

# BOOK REVIEW

## SINK *or* SWIM

A motley cast of characters  
flirts with death  
in Alison Lurie's  
Key West comedy

### THE LAST RESORT

By Alison Lurie

Henry Holt; 321 pages; \$22

Reviewed by Sarah Coleman

**A**fter a 10-year absence from the literary scene, Alison Lurie is back with a comic novel that picks up almost seamlessly where her 1988 work, "The Truth About Lorin Jones," left off. In that novel, a pivotal scene occurs when the heroine is on a trip to Key West, drinking in a bar with a handsome stranger. He turns and toasts her with, "Here's to your stay in the last resort." "The last resort?" she asks. "That's what we call it," he says.

The phrase is, of course, a pun — Key West is both a resort community at the southernmost tip of the contiguous United States and a place people go when they're worn out with life and seeking something new. In "The Last Resort," an assortment of motley characters washes up in the island community and proves the truth behind its nickname — for many of them, Key West is where they will either sink or swim, metaphorically and in some cases literally.

The inspirational allure of travel is a familiar theme for Lurie. In her 1985 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "Foreign Affairs," two American academics travel to London and discover love among its limp sandwiches and wet streets. Unfortunately, although Lurie's gift for evocative description is as sharp as ever ("bougainvillea foamed over white stucco walls in Christmas-ribbon colors"), the large array of characters in "The Last Resort" diffuses its narrative energy and makes it seem

►LURIE: See Page 6



Illustration by RICO MENDEZ / The Chronicle

# LURIE

From Page 1

sketchy compared with her earlier works.

The main action of the novel swirls around Wilkie Walker, a world-famous nature writer who, at 70, has secretly become convinced that he is dying of colon cancer. Seeing him depressed and irritable, his younger wife, Jenny, suggests they spend the winter in Key West, where Wilkie can finish off "The Copper Beech," the book destined to become the crowning work of his career. Unbeknownst to Jenny, before they even get to Key West her husband has developed a plan to stage his own "accidental" death-by-drowning off the shores of the island.

Dying isn't as easy as he'd assumed, though, and upon arrival on Key West Wilkie is continually thwarted in his plan. A storm makes it impossible for him to go swimming one day; he's co-opted into a tourist excursion the next. On one occasion, an AIDS patient pre-empts the naturalist's suicide by rolling himself and his wheelchair off the edge of the pier in front of Wilkie. "If he died tonight, his death would be arbitrarily but inexorably linked with that of the man in the wheelchair," thinks the homophobic Wilkie. "Maybe Wilkie Walker knew the man in the wheelchair, the scandal-hounds would speculate. Maybe they had

once been intimate."

Meanwhile, Jenny is rescued from a jellyfish attack by Lee Weiss, the lesbian owner of an all-female boardinghouse. Lee subsequently develops a crush on Jenny, as does Gerry Grass, a poet who's wintering in the same compound as the Walkers. Complications ensue for Lee when her friend Jacko, the com-

the unlikely hero of "Foreign Affairs." Lennie Zimmern from "The War Between the Tates" also makes a brief appearance. This device of creating a web of continuity among novels is cute and provides a bonus for Lurie regulars — but it also makes "The Last Resort" feel a bit like a dish made up of leftovers.

Flitting like a hummingbird among mem-

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pond's gardener, finds out he's HIV-positive, and his mother and cousin Barbie descend on him from Oklahoma. Barbie, a character so insipid that one has to give Lurie credit for caring about her at all, is a dim-witted, overweight woman of 36. Married to a philandering Oklahoma congressman, she has come to Key West to decide whether to leave him. While there, she chases forlornly after Wilkie and becomes emotionally involved in the plight of the manatee — a creature as plump and placid as herself.

Many characters here will be recognizable to readers of Lurie's previous works. Lee appeared in "The Truth About Lorin Jones," and Barbie is the daughter of Chuck Mumpson,

members of her ensemble cast, Lurie creates a comedy of manners that has moments of great charm and some inspired scenes. (One of these, the kayak trip in which the innocent Barbie and the world-weary Wilkie first sight a manatee, shows Lurie at her comic best.) But there's less focus here than in her previous works — in particular, Wilkie's suicidal urge, which should form the dominant thread, gets lost among the loose meanderings of other, less compelling characters.

Fans of Lurie's will also find many of her trademark themes here. Jenny, an old-fashioned wife who has devoted her married life to being Wilkie's secretary, is a prime source of discussion among the novel's feminist charac-

ters. Gay rights, and the homophobia they inspire, are another theme; Lurie proves more sympathetic to her gay characters here than she did in "The Truth About Lorin Jones."

Even so, it seems surprising that Jenny, a contemporary woman of 46, should refer to homosexuals as "handicapped" and that everyone in the novel takes Jacko's HIV diagnosis as an immediate death sentence.

In addition to the morbid elements of Jacko's diagnosis and Wilkie's death wish, an arthritic elderly character named Molly Hopkins intermittently ponders death. One might expect all of this to make "The Last Resort" the darkest of Lurie's novels, but on the contrary, the story's farcical elements take the sting out of death and keep the action sprinting along.

Lurie's lightheartedness here can perhaps be ascribed to the passage of time — like her characters, she has aged a decade, and her feminist ire has mellowed into a gracious acceptance of life's ups and downs. In this slightly vapid context, characters can't help but get along, and a temporary reprieve from death looks as bright as the "Christmas ribbon" bougainvillea that tumbles everywhere in Key West. ■

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*Sarah Coleman is the fiction editor of [feminista.com](http://feminista.com) and contributes to Salon and other Bay Area publications.*