

## INTERSECTIONS RADIO

### INTERVIEW WITH BRENDA RUFENER

MAY 16, 2018

#### TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You're listening to Intersections Radio, the podcast where we geek out on all things intersectionality. I'm your host, Sarika Mehta. Welcome, and thanks for tuning in.

Today, my guest is Brenda Rufener. She's the author of the young adult novel *Where I Live*. And this is her debut novel. *Where I Live* follows the story of Linden Rose, a clever and witty teenager who lives at her school, unbeknownst to everyone including her best friends.

She narrates her plans to hide, her backup plans, and her backup for the backup plans, in case she might be seen before the morning bell rings. She's also an extraordinary journalism student, and caught the eye of a local investigative reporter.†

In the midst of all this, she still faces the known adolescent issues, such as getting ready for the homecoming dance, and studying for the SATs.

Brenda Rufener hails from Oregon, and now lives in North Carolina. She has extensive experience working with homeless children and families, and almost ended up in such circumstances herself. She joins me today via Skype. This is Intersections Radio.

Brenda Rufener, welcome to Intersections Radio.

BRENDA RUFENER: Thank you so much for having me. I'm glad to be here.

SARIKA MEHTA: What inspired your novel, what made you decide to write this when you did?

BRENDA RUFENER: Well, there are really two parts to the inspiration behind *Where I Live*. One drawing from my personal experience, when I was a child, and then into my early teen years, my parents had went through a large phase of, where they were experiencing financial struggles. My father was laid off from work, we lost our house, and there was a short window of time that we were shuffling back and forth between living with relatives, and there was just a lot of chaos in my home.

So, not having a home for a short time does do that, and not having a bedroom of my own, friends would ask, hey, can I come over, and I

could not have them come over because I didn't have any space of my own. We were sharing a small, very small house with I think six other relatives, so there were ten of us in the house.

So, fast forward, I guess, to my college years, where I was volunteering for a literacy program that helped homeless teens, and there I met this amazing group of women who were going through the same things that I was going through when I was a teen, and I was just so drawn to them, so drawn to their positivity, their ability to push forward no matter what, and I really wished that my teen self had known those women when I faced that similar situation. I probably wouldn't have felt so embarrassed or shamed and isolated.

But, these women really, they really showed me what hope over adversity looked like, and that ended up being a major theme of this book, where Linden is that resilient character. She's witty, scrappy, she knows what to do. That really -- I really drew from my experiences working with these women.

SARIKA MEHTA: You know, you made a good point, that, a couple of good points where, you know, you're talking about there's a shame that comes with being in these circumstances, either being homeless or being in a situation where you have to share a small space with a lot of people, and you don't feel like you can show that to your friends, which is one heart breaking point.

And then, you also mentioned that you wished you'd known these women when you yourself were a teenager, and you would have felt less alone, and I wish that there was a way that we could make things either more transparent.

BRENDA RUFENER: Oh, definitely. And, I wish that -- this question has come up a lot, it's like, what makes us resilient, or what makes us want to lean on other people, or what makes us not feel like leaning on someone else, or sharing our secret with someone else, is weak, is seen as weak, and I don't have the answer to that, because, I mean, for me as a teen I was -- I felt shame over poverty. My friends were, you know, doing other things that I couldn't do, maybe taking dance lessons or piano or whatever it was. I felt shame, whereas maybe someone else can reach out to someone that's there for them, and share a situation, and be helped.

So, there's really -- I wish I had the answer to that. It's a tough one.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right, right. Well, let's talk more about the book. The characters especially are so enjoyable. I mean, one of the things, as I mentioned earlier, one of the things I really enjoy about reading young adult literature is the wit of teenagers. Linden and her best friends are clever and hilarious, so talk about developing those

characters.

BRENDA RUFENER: Well, those characters were really inspired by some people in my life, just very little, small snippets of their character, but, they, in developing the characters, I really wanted to focus less on Linden's crisis, because we're aware of it, and we, we know that she is homeless, and, but not everyone can connect with homelessness, because maybe that person has not been homeless.

So, but we're able to connect through the characters, and so, showing Linden as more than her crisis by having these friends around her that bring out these other aspects of her personality. They're very lovable, her -- Ham's relationship with Linden is hilarious, but they -- they just enjoy each other, and her friends become, they call themselves "The Triangle," and they become this family, this connection that she really needs.

So, in developing them, it was really fun to develop those characters, and just bring this sense of friendship, shaping it as family for Linden.

SARIKA MEHTA: Absolutely. And, another pleasant surprise was, despite the fact this book is set in a small town in Oregon, you have some diverse characters, including the triangle of friends, so, well, it's nice to see this happening in contemporary young adult literature, I can't speak much for what I was reading when I was a teenager.

BRENDA RUFENER: I think it's really important, for me especially. I mean, I grew up in a very small town, twelve hundred people, in eastern Oregon, and there were -- there was not a lot of diversity, and when there was, it was made a spectacle of, and that was really something that I've carried with me my entire life. I mean, it's not the way it should be and it's not how our world should exist.

