

## NY CULTURE

# Rivka Galchen, Author of 'American Innovations,' on Writing and Uncertainty

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Rivka Galchen walks with her daughter, Georgie, to McNally Jackson Books for a reading from her latest book, 'American Innovations.' *Andrew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal*

Rivka Galchen likes to write what she doesn't know.

In her fiction, including the short stories in her book "American Innovations," the 38-year-old author ventures out in search of uncertainty and surprise.

"I like running up against the boundary of understanding," Ms. Galchen said. "There's honesty in getting really close to something but admitting that it's actually fading away. You realize it's pixilated. When you get close, the resolution only goes so far."

Such themes have been on her mind even before she became a writer. She majored in English in college but went on to earn a medical degree from Mount Sinai, focusing on psychiatry.

"Medicine is sort of a para-science," Ms. Galchen said. Doctors, she added, "have to keep refining their rubrics and their taxonomies."

The mysteries of psychiatry helped her writing, which she turned back to after medical school. In "American Innovations," which was published in May in the wake of her 2008 debut novel "Atmospheric Disturbances," she delves into matters of perception, miscommunication, and even the mind-bending effects of time travel.

"I'm never planning an outfit in advance," said Ms. Galchen. "I don't like to have a grocery list when I go to the supermarket. When I try to cook to a recipe, it doesn't go very well."



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Ms. Galchen at McNally Jackson with the New Yorker's Willing Davidson. 'What she does really well is to dramatize the way we're always searching for hidden explanations and are never really able to find them,' Mr. Davidson says. *Andrew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal*

Her flights of fancy, however, are highly structured, friends and collaborators say.

"She's a master of the non-non sequitur," said Karen Russell, a fellow writer who in June interviewed Ms. Galchen as part of the New York Public Library's "Live From the NYPL" series. "She'll tack between Wittgenstein and Walter Benjamin and just as easily make a joke about rabbits and marshmallows. With a mind like Rivka's, you just hear the refrigerator hum of this vast intelligence all the time."

"I think it's about constant self-interrogation," said Willing Davidson, a senior editor at the New Yorker who worked with Ms. Galchen on many of the stories in her latest book. "What she does really well is to dramatize the way we're always searching for hidden explanations and are never really able to find them."

Ms. Galchen said she is happy to be back on such a search, however futile, with a new book to push and a writing routine that is returning back to normal after giving birth to her daughter in 2013. When not teaching at Columbia University, she works out of her home on West 38th Street or at a coffee shop down the street, but for the past month has been busy promoting "American Innovations."

"I was always afraid of short stories," she told an audience at the "Live From the NYPL" event, "but all the things that are tight and claustrophobic about short stories now seem appealing." Among her early childhood influences as a writer, she cited words in a Subaru car manual and ingredient lists on packages of food.

Back at her favored coffee shop, Ms. Galchen said matters of the mind are nothing if not surprising.

"As a beginning writer, you're really intent on, like, the brand of cigarette a person is smoking, or whether the waffles are whole-wheat, and you think you should know the resonances of all the details," she said. "But I think you're smarter when you go past your knowledge of associations and drop the details for something deeper that you're not really aware of. Then you can write past your own weakness."

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