

We thought we were on a trail, and then you start scrambling on rocks, thinking the rest of the trail might be there — and it isn't. There's no point of reference. It was October and we were very cold. Lori Lansens

BOOKS

HIGH ALTITUDE ANXIETY

Wilderness park provides a fitting setting for compelling survival tale

The Mountain Story
Lori Lansens
Knopf Canada

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POSTMEDIA NEWS

TORONTO It takes some 13 minutes to rise from the blistering heat of the Palm Springs desert to the alpine wilderness of Mount Jacinto State Park. But when you emerge from your aerial tram car at Mountain Station, you may well find yourself shivering in temperatures that are more than 20 degrees cooler. And if it's winter, you'll encounter snow.

It's a wilderness playground up there, with views that on a clear day can extend beyond the California border to Las Vegas.

But it can also be a place of danger and death.

Canadian novelist Lori Lansens wasn't just relying on her fictional imagination when she wrote her new novel, *The Mountain Story*. Indeed, this harrowing survival adventure was triggered by her own initial encounter with the Mount Jacinto wilderness.

"That first time, when we got lost, I knew I'd be setting a story there," she says. "The place just spoke to me."

Lansens, a native of Chatham, Ont., is chatting in her Toronto publisher's office, in the heart of an urban culture far removed from the untamed landscape that places her four main characters in jeopardy. But the power of that setting still consumes her.

"I hadn't known about this mountain," says Lansens, who lives in Southern California. "In fact, a lot of my friends in California didn't know about it and had never been there."

She wanted to see it for herself, despite the fact that she suffers from vertigo and extreme motion sickness. So she fortified herself with a double dose of medication before she and her husband, TV director Milan Cheylov, rode the tram 8,000 feet up to Mountain Station.

When she first disembarked, it was akin to a "religious experience."

Yet minutes later she was in a panic, fearing she and her husband were irretrievably lost.

They had set out on a short hike, following an apparent pathway that soon became non-existent. When they tried to backtrack, the wilderness area deepened.

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trail might be there — and it isn't. There's no point of reference. It was October and we were very cold."

They were lost for only 15 minutes, but it seemed much longer. And yes, they were frightened — "neither of us showed much grace under pressure." Furthermore, they had reason to be fearful. "After all, people do get lost up there, and people do die."

There's a harrowing moment of truth in *The Mountain Story*, published by Knopf Canada, when its four embattled characters find themselves in a hostile canyon looking down on the lights of

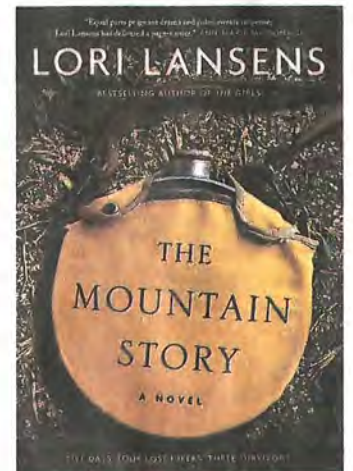
Palm Springs. The sight is both reassuring and terrifying — safety is so near and yet so far. There is no way they can get down there. And there is seemingly no alternate escape route from their growing nightmare.

Lansens experienced similar emotions on that first visit to San Jacinto. She also knew she now had the setting she needed for what *Library Journal* has called "a miraculous novel."

For Lansens, whose previous international best-sellers include *Rush Home Road* and *The Wife's Tale*, her characters always come

first. So, with this new novel, she had images of "three women and a broken young boy" before anything else.

The women represent three generations. Nola, the stoic and grounded grandmother, is still coping with the loss of her husband as she revisits the mountain they both loved. Bridget is her troubled daughter — desperately insecure and lonely. Vonn is the granddaughter still struggling to define herself. And then there is the story's first-person narrator — Wolf, a suicidal youth who is there to end his own life only to find himself drawn into



their orbit and a desperate five-day struggle for survival in a hostile wilderness.

Lansens currently lives in a remote area of the Santa Monica Mountains, and the character of Wolf emerged from her community's grief over a cluster of teenage suicides.

"One of the children was briefly our neighbour, and that hit close to home," Lansens remembers. She pauses, overcome by emotion. "I'm sorry, it's hard to talk about. I have children approaching high school age. ... My own life is woven into the fabric of everything thing I write."

"It was a very dark time that was somehow cathartic for me. I wanted to change the outcome, and that's really where the character of Wolf came from."

So Wolf and these three women became the basis for a novel about despair, conflict and redemption — but also one framed in the context of a throat-catching adventure.

She originally thought of placing her characters in her own home territory. "But I didn't think it believable that they could be lost for five days. I wanted more peril — the weather, the freezing temperatures, the animals. Also the metaphor — you can see where you want to be but you can't reach it."

Mount Jacinto answered her needs. And after that first journey to the top, there were many more. Matt Jordan, of the Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit, became her mentor in her researches, leading her to perilous places that "I wouldn't have been able to get to on my own."

She realized she was testing herself and confronting her own fears. "I asked Matt to leave me alone in the snow in the dark with only moonlight and the wind whistling through the pines."

"I knew he was there and watching me, and I still felt really frightened and alone," she says. "It was a very potent moment for me."