



*small acts of sex and electricity* by Lise Haines

Fiction Hardcover

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**SUMMARY: *small acts of sex and electricity***

In two women's lives a thin line exists between friendship and rivalry. Jane has almost everything—a husband, two daughters, wealth, and a thriving career. Mattie has only freedom.

Jane has just inherited her grandmother's estate on Miramar Beach, a paradise of plenty afloat on Southern California's white-blue coast. Yet in the middle of the night she takes off, geographically and emotionally, for places unknown. And in doing so she challenges her reluctant friend to a dangerous game of trading places.

Mattie is left behind with her friend's husband Mike, with whom she has long been connected to by a palpable current of sexual electricity. And even Jane's teenage daughter Livvy seems to crave her attention. Yet she feels compelled to look back into the past to understand why her friend from childhood would do what, on the surface, would appear to be a childish thing.

In the friendship's intriguing history, the women are as often two minds pitted against each other as two friends who deeply understand each other. And their ties to others—Mike, the children, and Jane's grandmother Frannie—define the tug of war that unbalances their own relationship.

In a technique both spare and profound, Lise Haines writes of sex and friendship as territories widely chartered but never conquered. *small acts of sex and electricity* projects intriguing questions onto a canvass of psychologically riveting fiction.

## **About the Author**

When Frank Sinatra said it was “very good year,” he could have been talking about 2006 for Lise Haines. Not only is her second novel, *small acts of sex and electricity*, being published, but in the fall she will begin teaching at Harvard as a prestigious Brigg-Copeland Lecturer.

Haines grew up on Chicago’s North Shore, where she first felt the urge to write. “I was preoccupied with writing before I knew how to hold a pencil and make a complete sentence on the page, she says. “As a young child, I made up songs and poems all the time. Mostly, I kept these to myself. When I was about 5 years old and our family had a housekeeper, I used to tell her stories.

Apparently, the storytelling became more sophisticated. Her first novel was the critically-acclaimed *In my Sister’s Country* (Blue Hen/Penguin Putnam). And she holds a MFA in creative writing from Bennington.

Haines has a reputation for handling difficult topics with frankness. However, that may be overshadowed by her reputation for creating superb fiction.

## **Questions and Answers with Lise Haines:**

### **Does your book mirror any of your experiences growing up?**

I enjoyed playing dress up as a child. My mother loved clothes so there was a good deal to enjoy in her closet. The similarities in the book and my life have to do with the sense of place, of living in Santa Barbara for 25 years.

### **How did your experience at Bennington College influence your writing?**

In every possible way. I worked with some of the best writers working in America today. I had an amazing writing community of peers I still keep in touch with.

### **Are you working on another book? If so, please describe it.**

I’m working on another novel. But I’m a superstitious writer, so I’m holding back talking about it.

### **How long did it take for you to write *small acts of sex and electricity*?**

I did two major revisions. So the whole thing, from beginning to end, was 5 years. Five years threaded around many large events in my personal life, working full-time and being a parent.

### **Why did you write about an embattled friendship between two women?**

I didn't set out to write an embattled relationship. The first thing I wrote was the scene on the beach, when Mattie meets Jane. Mattie was fascinated by Jane. I was intrigued by both of them and wanted to understand how their friendship would develop. The strain between them came out of events and personalities that revealed themselves as the book progressed. All of this to say that I don't work with an outline or even a concept in mind.

**Is writing about sexuality harder or easier than writing about others subjects?**

Sex is simply part of my character's lives. I hope I write about it as naturally as I write about folding laundry or changing a flat. And I hope I make laundry folding and tire changing almost as compelling as sex.

**How did you develop your distinctive style?**

I don't know that it's a conscious process. And I'm sure I've been influenced by a large number of sources--literary, cultural, the teachers I've worked with and so forth. I spent many years in poetry and many years writing novels, working alone, listening to the voices of my narrators. The endless rewrites. It's so hard to nail down.

**Why do you use Miramar Beach as a setting? What brought it to your attention?**

Miramar Beach is one of my favorite walks and it's a place of envy. I walked that beach for 25 years, thinking about what it would be like to live in one of those houses. I try to convey the idea of being in the moment and looking back at the moment simultaneously. Stuart Dybek writes about this in a story titled *Pet Milk*. His narrator says, "It was the first time I'd ever had the feeling of missing someone I was still with." I didn't realize when I began SASE that I'd be leaving Santa Barbara a year later. Once I moved, the job was about reconstructing memory.

Tim O'Brien, Lorrie Moore, Amy Hempel, Rick Moody, Lily Tuck, I've just read Coetzee's *Disgrace*--a hard book to read emotionally, worth every bit of its pain. I'm reading *Middlesex* right now (*Eugenides*). I love Jane Austen, some of the Russians, Jamaica Kincaid, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, Marquez, Borges, Charles Baxter, Alice Munro, Jayne Anne Phillips, Ishiguro, John Fante, John Fowles, Virginia Woolf, Louise Erdrich, Toni Morrison. So many....

**READERS' GROUP QUESTIONS**

1. How would you describe the Lise Haines' writing style? How is her technique different from those of other writers?
2. Why do you think Mattie remains in love with Mike for so long and emotionally limits her relationships with other men?
3. Why does Chapter Four end with the description of the circus knife-throwing act? It is a symbolic commentary on Jane's circumstances? on her marriage? on marriage generally?
4. How is the Miramar setting important to the story? How does it support the novel's plot and themes?
5. Is Mattie's relationship with Frannie as special she thinks it is? If so or if not, what things indicate this?
6. What are the feelings and circumstances that fuel Jane's departure?
7. Why do you think Jane seems unhappy with her circumstances despite having a life that is ostensibly more complete than Mattie's?
8. What do you think is really going on between Mike and Mattie? Why have they remained attracted to each other over the years?
9. How would you describe the relationship between Mattie and Jane? And why has it lasted so long despite its problems?
10. Do you think Mattie and Jane are destined to have a seesaw friendship for the rest of their lives? Or at the book's end, do you think that the bond between Mattie and Jane has ended with Mattie's rejection of Mike?
11. Why is Livvy drawn to Mattie? And why do you think Mattie smokes pot with Livvy and Taylor? And later on why does she decide to buy pot from Taylor?
12. Despite Mattie's last rejection, does there seem to be a possibility that she and Mike will get together? Why or why not? Why would you think that she feels being with Mike would mean permanent "triangulation?"

### **RECOMMENDED READING**

*In My Sister's Country* by Lise Haines

*158-Pound Marriage* by John Irving

*While I was Gone* by Sue Miller

*The Year of Pleasures* by Elizabeth Berg

*A Ship Made of Paper* by Scott Spencer

*The Robber Bride* by Margaret Atwood

*Love* by Toni Morrison