

**“Untitled” by Lou Berney**  
**Fall 2018 – Lead Read ▪ On Sale: 10/2/2018 ▪ 9780062663849**  
**Behind-the-Book Essay**

I was conceived the night John F. Kennedy was assassinated. At least that’s what my mother always told me. It’s plausible, though the math is a stretch and my mother did like a good story.

My mother and her stories are at the heart of this novel. As a little girl during the Depression she traveled Route 66 with her family from Oklahoma to California, everything they owned crammed into the trunk of the car. I remember vividly her bedtime stories about the journey – the Painted Desert and the Petrified Forest and the tow-trucks that lurked near dangerous bends in the highway, waiting for unsuspecting cars to careen off the road. I remember wanting very badly to visit this magical, menacing place.

Both of my mother’s parents died when she was in her early teens. College was never an option. She worked as a secretary and married a man who, for better and worse, was the life of the party. She was devoted to her children and raised them, I can attest, expertly. Money was often tight and she had many worries, but she made sure that my sisters and I never shared those. She was ferociously intelligent and resilient and curious about the world. She’d always dreamed of becoming an artist or writer or movie director. In a different time, under different circumstances, I’ve no doubt that she would have done it.

My favorite story she used to tell occurred before I was born. My sisters were seven and eight years old, my father had not yet committed to the straight and narrow, my mother was working full-time to support the family, and the family dog had epilepsy. So times were already tough when my sisters’ pet hamster developed a big purple tumor on its head and began to spend every minute of every day (and night) spinning frantically on its wheel. *Squeaka-squeaka-squeaka*. My mother finally couldn’t stand it any more and moved the hamster’s cage out to the garage. And then, fed up with my father’s drinking, she borrowed a cot and exiled him to the garage too. The dog, who preferred the cool cement floor when a seizure approached, made three. Every time my mother stepped into the garage, she said, she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

When I was in grad school, I sent my mother copies of the short stories I wrote. She would read each story and then explain to me in detail what didn’t work and why. This infuriated me because she was usually right. I explained to her that she had no idea what she was talking about. Most of the books she read, after all, were biographies of movie stars from the ’40s and ’50s that her sister, my Aunt Kay, loaned her.

My mother admitted that this was true. And then she did what I should have known she would do. She got a library card and started reading all the writers that I was studying. She read Faulkner and Woolf and Zora Neale Hurston. She read Raymond Carver and Lorrie Moore and Louise Erdrich and Flannery O’Conner and Elmore Leonard. She read everything. For every book that I read, she read three or four or five. Before long she was discovering and recommending writers to me.

And she continued to read my stories and point out the problems. Only now she found even more problems and was *always* right, not just usually.

My novel is fiction. I borrowed a few pieces of my mother’s stories, of my mother’s story, but it’s not about her. On the other hand, though, it’s all about her, since without her influence and inspiration I would never have written this or anything else at all.