



Alison Lurie

September 3, 1926 – December 3, 2020

Alison Lurie, Whiton Professor of English, emerita, died in Ithaca on December 3, 2020, at the age of 94. Professor Lurie was among the most widely published and celebrated authors in the Department of Literatures in English, where she taught literature, folklore, humor, and writing for nearly four decades. Her many honors included Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundation grants, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Fiction, and a D. Lit. from Oxford University. She was also awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her 1984 novel *Foreign Affairs*, and France's *Prix Femina Étranger* in 1989 for *The Truth About Lorin Jones*.

Professor Lurie was born in Chicago, Illinois on September 3, 1926, and grew up in White Plains, New York. Her family history is summarized in an obituary published December 6 in the *Washington Post*: “Her father was a sociologist and a founder of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds. Her mother edited the book and magazine sections of the *Detroit Free Press* before her marriage. Her parents, both socialists, sent her to a progressive coed boarding school, the Cherry Lawn School in Darien, Connecticut, from which she graduated in 1943. She received a bachelor's degree four years later from Radcliffe College, the women's college that was sister school to Harvard.”

In the 1940s, Professor Lurie published her first stories and poems; in 1948 she married her first husband, Harvard Ph.D. and eventual Cornell Professor Jonathan Bishop, a literary critic, poet and author of books on philosophy and religion. While raising their three sons, Professor Lurie helped found an experimental theater arts group in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and eventually completed her novel *Love and Friendship*, which launched her career in fiction. She arrived at Cornell with Professor Bishop in 1961, and began her Cornell teaching career in 1969, where she designed courses in folklore and children's literature, subjects previously seen as outside the purview of the department. She was one of a group of women instructors who joined forces to fight for recognition and promotion at Cornell and was among the first women to be tenured by the Department of Literatures in English. Professor Lurie and Professor Bishop divorced in 1985.

In 1995, she married novelist Edward Hower, who survives her. Professor Lurie is also survived by her three sons—John Bishop of Nashua, New Hampshire, Jeremy Bishop of Blanco, Texas, and Joshua Bishop, of Sydney, Australia—as well as her sister, three nieces, two step-children, and three grandchildren.

Professor Lurie was best known inside and outside Cornell for her satirical novels, which combine mordant wit and sharp character observation with empathy and compassion. In these comedies of manners, artists, academics, and other small-town figures lose their way in life, upsetting their marriages and upending their careers. Her first novel set in central New York—a common setting for her work throughout her career—was *Imaginary Friends* (1969), which lampooned the sexual and spiritual mores of the 1960s via a small-town cult of UFO worshippers. Among the most locally celebrated of her books is *The War Between the Tates*, a 1974 novel set in Corinth, a fictionalized Ithaca, and its eponymous university. The book satirizes the vanities and foibles of professors and ‘townies’, and upon its publication elicited curiosity and consternation among Ithacans who believed they might have served as inspiration. Professor Lurie’s subsequent novel *Foreign Affairs* has, as its protagonists, an unmarried Corinth professor of children’s literature and her younger male colleague, who separately undergo romantic and intellectual misadventures in Great Britain. That book is one of the few comedies ever to have been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

In addition to her career as a novelist, Professor Lurie was a prolific essayist who published books on the subjects of clothing, houses, and children’s stories. *The Language of Clothes* (1981) explored the way women’s lives throughout history influenced their mode of dress, and how women’s clothes reinforced or exploded gender roles. *The Language of Houses* (2014) gave a similar treatment to architecture, showing the way our dwellings reflect and compel our lives. Professor Lurie’s other nonfiction titles collect and analyze ghost stories and stories for children, two subjects of her perennial fascination that strongly influenced her fiction writing. Her final book, 2019’s *Words and Worlds: From Autobiographies to Zippers*, collected 21 essays ranging in subject from theater and art to fashion and, in one piece, the nature of literary criticism.

Students, Cornell faculty, and local writers remember Professor Lurie as wise, witty, and supportive, an exemplary teacher and colleague, and an excellent conversationalist whose enthusiastic presence was a staple of literary events in Ithaca. An obituary in the *Ithaca Journal* elaborated: “Alison was known for her warmth, sensitivity, and cheerfulness, both in her writing and in her personal relationships. She loved folk music and Mozart and enjoyed country-western concerts at upstate county fairs.”

Many of Professor Lurie’s students have gone on to enjoy their own success as writers, including Melissa Bank, Juno Diaz, Lorrie Moore, Micah Perks, and Julie Schumacher. Alison Lurie is remembered fondly and much missed both at Cornell and around the world.

Written by Stephanie Vaughn and J. Robert Lennon