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WORKING ON THEIR NIGHT MOVES



Frederick's Dish. Pulitzer winner Elizabeth Strout penned the accompanying story.

Painter Linden Frederick collaborates with a murderer's row of great authors for a one-of-a-kind cross-genre exhibit.

By Frances Killea

Outside, on New York City's Park Avenue, rush hour was in full swing. Financiers in bespoke suits hurried past skyward-gazing tourists, while cyclists wove through gridlocked taxicabs and delivery trucks. But inside Forum Gallery, a contemporary art space on the ground floor of a Midtown high-rise, a series of works by Belfast-based painter Linden Frederick evoked tranquil scenes of nightfall in quieter corners of America — Maine prominently among them.

Frederick's exhibition, *Night Stories*, comprises 15 paintings of seemingly mundane locations — corner stores, empty lots, barren roadsides — all cast in the shadowy throes of dusk. The show opened in New York in May. This month, it moves to Rockland's Center for Maine Contemporary Art, where director Suzette McAvoy is a longtime champion of Frederick's. She remembers first encountering his work at a local gallery some 20 years ago, when she was a curator at the Farnsworth Art Museum.

"I was so taken with his work," she recalls. "We bought a painting for the museum right out of that show." His latest series adds a new layer to his work: each *Night Stories* painting inspired a short story by a prominent author, and those stories are incorporated into the exhibit.

At Forum Gallery, wall-mounted tablets allowed guests to read the stories while examining the corresponding paintings — although most attendees went analog, toting copies of the tie-in *Night Stories* anthology, put out by boutique art-book publisher Glitterati Incorporated and for sale during the exhibition. Visitors to the CMCA can expect a similar setup, with loaner e-readers pre-loaded with the full stories and wall plaques offering excerpts. McAvoy can't recall another time she's hosted a show based on such an unusual concept.

Frederick developed his distinctive penchant for yawning skies and twilight scenery in the late '70s during a stint in upstate New York, where he grew up. "I remember driving home — we were renovating a house, and it was so rough inside," he says. "I saw lights on in other people's houses, all so finished and nice. It gave me a certain feel: 'What's it like to have a nice, finished house? Maybe I'll paint that and see what that feels like.' I get a certain mood when I see an image like this." After that, night scenes became his forte. Almost 30 years ago, he moved to Maine, where he's found plenty more inspiration for his style.



*Frederick's painting *Liquor* became the basis for a short story by friend and Oscar-nominated screenwriter Lawrence Kasdan. Linden Frederick*

Night Stories began as a casual conversation with his wife, Heather, about how writers seemed to gravitate to his paintings, and the conversation evolved into an idea to reverse the usual author–illustrator relationship, inviting authors to use Frederick's art as the inspiration for their work. The concept isn't totally new — in 2016, for instance, an all-star list of authors contributed to the short-story anthology *In Sunlight or in Shadow*, inspired by Edward Hopper paintings. To help recruit authors to the project, Frederick tapped friend and Portland resident Richard Russo, the Pulitzer-winning author of *Empire Falls*. Among the final roster of 15 writers (many of them Mainers) are PEN/Faulkner winner Ann Patchett (Bel Canto), perennial bestseller Tess Gerritsen (the *Rizzoli & Isles* series), Pulitzer winner Elizabeth Strout (*Olive Kitteridge*), Pulitzer winner Anthony Doerr (*All the Light We Cannot See*), and National Book Award winner Louise Erdrich (*The Round House*), as well as Russo himself.

One of the first to sign on was Mainer Lois Lowry, who won Newbery awards for both *Number the Stars* and *The Giver*. “Most

often, I write something, and if it's going to be illustrated, that happens afterwards," Lowry says. "This is a complete reversal, and I found it very intriguing and exhilarating." Frederick painted miniature studies of scenes and sent them out for the writers to choose from. The one Lowry picked, titled *50 Percent*, depicts bright formal gowns on pale mannequins inside a picture window. The image grabbed her, although the scene's stillness and absence of human presence made it challenging to develop her story.

"It took me a long time to come up with," Lowry recalls. "I sat that picture on my desk so I looked at it every day as I was working on other things." The story she finally began to imagine involves a group of older men tempted by a chance to perform a mischievous and destructive prank.

"All of us who write are always looking for triggers," Lowry says. "Sometimes it will be something you read or something you observe, an interaction between two strangers. Those things are out there all the time, and a writer has a heightened sense of responding to them. But this was unique . . . with that mysterious quality that Linden's paintings have. I think all of his paintings are set at a time when you feel something has either just happened or is about to happen."

"To me, the real magic quality of Linden's work is that sense of the human presence without actually picturing people there," says CMCA director McAvoy. "You get that glow, and you get a sense of the people inside the houses, their presence and activity by all the different kinds of light."

While Lowry and the other authors set about writing, Frederick started painting the scenes full-scale, each on a 36-inch-by-36-inch canvas. He works in a studio behind his Belfast home. It's a bright-yellow, one-room cottage with a high ceiling, a loft, and a large window that lets light stream onto his easels. Many of the scenes come from nearby places he can duck out to study, but he often obscures reality, or at least toys with it just enough to give his work an "Anyplace, USA" feel.

Some scenes in *Night Stories* will be easily recognizable to Mainers. Downtown Belfast's Alexia's Pizza, for instance, is the subject of *Takeout* (and an accompanying story by Gerritsen). But IDing the locales isn't always so easy. "Sometimes I think I recognize a location, and then he says it's not really there," McAvoy says. "That's the other thing about Linden's work: he creates these scenes we're all so familiar with that we think we know them, even when they don't exist."

“This is a Portland image, based on a Portland place,” Frederick says, sitting in his studio, pointing to a painting



*“I find it really interesting how visual art can trigger the written word,” Frederick says.
Photograph by Michael D. Wilson*

called *Mansard*. Even so, Frederick invented the tableau in the window of the first-floor building, which sits beneath the glowing window of an upstairs apartment. In this case — and a few others — an author’s reaction to the original image created a sort of feedback loop, inspiring Frederick to tweak the final painting. “I hadn’t decided what was going to be inside,” he says, until Mainer and Kirkus award winner Lily King (*Euphoria*) came up with her story, about the folks in that upstairs apartment. “She made a reference to this old beauty parlor downstairs,” Frederick says. “So I said, ‘Perfect!’ ”

Another painting, *Offramp*, depicts the turn-off from the bridge over the Passagassawakeag River in Belfast. But for Edgar-winning author Dennis Lehane (*Live by Night*), who spun a story about a federal marshal given the wrong address for an arrest, the setting instead became Ohio. Frederick chose *Offramp* for the book’s cover, and it’s a fitting example of his broader aim: for his scenes to feel universal, familiar, ubiquitous. He hopes it will resonate with

anyone who's ever exited a highway at dusk, heading toward a few lighted windows in an otherwise darkening stand of trees.

Night Stories shows at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (21 Winter St., Rockland; 207-701-5005) from August 19 through November 5. The book (*Glitterati*; hardcover, 132 pages, \$45) is available at the CMCA gift shop (and online beginning October 7). Other participating authors are National Book Award finalists Andre Dubus III (*House of Sand and Fog*) and Joshua Ferris (*Then We Came to the End*), Edgar Award winner Dennis Lehane (*Live by Night*), New York Times bestseller Luanne Rice (*Crazy in Love*), Oscar winner Ted Tally (*The Silence of the Lambs*), and PEN USA winner Daniel Woodrell (*Tomato Red*).