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# Lily King, *Euphoria*

COFFEE SIDE



Lily King's latest novel is the page-turner of the summer.

INTERVIEW BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

**N**ovelist and Yarmouth resident Lily King's fourth book, published in June by Atlantic Monthly Press, is a fictionalized account of a period in the life of a renowned anthropologist very much like Margaret Mead. *Euphoria* takes place in the New Guinea jungle in the 1930s. King takes liberties with actual events, which is where the dark suspense and magic lie. The *New York Times Book Review* declares it a "fiercely intelligent tale of competing egos and desires in a landscape of exotic menace."

As a published writer, King came out of the gate like a thoroughbred. Her first novel, *The Pleasing Hour* (1999), was a *New York Times* Notable Book that year and an alter-

nate for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Her second, *The English Teacher* (2006), made the *Publishers Weekly* Top Ten, was the *Chicago Tribune's* Best Book of the Year, and won the Maine Fiction Award. *Father of the Rain* (2010) followed, a *Publishers Weekly* Best Novel, a *New York Times* Editors Choice, and winner of the New England and Maine awards for fiction.

Lily King lives in Yarmouth with her husband, Tyler Clements, and two daughters.

**How did you first latch onto Margaret Mead?**

Years ago, while I was writing *Father of the Rain*, a friend brought me to Casco Bay Books on Middle Street, which isn't there anymore. They were having a sale, so I thought I should buy something, and I picked up Jane Howard's biography of Mead, for some reason. I got hooked, so I started researching her, even though I was still working on another book. I think I put

in about five years of research, and two-and-a-half to write it. I read Mead's own memoir—she actually wrote very little about the period covered [in *Euphoria*]. When Mead was married to her first husband, who was American—while she was also in a passionate relationship with the anthropologist Ruth Benedict—she met the Australian anthropologist I called Fen in the book on the ship returning from Samoa. She was not a monogamous person, even though she could be madly in love.

**You didn't use real names in the novel.**

It's a novel, with characters, based on the way I imagined things happened between Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson (Bankson in the novel) when she fell in love with him while she was married to Fen and doing field research with him in New Guinea. She wrote very little about it, but I believe her husband was possessive and abu-





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sive, and that there was nevertheless some shame involved about her affair with Bankson, who became her third husband. Margaret Mead was this tiny little person who could look so homely in some photographs and so ethereally beautiful in others. And man, could she get a man! Everyone fell in love with her.

**Was there really a tribe that kept its babies in covered baskets, and killed some of them, and allowed its children to be raped?**

Yes. The tribe names are fictional, but they're based on their real field notes.

**Have you been to New Guinea, or to a jungle?**

I've never been—I understand it's not a safe place to visit. But when I was about 33 I took a voyage on a tributary of the Amazon. Of course I didn't save any notes! But a little of the heat, humidity, and insects goes a long way. I tried not to overdo it in the book.

**How did you end up in Maine?**

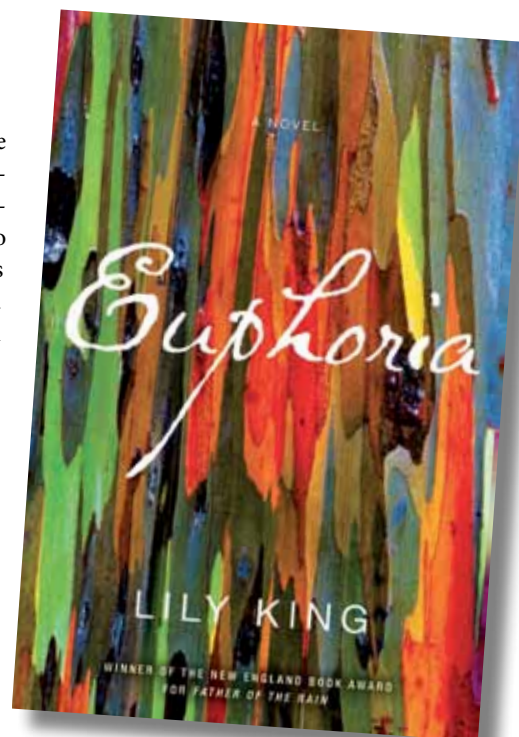
I first came to North Haven one summer when I was 22 or 23. I was just out of college, and I didn't have a plan. My mother married a man with a house there, so I visited and wound up living there for a year or so, working at the Pulpit Harbor Inn. It's not there anymore.

I'm from Massachusetts, but I went to college in the South (the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill); my mother's family is from the South. It was the best thing I could have done. I learned that everyone doesn't have the same lifestyle, the same culture. I spent two years in Paris as an *au pair*—it was wonderful.

I went to graduate school at Syracuse and got a degree in creative writing. Of course, the only thing you can do with it is teach. I applied everywhere, but no luck, nothing. Then, just weeks before the academic year was going to start, I was hired to be the high school English teacher at the American School in Valencia, Spain, a K through 12. It was great. I didn't know Spanish, but it was easier than learning French. I started working on my first novel there. Later I ended up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and got married.

**And you've been in Yarmouth for the past 12 years.**

After our second child was born, it was time to get out of Cambridge. And Maine was the place that had always felt the most like a



home I had to return to. It took 14 years, but I made it back.

I didn't know there was such a great group of writers in Maine. I couldn't live anywhere else now.

**It looks like you've got a busy book tour ahead.**

I've already been traveling since the minute the book came out. Here's the thing about book tours. They're really good, but writers are already on to their next book in their heads. You just want to sit down and write.

**And you write longhand? [King brings out one of the thick spiral notebooks she filled with tiny script in the course of writing *Euphoria*.]**

I do, I just do. I always have, the same recycled-paper notebooks from Staples. It's like superstition now! I write in these, and I keep notes to myself in the back. I make rough plot timelines before I've figured out how to write the scene.

**What's next?**

I've just sold the screen rights to *Euphoria*. To a director I really respect, Michael Apted [director of *Gorillas in the Mist*, a 1988 bio-pic starring Sigourney Weaver about primatologist Jane Fossey, filmed on jungle location]. It's complicated, because it'll be location shooting, but I think it could make an excellent movie. They're looking for a screenwriter now.

**Does it drive you nuts that you're a Maine writer and your last name is King?**

[Laughs.] Actually, it's kind of fun. And no, I'm no relation. ■

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