

Publishers Weekly

All Roads Lead To...

Adam Langer remembers exactly when he started writing his debut novel, *Crossing California*. It was New Year's Eve, 2001; Langer had a cold and no big plans, so he started reading Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. He admits that he never really "got" Woolf before, but this encounter inspired him to start writing a short story the next day. "It was about three characters meeting on a street corner in Chicago," he tells PW. The "California" in the title refers to the street that served as a line of demarcation between middle class and upper middle class families in the Windy City neighborhood where Langer grew up. "*Crossing California* seemed like a really big deal," he explains. "There was a sense that once you cross California everything was okay."

Langer says the book is "very unautobiographical," except for the fact that he was a Jewish boy who had a Bar Mitzvah in the West Rogers Park neighborhood at about the same time the book is set. Dates figure prominently in *Crossing California*, which opens on November 4, 1979, the day the American hostages were taken in Tehran and ends on January 21, 1981, when they were released. In those 444 days, says Langer, everything changed in America. The Carter presidency gave way to the Reagan era. John Lennon went from recording his *Double Fantasy* album to being killed. The country became obsessed with who shot J.R. on Dallas, and the three characters who meet up at California and North in Langer's book are obsessed with all the changes happening to them, their small worlds and the nation.

The mostly comic action revolves around the three classmates and their families. Jill Wasserstrom, from east of California, takes the Iranian perspective in a school debate and plans a mischievous Bat Mitzvah speech as her widowed father goes on his first date since his wife's death. Muley Scott Wills, of mixed black and Jewish heritage, becomes host of a children's program on National Public Radio and takes a stand with his single mom that forces her to deal with his estranged father, an L.A. record label mogul. Lana Rovner, from the better side of the street, does not become host of the same program and lives with her older brother who is trying

everything to launch a music career and score with Jill's big sister as their parents' marriage unravels.

"So much of the '60s ended in 1980," says Langer, a former NPR child host and a filmmaker, playwright and editor of the now defunct Book magazine. "A lot of this is hindsight. It wasn't until I got it written down that gradually I realized what was going on in the country. I was lucky the street was named California because it serves as a metaphor for America."

–Bridget Kinsella