

Andrea Lee

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About this Person

Born: 1953 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: Writer
Updated: Sept. 10, 2009

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born 1953, in Philadelphia, PA; married; children: two. **Education:** Harvard University, B.A. (Radcliffe College), 1953, M.A., 1974. **Addresses:** Home: Turin, Italy.

CAREER:

New Yorker, New York, NY, staff writer.

AWARDS:

Nomination for American Book Award for general nonfiction, 1981, for *Russian Journal*; Jean Stein Award, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1984.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *Russian Journal* (memoir), Random House (New York, NY), 1981, 2006.
- *Sarah Phillips* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 1984, with a new foreword by Valerie Smith, Northeastern University Press (Boston, MA), 1993.
- *Interesting Women: Stories*, Random House (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Lost Hearts in Italy* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor to periodicals, including the *New York Times*, and *Vogue*.

Sidelights

Andrea Lee has distinguished herself as a noteworthy journalist and novelist. In her nonfiction work, *Russian Journal*, she provides an insightful perspective on contemporary Soviet life, and in her novel

Sarah Phillips, she recounts the reckless past of a middle-class black woman. These writings, while embracing different themes, have earned Lee praise as a keen observer and a consummate technician, one whose probing insights are inevitably rendered with concision and grace. As Susan Richards Shreve noted in the *New York Times Book Review*, "Andrea Lee's authority as a writer comes of an unstinting honesty and a style at once simple and yet luminous."

Lee's first book, *Russian Journal*, derives from a diary she kept in 1978 while in the Soviet Union, where her husband was studying for ten months on a fellowship. Relying on public transportation and a rudimentary grasp of the Russian language, Lee visited a wide variety of Soviet places, including public baths, college campuses, farmers' markets, and nightclubs. She met bureaucrats, dissidents, and even contraband sellers; encountered many cynics and youthful materialists; observed a disturbing number of public drunks; and became acquainted with some of the country's more unsettling aspects, notably surveillance. In her journal Lee wrote that, due to their circumstances, she and her husband "got a view of life in Moscow and Leningrad that was very different from that of the diplomats and journalists we knew."

Following the 1981 publication of *Russian Journal*, critics cited the book as a refreshing, if narrow, perspective on Soviet life. Susan Jacoby, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, called Lee's book "a subtly crafted reflection of both the bleak and golden shadings of Russian life" and added: "The subject matter of this journal is highly idiosyncratic. ... What Miss Lee offers are the people, places and experiences that touched her most deeply." *Washington Post Book World* reviewer Peter Osnos cited the book's worth for "conveying a feeling of place and atmosphere" and declared: "Lee writes very well. There is a warmth and freshness about her style that makes reading effortless." Osnos was especially impressed with Lee's depiction of the Soviet people, particularly its younger citizens. "What is best about the book--what distinguishes it from other books about the Soviet Union published in recent years--is her accounts of friendships with young people," he contended. Similarly, *Newsweek* reviewer Walter Clemons praised Lee's "unassuming delicacy and exactness," asserting that "her most winning quality is her capacity for friendship." Michael Irwin, who evaluated *Russian Journal* in the *London Review of Books*, also found Lee an engaging reporter. He praised her "astuteness" and called *Russian Journal* "a considerable exercise in observation, empathy and personal and literary tact." Lee's refusal to write about being a black person in the Soviet Union caused a few reservations among critics reviewing *Russian Journal*. Jacoby called this omission "regrettable" and contended that Lee's race "must have affected [her Russian friends'] perceptions (and Miss Lee's) in some way." Jacoby added: "Miss Lee's responses would surely have been as interesting as the rest of her observations, and I wish she had included them." Osnos also noted Lee's reluctance to write about race. He described the omission as "slightly awkward" and observed: "Apparently, she feels that her blackness has nothing to do with her time in the Soviet Union. That is her business. But she never even says as much."

As if responding to charges that she avoided racial subjects, Lee followed *Russian Journal* with *Sarah Phillips*, an episodic novel explicitly concerned with a contemporary African American woman. The work's title character is introduced as a woman grown disgusted with her boorish, racist acquaintances and lovers in Paris, where she has been living in self-exile. At the end of the first chapter, Sarah decides to leave Paris, and in the ensuing sections she recalls events--principally from childhood and adolescence--contributing to her present circumstances. Unlike most black characters in American fiction, Sarah is an assimilated elitist whose background is middle class, and her goal is to scandalize her bourgeois parents. She even accepts tokenism when she becomes the first African American student at an exclusive girls' school. Her father is a minister involved in the civil rights movement, an involvement that actually leads to her embarrassment when he is briefly imprisoned for civil disobedience. Bored with America, Sarah leaves the country after her father's death and her graduation from college. She settles in Paris, where she indulges in various interracial sexual shenanigans, including a *menage-a-quatre*. By novel's end, however, Sarah realizes the emptiness of her assimilation into white society--both European and American--and reaches a greater understanding of herself and her heritage.

With *Sarah Phillips* Lee earned further literary acclaim. In *Saturday Review*, Bruce Van Wyngarden described the novel as a "coming-of-age remembrance in which detail and insight are delightfully, and sometimes poignantly, blended." He also deemed it "an engaging and promising" first novel. Likewise, *Best Sellers* reviewer Francis Goskowski called *Sarah Phillips* an "engaging, witty" work and asserted that with it, Lee emerges as a "major novelistic talent." Patricia Vigderman was one of several critics who noted the novel's breakthrough perspective on race, particularly the characterization of Sarah as an assimilated African American. Critiquing the work for the *Boston Review*, Vigderman conceded that "this novel does not fit easily into the Afro-American tradition, and may even meet with some disapproval," but she nonetheless considered it "a very gracefully written book about black identity." "Without a doubt," wrote Goskowski, "Ms. Lee will be heard from again, and she will command our attention."

