, a journalist and critic, a guidebook writer, a test-prep tutor, a film producer, even a director of what he described as a "very low-low-low-low budget movie" based on one of his own plays. But his two propulsive novels – last year's wildly acclaimed "Crossing California" and its recently published sequel, "The Washington Story" (Riverhead, \$24.95) – suggest that in fiction-writing, 38-year-old Langer has found his supreme calling at last.

He recently sat down at Café La Fortuna on the Upper West Side and, over iced coffee and sour-cherry plum pie, discussed his newfound vocation, which he insists isn't new at all. "I didn't wait this long to become a novelist," he says. "I waited this long for someone to publish me." He wrote several novels before "Crossing California," "novels that I never showed to anybody and novels that people didn't want." He completed his first at age 17, the story of a teenage Jewish actor "wandering around the Chicago Loop and stumbling onto a criminal plot involving gang-bangers, drugs and members of the Chicago City Council."

More than a decade and a half later, Langer hit his stride, drafting "Crossing California" in record time. "My stock answer to that," he says when asked how long he worked on the novel, "which is actually true, is about 30-some years and about nine months." He started the first draft in January 2002 and "finished, on my honeymoon, as it turned out, in August 2002." He wrote its sequel "The Washington Story" at a similarly breakneck speed. "The first draft took about a year," he says, "give or take."

Both novels trace the intertwined lives of several families in West Rogers Park, the north Chicago neighborhood that had the city's

highest concentration of Jews when Langer grew up there. The action of "Crossing California" spans from 1979 to 1981 and uses historical events, such as the Iran hostage crisis and the Reagan Revolution, as touchstones. "The Washington Story" covers a broader time period, from 1982 to 1987, corresponding to the divisive reign of Chicago's first black mayor, Harold Washington. As in "Crossing California," Langer pays careful attention to the particulars of time and place, not just the upheavals that made headlines – from the death of Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev to the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger – but the music, the movies, the slang, the sports, the streets and shop names. In both books, Langer supplies glossaries to help the reader navigate the more obscure references.

"I write from memory," Langer says of harnessing so many remarkable details, "and I actually don't consult anything when I'm writing. I just write what I think happened, what I think was going on around that time, what music I think was playing. Then afterward, I go back and fill in. It turns out I'm usually about 85 percent right," he says, "but occasionally, reality will intervene and offer something better."

Langer doesn't apologize for the detail obsession. "I think the more specific you are," he says, "the more universal it is." As a journalist, he says, he was "always very lazy in terms of detail," but in his novels, "I want to capture the flavor and the essence, and I want people to hear it and taste it and see it."

To this end, Langer draws on his encyclopedic knowledge of Chicago culture and geography. "I lived so long there," he says, "that it's going to be a part of whatever I do, but I've lived other places, too," including New York, where the author moved in 2000 when he received a journalism fellowship from Columbia University. As a new father, Langer has no regrets about raising his 2-month-old daughter, Nora Langer Sissenich, away from the town that figures so prominently in his fiction. "Chicago was different when I was growing up there," he says. "I find it a little less interesting now, in part because I'm older, but also because a lot of the city has been scrubbed. The tourist industry has exploded, and it feels like a different place, with people walking around in Cubs uniforms

everywhere. I still think it's a great city, and if I hadn't spent so much time there, I'd consider going back, and who knows?"

Already in "The Washington Story," Langer's fictional universe expands outward from West Rogers Park – to New York, Florida and Germany – and in his next novel, he plans to leave Chicago still further behind. Langer won't say much about this project, just that it's set in the present day, and in New York, not Chicago. He may still revisit the characters of West Rogers Park in a third installment, but he leaves those plans for the future. "At the end of 'The Washington Story'," he says, "I still had questions that I wanted answered and so will hope to find out more next year."

Langer often takes this come-what-may approach to storytelling. "I often acted as my own Scheherazade," he says of plotting "Crossing California," "leaving myself a cliff-hanger that I would try to puzzle out in the morning." He doesn't outline; "I like to be surprised," he says. "Part of the fun of writing for me is sitting down not knowing where something is going and finding out as I'm writing."