

# A Conversation with Lisa Lutz and David Hayward Authors of **HEADS YOU LOSE**

**1. You're the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Spellman comic crime novels. Why on earth would you ask your former boyfriend – a lightly published poet, no less – to collaborate with you on your new mystery novel?**

Lisa: I've asked myself that question every day for the past year. Still no answer.

**2. How did the last project you worked on with Lisa end?**

David: I've provided Lisa with menial editorial help on and off since her screenwriting days, but we've never really collaborated on anything. As I'm sure she'll tell you, this was a different ballgame.

**3. What were the ground rules you set for collaborating? And was David the first writer you asked to collaborate with you?**

Lisa: The basic rules for the collaboration were that I would write the odd-numbered chapters and Dave would write the even ones. I agreed to a fifty-fifty split with the understanding that if we had any extreme "artistic" differences, I'd win the coin toss (without a coin toss). Dave definitely wanted the final chapter, but I vetoed that idea fairly early on.

**4. Give us a brief synopsis of the story, if you will. What's the crime that sets it in motion?**

David: Outside tiny Mercer, California, a headless body shows up on the property of Paul and Lacey Hansen, orphaned siblings in their twenties. They don't call the cops because they don't want to call attention to the pot they're growing. Instead, they move the body to a new location, hoping it'll be quickly discovered. Two nights later it shows up again in their driveway. They soon discover that the victim is closely tied to their past. Mayhem ensues.

Lisa: I do not disagree with Dave's synopsis.

**5. Did you initially think of your fictional protagonists, Lacey and Paul, as surrogates for you and David? Or did they just assume those roles as you wrote? Also, it's interesting**

**that you made them siblings rather than romantic partners or spouses. Should we read a lot of significance into that?**

Lisa: Dave and I have a very sibling-like relationship, so feel free to read into it. I definitely think we used the characters as our authors' voices on occasion, but I don't think that Lacey and Paul as characters resemble me and Dave as people.

**6. You tended to emphasize character development, while Lisa put more stress on plot development. How did that difference in approach help shape the novel?**

David: We wanted the book to feel like it was always in danger of going off the rails. Once Lisa complained about my reluctance to move the plot forward, I took it to extremes. Having said that, it does bear a striking resemblance to my genuine defects as a fiction writer.

**7. Although you had a rule that one writer couldn't overturn any plot developments established by the other, it would seem that both of you interpreted that rule pretty loosely. Lisa, what was your biggest complaint about David in that regard? And David, what was your biggest beef?**

Lisa: Dave's complete disinterest in solving the murder was my primary complaint. And the TV show references got under my skin. It took me a little while to realize that they were fake.

David: It would have been great to see Lisa employ some intermediate-level conflict resolution tools before reaching for the ax. Writing four nonviolent crime novels in four years can apparently leave a person with some serious pent-up aggression. I had to make some unpleasant compromises just to keep Irving the cat alive.

**8. Who came up with the idea of including the notes you wrote to one another at the end of each chapter?**

Lisa: The novel's premise and the way it was structured were my idea. I brought the idea to Dave because I knew he was the one person who could offer the perfect counterbalance.

**9. Since you're the more academically oriented member of the team, was it you who came up with the idea of commenting on each other's work in footnotes?**

David: Nope. Lisa's always had thing for footnotes, I think stemming from her love of *Infinite Jest*. They're a big part of her Spellman books. In fact, she has an email subfolder called "Footnote Maniacs" for fans who complain about them.

**10. Why did you call David "Dr. Thesaurus"?**

Lisa: He uses a lot of big words. Sometimes during ordinary conversations I have to consult a dictionary. When's the last time you saw "asperous" in a crime novel?

**11. Why did you object to Lisa killing off so many characters?**

David: Lisa was doing most of the driving, plot-wise, so I felt like they were pretty much all I had.

**12. You both used this book to needle some of your coauthor's sore points – Lisa's lack of a college degree and David's slim publishing history, for example. What else? Are there any digs that either of you regret? Or wish you'd included?**

David: Our relationship has been heavily insult-oriented for a long time. I'm pretty sure that's why Lisa conceived Paul and Lacey as siblings rather than friends or a romantic couple.

Lisa: Dave and I are actually far more comfortable with our insult-laden friendship than most observers. I have no regrets for digs included. As for digs excluded, we have the rest of our lives.

**13. How did you come up with the title to this novel?**

David: We were calling it *What Now?* for a while, but I always felt like there was some obvious, much better title just out of reach—like a name you can't quite remember. It came to me as I was re-reading something about the coin toss. I think I literally hit myself in the forehead and said "of course."

Lisa: Dave's good with titles in general.

**14. You wrote in one of your notes, "I used to think writing half a book would be easier than a whole one." Do you still feel that way?**

Lisa: I think I said that I used to think that, but I was dead wrong. Writing half a book is way harder.

**15. Did you do any special research for this book? How familiar are you with the part of rural northern California where it's set – an area well known for its pot-growing?**

David: I live in a little town in rural Northern California, but it's very far from Mercer, both geographically and culturally. I initially wanted us to visit the Mt. Shasta area to get a feel for the setting, but Lisa nixed that idea. I think she intuited that part of the conflict between the two authors would come from the fact that they're each creating a vision of Mercer pretty much from scratch. Either that or she didn't want to spend four hours in a car with me.

Lisa: Most of the details of the town were Dave's. If any research was done, Dave did it, especially all the pot-growing stuff. I'm a deeply lazy person and avoid research whenever possible and was happy to defer to Dave. He recently referred to himself as my fiction butler. I think that's appropriate.

David: What I actually said was that she *thinks* I'm her fiction butler.

**16. Are you pleased with the way the novel turned out? Does it have a synergy that it wouldn't have had if either of you had done it alone?**

David: Yes. I literally can't imagine having written it alone—the book is all about how we respond to each other. The best parts of it are the ones that neither of us could have anticipated independently.

Lisa: I am very pleased with the book. It really was an experiment. At the very beginning, we didn't even know whether we'd finish it.

**17. What were the biggest surprises for each of you during the writing process?**

David: When I sent Lisa my first chapter, I was pretty sure she'd be blown away by it. Let's just say she was not.

Lisa: Dave's version of Brandy Chester. It was the greatest blindside.

**18. How has your personal relationship changed as a result of writing this book together?**

David: It's stronger than ever. We have new, matching battle scars.

Lisa: If you spend close to a year insulting a person for sport, you're likely to learn where to draw the line. I think we both have a good sense of the other's breaking point by now.

**19. What are your views on the importance of Irving the cat as a character?**

David: This goes without saying, but he's the heart and soul of *Heads You Lose*.

Lisa: That's complete nonsense and Dave knows it.

**20. What did you learn about the creative process itself from doing this book together?**

David: Control is overrated. Never being able to orchestrate everything the way you think you want it turns out to be great practice for writing in general, not just collaborative writing.

Lisa: Control is key.

**21. Will you collaborate again? Will we see the return of Paul and Lacey?**

David: Once Lisa has responded to my short list of reasonable demands, we'll let you know.

Lisa: I have a longer list. So, for now, I can't comment.