I mean, my husband is Asian, so I hear from his perspective how he grew up in a very rural environment as well, in eastern Washington, and the experiences that he went through really helped to shape some of the story. And I wanted the story to be contemporary, like, okeh, this is how it is now, and because when I do go back and visit those places that we lived, there's a lot more diverse -- diversity in the community, and it's more accepted, and maybe not perfect, by any means, but at least it's present, and we're seeing more of it, and especially with teens.

Teens embrace diversity, for the most part, and at least in the people that I've been in contact with, and so I really wanted that to be in the story, but yet also there is the juxtaposition there as well, where they have some problems with bullying, and things like that.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. It's not, you know, it's not a rosy lens on this,

and I -- but I do appreciate that it's just existing as normalcy, and not -- not as a token, not as, what you were saying before, as a spectacle.

BRENDA RUFENER: Exactly.

SARIKA MEHTA: Another character that I want to talk about, I don't want to give away spoilers by revealing too much about what's happening in the story, but basically there's a plot line that details an abusive relationship, and so you have to write this character, this abusive character, and so I don't want to say who it is, but, the point being that it's not a simple two-dimensional thing of writing somebody who is a monster, you know. This character is likable, and he struggles.

BRENDA RUFENER: Right. And I think that's really one of the main parts of this story, is that, well with Linden, she's hiding, and so we see other characters as well wearing these masks, and not being real, and open and transparent, with everyone around them, so that is definitely was a complicated part of the story, and tying it back to Linden and what she needs to do as a result of it.

SARIKA MEHTA: It's easy to say this is, you know, a hero, and this is a monster. It's easy to write that, particularly with younger ages. But it's important to say why this became, this person became a monster, why do they act out this way.

That kind of leads me to want to talk about both the work of fiction and real life, you know, this is a heart breaking tale kind of enveloped in a lot of snark and sarcasm and wonderful, you know, wit. But there is real life, and how children and families who are homeless in America are affected.

According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, one in 30 children are homeless. How do so many kids fall through the cracks? I mean that's -- that's pretty high. How does this happen?

BRENDA RUFENER: Well, and that's really interesting, because early on, when the advance reader copies went out of where I live, we weren't sure what kind of response we would get, so, the publisher sent out the advance reader copies, and the immediate response that I received was from teachers, and I received several emails from teachers, saying, I have this homeless child in my class, and they're living in their car, or they're just about to lose their home and their family's going to be in a homeless shelter.

And, it was -- they were thanking me, and I didn't quite know what to do with all of the information they were giving me, because, I mean, it is my debut, and I didn't know that this is the kind of reaction I would get. I was in tears, basically.

SARIKA MEHTA: Wow.

BRENDA RUFENER: So, the feedback from these teachers, they were expressing appreciation for a book that they could pass along to their colleagues, and help to remind, I guess remind each other that these issues exist in their school, and next week I'm actually doing a high school visit in Virginia, at a school where homelessness is very -- is very much a problem, I mean, what the, I forget the statistics that they gave me, but -- but, a large percentage of their student body has either lived as homeless, or they have, they're on the brink of homelessness.

I mean, with housing insecurity the way it is, and things like that, it's very common, and so I'm looking forward to that school visit, and just learning more from them, and I'm able to share, of course, my background with them.

But, it is a problem, and even in my community here, in North Carolina, the homeless shelters that do exist are not necessarily set up to take in teens, especially teen girls, or those who identify as teen girls. They are set up to take families or adults, and so a lot of teens do slip through the cracks, and if they're homeless, they form these groups or, not really gangs, that has a bad connotation to it, but they form these groups of kids that live on the streets. They pool resources, they live where -- in cars, wherever they need to be, they just lean on each other. And that's where that friendship develops, I guess, again.

SARIKA MEHTA: I want to go back to what you were saying, that these shelters are not set up to take teenage girls or teenagers who identify as girls. Can you expand on that?

BRENDA RUFENER: Well, at least where I live, there is one shelter that I'm aware of that is set up for teen -- for teens, but it's special. It's, like, they only take ages I believe 12 to 18. When -- I volunteered at this shelter, and they have told me that kids don't feel safe, especially girls, young teen girls, they don't feel safe in a regular homeless shelter, and they don't have the resources there to help them.

I mean, these are girls who need tampons, and, you know, bras, and just things that we don't maybe necessarily think of when we are even donating to homeless shelters. We think of, you know, the need of food, that's what we see on the news, not the tangible goods that a teen girl needs, which is underwear, bras, tampons, you know, deodorant, those kind of things.

So, just from a practical standpoint, they're not necessarily set up that way. And then from a safety standpoint, they're -- I mean, there

are a lot of adult men, homeless men, living in the same facility as these teen girls, and they don't feel safe.

SARIKA MEHTA: I assumed you were talking about the safety issue, but you're right with the resources as well, that --

BRENDA RUFENER: Right.