Interesting Women: Stories is a collection of thirteen tales about black women, many of which are set in Italy. In the opening story, "The Birthday Present," a wife gives her older Italian husband a gift of two expensive call girls for his fifty-fifth birthday. "'The Birthday Present' is a classic Andrea Lee story because it says worlds about the kind of power that the best fiction knows how to negotiate," noted Veronica Chambers in *Black Issues Book Review*. "Interestingly, in Lee's work, there is the power of race, both when it is present and when it is not. In several of Lee's stories, the protagonist is not identified as African American at all."

The title story is about the meeting of two women, one vacationing in Thailand with her twelve-year-old daughter while her husband attends to business in China, and the other the unconventional divorced adventuress who calls herself Silver. "Anthropology" finds a writer living in Rome returning to South Carolina to visit her aunt, the chronicler of the area and its people. An African American woman tourist is mistaken for a call girl by a white American, and she plays along in "Dancing with Josefina."

Booklist reviewer Donna Seaman wrote that each of the stories "deftly decodes the tricky dynamics of sexual, racial, and cultural trespass." Noted a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor: "As arch as the lives depicted here are, Lee's pinpoint accuracy for the right word and perfect tone bring a universal truth to these stories about the--well, the more interesting sex."

Lost Hearts in Italy begins in the mid-2000s with the daughter of the central couple heading to her parents' alma mater. They met as students while attending Harvard during the 1980s. Mira, who is black, and Nick, who is white, dismissed their parents' concerns and married, then moved to Rome. Nick's career was in international finance, and Mira became a writer. Their marriage was doomed, however, beginning when she met seductive older Italian Zenin, who made his billions manufacturing cheap toys. She later married Vanni and had two sons, and Nick moved to England with his second wife.

Erica Wagner reviewed *Lost Hearts in Italy* for the *New York Times Book Review*, writing: "Lee has a talent for descriptive writing, and the passages in this novel that describe, say, Nick and Mira's romantic afternoon at Cerveteri, the Etruscan city of the dead just outside Rome, are pleasing and evocative. And the novel, overall, is not onerous to read. But I kept wondering why I was bothering with these people, and why the author kept feeling the need to drive her points, such as they are, home so firmly."

Seaman described the story as being "exquisite" and noted: "Each encounter is choreographed with the deadly elegance and precision of a fencing match."

FURTHER READINGS:

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BOOKS

- o *Black Literature Criticism*, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1992.
- o *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Volume 36, Gale (Detroit, MI).
- o Lee, Andrea, *Russian Journal*, Random House (New York, NY), 1981.

PERIODICALS

- o *African American Review*, spring, 1995, review of *Sarah Phillips*, p. 164.
- o *Best Sellers*, February, 1985, Francis Goskowski, review of *Sarah Phillips*, p. 408.
- o *Black Issues Book Review*, July-August, 2002, Veronica Chambers, review of *Interesting Women: Stories*, p. 31; September-October, 2006, Marjorie Valbrun, review of *Lost Hearts in Italy*, p. 45.
- o *Booklist*, March 1, 2002, Donna Seaman, review of *Interesting Women*, p. 1088; May 15, 2006, Donna Seaman, review of *Lost Hearts in Italy*, p. 24.
- o *Boston Review*, February, 1985, Patricia Vigderman, review of *Sarah Phillips*, p. 23.
- o *Entertainment Weekly*, June 23, 2006, Jessica Shaw, review of *Lost Hearts in Italy*, p. 75.
- o *Kirkus Reviews*, February 1, 2002, review of *Interesting Women*, p. 130.
- o *Library Journal*, March 1, 2002, Jo Manning, review of *Interesting Women*, p. 142; June 1, 2006, Barbara Hoffert, review of *Lost Hearts in Italy*, p. 108.
- o *London Review of Books*, October 6, 1982, Michael Irwin, review of *Russian Journal*.
- o *Newsweek*, October 19, 1981, Walter Clemons, review of *Russian Journal*, p. 101.
- o *New York Review of Books*, November 5, 1981, review of *Russian Journal*, p. 56.
- o *New York Times*, December 6, 1984, review of *Sarah Phillips*, p. 25.
- o *New York Times Book Review*, October 25, 1981, Susan Jacoby, review of *Russian Journal*, pp. 11, 22; November 18, 1984, review of *Sarah Phillips*, p. 13; May 26, 2002, review of *Interesting Women*, p. 18; July 2, 2006, Erica Wagner, review of *Lost Hearts in Italy*.
- o *Publishers Weekly*, February 18, 2002, review of *Interesting Women*, p. 70.
- o *Saturday Review*, February, 1985, Bruce Van Wyngarden, review of *Sarah Phillips*, p. 74.
- o *Spectator*, June 12, 1982, review of *Russian Journal*, p. 23.
- o *Times Literary Supplement*, August 13, 1982, review of *Russian Journal*, p. 891; April 5, 1985, review of *Sarah Phillips*, p. 376.
- o *Washington Post Book World*, October 25, 1981, Peter Osnos, review of *Russian Journal*.

ONLINE

- o *GRITS.com*, [http:// www.thegritsbookclub.com/](http://www.thegritsbookclub.com/) (November 7, 2008), Stephanie, review of *Interesting Women*.
- o *Guardian Online* [http:// www.guardian.co.uk/](http://www.guardian.co.uk/) (September 23, 2006), Lucy Ellmann, review of *Lost Hearts in Italy*.
- o *Random House Web site*, <http://www.randomhouse.com/> (November 7, 2008), interview.*

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