A lonely 70-year-old woman takes in an abandoned girl in this heart-wrenching tale of love and loss set in the black communities of southwestern Ontario.

Rush Home Road, a dramatic début novel by an adept storyteller, was compared to John Steinbeck and Alice Munro and is poised to become beloved by readers around the world. While exploring the rich history of the Underground Railroad, whereby fugitive slaves from the United States found freedom in Canada, it also speaks broadly of motherhood, understanding, the importance of goodness and the power of love.

Rusholme, Ontario, is an all-black town born of the Underground Railroad. Its inhabitants farm land cleared by their ancestors who escaped slavery, and are grateful for modest comforts and richness of life; but for the taint of the bootleggers, it is a strong and peaceful community. At fifteen, Addy Shadd has learned to bake a pie crust better than her mother’s, and is happy to pick vegetables in the fields in summer so she can show off her strong, smooth calves to Chester Monk, the young man she hopes to marry one day.

At the annual Strawberry Supper, her dreams go horribly awry. A series of terrible misunderstandings lead to the tragic death of her brother, and blame falls on Addy. Shunned by her family, exiled from the community, she leaves home to find a new life. One refrain fills her head: Rush Home. But she is no longer welcome in Rusholme. Her courageous journey takes her to less-sheltered places, first to Detroit, then Chatham, where she finds a home for a while — until
tragedy strikes again. Addy has learned to accept the tribulations life deals her as merely "what is."

Many years later, in 1978, we meet Addy at 70, living in a trailer park near Lake Erie. She grows flowers and keeps a tidy house, her only company the voice of her little brother Leam, which has stayed with her through the years. Her quiet existence is ruptured suddenly when a neighbour offers to pay Addy to look after her young daughter for the summer. Before Addy can act on her second thoughts, the girl's mother has disappeared, and odd, mixed-race Sharla Cody is Addy's responsibility.

It is not the first time Addy has had a five-year-old to care for, and although long-neglected Sharla has much to learn about how to behave, her warm, grateful presence brings back a deluge of memories for Addy, who carries an unwarranted burden of guilt. As we watch a relationship unfold between the aging Addy and the little girl she chooses to care for, we are transported through flashbacks into the harsh life of a strong woman who endured more disasters than triumphs, suffered through racism and prejudice, but still has faith in the redemptive power of love.

With its depictions of human nature at its most despicable and most admirable, Rush Home Road is heartbreaking but optimistic, passionate but funny, intimate and readable, with skillfully drawn characters and compelling plot twists. Although Knopf Canada was the first publisher to buy the manuscript, a U.S. publisher quickly paid a large advance for the remaining rights to this first novel by a Canadian author, and within two months of acquiring the manuscript had sold it in eleven countries. Shortly after the book's publication, film rights were bought by Whoopi Goldberg, who plans to play the lead role.
She lives in Toronto, but Lori Lansens grew up in Chatham, and was inspired by the stories she heard as a child. Though her own family was white, she was fascinated that African Americans found their freedom in the nearby towns just north of the border, such as Dresden, home of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The fictional Rusholme is modeled on Buxton, which was settled by fugitive slaves in 1849 and was a thriving black town until after the American Civil War, when many went back to the States.

When Lori finally came to write Rush Home Road, she conducted research in the Black Heritage Centre in Chatham, and integrated local history into the novel. But the characters were already real to her long before she sat down at her computer to write. “Sharla and Addy entered my imagination together; I knew they would be the subject of my first book, when I found the courage to write it.” She listened to them talking in her head for fifteen years, and knew them as well as, or better than, any living person. All that remained was to determine how to tell their story.

While Rush Home Road was her first novel, Lansens had earned her creative stripes. For a time, she knew she wanted to be a writer, but didn’t know how. Then she quit her job selling advertising for a newspaper, and worked as a waitress in the evenings, writing by day. This path led first to the screen, not the page; she had taken acting classes and had worked as an actress. As a screenwriter, she had immediate award-winning success with her first film South of Wawa, about a doughnut-shop waitress. In the nineties, she wrote and directed several short films that were shown at festivals, through the production company that she owns with her director husband.
Like novelist Ann-Marie MacDonald, Lansens learned first to tell stories through drama, but when time came to write the big story that had been gestating for so long, she knew it had to be a novel. In fact, she already knew the beginning, middle and end of the novel. However well she had crafted the plot, though, she was often surprised at how the characters would take it in an alternative direction, as they revealed themselves during the writing process.

While writing the novel, Lori was pregnant with her first child, and only finished the manuscript a week before he was born. "I'm sure my experience of motherhood contributed to the story." She is herself the middle child in a close-knit family and has a rich relationship with her own mother. She read the drafts aloud to her unborn child, so that he would hear the sound of her voice, which may have helped give the narrative its intimate feel. She also felt so deeply for her characters that sometimes her husband would hear her weeping as she worked out the lives of Addy and Sharla. "I wanted to give this motherless child a mother, and a very good mother at that."

Eighteen years after the thrill of selling her first short story to a literary journal, she has finally put aside the screenwriting for a while and returned to fiction with undeniable success. Novelists get much more respect than screenwriters, she says, and the process is completely different, although her training as screenwriter does allow her to see writing simply as a job: "My muse is the on switch of my computer." Being pregnant with her second child during the promotion of the book also helped her stay grounded. Yet there is no question she loves this new job. "I'm committed to writing fiction — I feel like I've found my home."
Discussion Questions

1. The American publisher described *Rush Home Road* as reading “as if John Irving has written *The Color Purple*.” In his review, George Elliott Clarke said the novel reminded him of Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*, coupled with Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, but as if both novels had been penned by Toni Morrison. Can you comment on these comparisons?

2. Jacquelyn Mitchard commented on the novel’s portrait of “how much has changed, and how little, over nearly a century, in the realms of race, love, hate and loss.” How does Addy’s early life compare to Sharla’s?

3. Is Addy’s determined acceptance of “what is” — her endurance that might be an inheritance from her enslaved ancestors — always a blessing or sometimes a curse?

4. How much did the historical background of the novel contribute to your interest in the narrative?

5. Addy teaches Sharla how to value herself by valuing other people; she shows her simple ways of living and gives her a set of morals. Can you compare this to any other fictional mother-child relationships?

6. While the central characters of the novel are clearly Addy and Sharla, the novel is filled with convincing male characters. Which did you find most interesting?