

[The Campaign for the American Reader](#), blog interview by Marshal Zeringue

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Corinne Demas

[Corinne Demas](#) is the award-winning author of thirty-seven books, including five novels (among them *The Writing Circle* and *Returning to Shore*), two short story collections, a memoir (*Eleven Stories High: Growing Up in Stuyvesant Town, 1948–1968*), a poetry chapbook (*The Donkeys Postpone Gratification*), a play, and numerous books for children (including *Saying Goodbye to Lulu*, *The Littlest Matryoshka*, and *The Disappearing Island*). Her short stories have appeared in more than fifty publications. She is also the editor of *Great American Short Stories: From Hawthorne to Hemingway*.

Demas is a professor emerita of English at Mount Holyoke College and a fiction editor for the Massachusetts Review. She divides her time between Western Massachusetts and Cape Cod.

Demas's new novel is [The Road Towards Home](#).

My Q&A with the author:

How much work does your title do to take readers into the story?

My working title for my novel was *The Lady with the Dog*, the title of a favorite short story by Anton Chekhov, which is quoted in my epilogue. The novel does more, though, than focus on one female dog-owner, so my editor, my agent, and I explored dozens of other titles. I kept mining the text of the manuscript, looking for a phrase that would speak to the core of the novel, and I ended up discovering it in the last line of the book.

I hope *The Road Towards Home* will suggest to readers not just a physical road, but a psychological journey as well. There are a number of “homes” in the novel: the houses each of the characters once owned, the retirement community where they find themselves, and the rough Cape Cod cottage where most of the story takes place. Home, of course is not just a physical place, but a state of mind.

I chose “towards” rather than “toward” for the title because of the sound. I was relieved to find that the Merriam-Webster dictionary says they are interchangeable and dispels the myth that “towards” is more properly British.

What's in a name?

Naming characters in a novel is such a tricky business! I selected “Noah” and “Cassandra” for my two main characters because the names were familiar but not too common. In her kind blurb for the book, novelist Valerie Martin touched on the way the

names might resonate, as well: Noah (saved the world with a boat) and Cassandra (sees the future way too clearly).

Cassandra can be pronounced two ways, and my character makes it clear that her name is not pronounced in what she calls “the ‘snooty way,’ the second ‘a’ pronounced like an ‘o’ as in ‘on.’ When people mispronounced her name Cassandra felt it gave her a certain edge over them.”

Early in the story, Noah is surprised to discover that Cassandra Joyce is the Sandy Karras he knew back when they were in college. As their relationship develops he calls her Sandy in private, but introduces to others as Cassandra. “Because Sandy is what I call you,” he says. “Cassandra is for everyone else.”

When I named the senior living community where the story begins, I made sure there wasn’t an actual place by that name. The cottage my characters escape to is on the Outer Cape, but I didn’t name the town so I’d have freedom to move things around. I imagine readers will have fun arguing about the locale.

How surprised would your teenage reader self be by your new novel?

My teenage reader self wouldn’t be surprised by my novel, but I expect she’d be curious about my portrayal of Cassandra’s two daughters as well as Cassandra’s relationship with her sister, Judy, when they were young. Because I’m an only child, I think the teenage me would find it intriguing that the novelist me has obviously been studying the way siblings interact as children and exploring the way their childhood experience shapes their relationship as adults.

Do you find it harder to write beginnings or endings? Which do you change more?

The opening of my novel: “There was a new resident at Clarion court. Noah normally didn’t pay attention to the arrival of newcomers, but he couldn’t miss this one because she was accompanied by one of the biggest dogs he’d ever seen,” echoes the opening of Chekhov’s short story, so my beginning was all set.

I knew where I wanted my characters to end up, but I couldn’t force that ending on them. Once I created them and they became real to me I had to let them do whatever was right for them; I had to sit back and let things play out. The ending was not surprising, but I couldn’t have predicted the way we’d get there.

Do you see much of yourself in your characters? Do they have any connection to your personality, or are they a world apart?

Just as in my all of my other books, *The Road Towards Home* incorporates little bits of my own reality—the smell of a Stilton cheese, the feel of the sand on “winter-soft” feet—but my characters are entirely themselves. Cassandra is feistier than I am. Noah is more ironic. Of course while I was writing this novel I had to become them, see the

world as they see it. And I had to capture their distinct voices.

What non-literary inspirations have influenced your writing?

One of the most important influences on my writing is the natural world. I'm not a scientist, but I'm an enthusiastic amateur, and concerned about environmental issues. Cassandra is an entomologist, so I relied on the help of scientists I know and the many field school classes I've taken at Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. (I took the one on insects twice—and there's still so much more to learn!)

I didn't include references to politics in the novel because I wanted the story to be timeless, but contemporary politics certainly influenced me--and my characters. Cassandra, for example, has a challenging relationship with her son-in-law, who is a climate change denier.

Music plays a role in this novel, and I've been influenced by my own adventures taking violin lessons and my appreciation of and struggles with Bach. I had fun selecting the cello music Noah is working on. The name I gave his sailboat, "Sarabande," was in the running for the title of the book.

Visit [Corinne Demas's website](#).

--Marshal Zeringue