SARIKA MEHTA: -- women and girls need.

BRENDA RUFENER: It was really eye-opening to me, just in my volunteer work, which was, they don't get enough of those resources there. They're getting in, you know, bread, and, you know, all of the canned goods and things like that, but not the main things that women need or that girls need.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. Bread's not really going to help you get through your period. Right?

BRENDA RUFENER: Yeah, exactly. Which is one of the reasons I brought up Linden getting her period in the story, because, I mean, that's a real issue. We all go through it, but when you're homeless and you don't have money for tampons, what do you do?

SARIKA MEHTA: In your work, and in your research for this book, were there any surprising statistics, or were there any demographic breakdowns, with a homeless population?

BRENDA RUFENER: I think the biggest surprise for me, and maybe it was just me being a little bit naive, was the -- the staggering numbers of LGBTQ plus children, who come out at home, and end up being homeless as a result of their -- what they identify as, and their sexuality.

So, that, to me, was really surprising, that those numbers, and I don't have the hard numbers in front of me. It really surprised me that that -- that that is such a problem, and especially in conservative states, we see that even in our own -- my own state of North Carolina. Just close to, I would say, half of the, and that may be skewed by ten percent or so, but, half of the teens that I worked with, who are homeless, are LGBTQ plus.

So --

SARIKA MEHTA: Half of them.

BRENDA RUFENER: To me, I mean, it's heartbreaking, but it is a real problem.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. Because that's a different circumstance than somebody falling into hardship due to financial problems.

BRENDA RUFENER: Yeah, definitely. So, to me, that was, that's a really hard one for me to see and face, but I just believe in, a lot of love and helping them, in any way that we can.

SARIKA MEHTA: Speaking about what you were saying before, when you had the response from teachers, who are saying I have homeless students, or I have students who were homeless. The big thing in this book is that nobody knows she's homeless, and I, part of me was kind of like, how can, I mean, she's pretty good at covering her tracks, but, how could they not know?

BRENDA RUFENER: Yeah. So, there -- the teachers that I interacted with were, they did -- they were aware that, okeh, here is this student in my class who has made mention, or has told a friend who has then told the teacher, that they are experiencing these financial problems, and are on the brink of homelessness, or living homeless.

And, with Linden, it's more of, okeh, I need her to be in that school and be hiding, and for people not to be aware that she is homeless, because that is her big secret, but, for her to find her voice in the end, maybe, and to be able to -- to open up and share who she really is, and to not have the shame that goes along with that.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. It's the issue of shame, and I want to talk about some of your experiences in writing and publishing. You know, it's great you had received really positive feedback from other teachers. What were some of the challenges you faced in writing and publishing this book?

BRENDA RUFENER: The real challenge in writing this book was, are people going to be able to connect with a homeless person, if they're not homeless? Just in working with my publisher, we wanted a story that was contemporary, that showed hope through adversity or over adversity, but it not to get too dark, and there's some really amazing books out there in YA that deal with homelessness, but some of them do focus on, and not that it's negative at all, but they do focus on just the crisis.

And, I wanted to take this a little bit in, I guess in a different direction, where, we know she's homeless, but she's just like one of us. And show Linden as more than being her homelessness. So she's that typical person who is, is just navigating high school, and she's going through all of the same issues that we all have gone through on certain levels, but, she has to do it while being homeless.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. The issues are magnified, like, getting ready for the homecoming dance is a little more complicated, or --

BRENDA RUFENER: Definitely.

SARIKA MEHTA: -- studying, and making good grades, her life depends on it because she wants all of her friends to go to the same college, and, well, my last question was, if you had any other remarks or takeaways you want to share?

BRENDA RUFENER: I do have a new book coming out, my second YA, since we last spoke, is coming out in April of next year, and is a story told in dual points of view. You'll meet Aggie and Max, and they are two teens who are torn apart by an unimaginable pain and guilt over the loss of their siblings, and the book deals with another -- another hard topic, grief, and the different layers of grief, and the impact that this tragedy has had on these two families, who once loved each other, but now are pointing fingers of blame.

So, it's another story that's very personal to me. A personal topic, that's grief, when I was writing the story, I lost three of my grandparents during a six months' span of time, so I was drawing on a lot of very personal experience with grief, and so, but, finding that balance in writing this story with humor, and some flavorful characters, hopefully, and then navigating the hard topics.

SARIKA MEHTA: Brenda Rufener, thank you so much for joining me on Intersections Radio.

BRENDA RUFENER: Thank you, Sarika, I had a great time.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was my guest Brenda Rufener, author of the debut novel *Where I Live*.†To listen to the podcast of this interview, check out [IntersectionsRadio.wordpress.com](http://IntersectionsRadio.wordpress.com). Visit the same website for previous episodes of this podcast. And join the Facebook community at [facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio](https://facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio). You're listening to Intersections Radio. I'm Sarika Mehta. Thanks for listening.