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## Urban Gardner: A Conversation With Maira Kalman, an Author and Illustrator

### Ralph Gardner Jr. and Maira Kalman Talk About All the Neat Stuff in Her Greenwich Village Home

By RALPH GARDNER JR.



Maira Kalman and I were to take a walk through a neighborhood of her choosing and she'd help me hone my observational street skills. At least, that was my plan. Ms. Kalman, the author, illustrator and social anthropologist of works such as *The Principles of Uncertainty*, displays an unerring eye for the pithy detail—whether it's the understated nobility of a sausage-and-eggs breakfast or the “odd yet endearing museum guard” in Proust's room in Paris.

Her latest book, with Daniel Handler, is *Girls Standing on Lawns*, which is pretty much as the title suggests. The book's artwork is on view at the Julie Saul Gallery through June

14. Ms. Kalman is also the author of 18 children's books, as well as an illustrated version of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and the creator, with Rick Meyerowitz, of that humorous post-9/11 *New Yorkistan* cover for the *New Yorker*.

Things didn't go exactly as planned when we got together. For starters, Ms. Kalman claims not to see things much differently than anybody else. “I'm a good observer of what I'm observing,” she explained. She added something about “how blind I am to so much going on.”

“You're choosing,” she said. “What I'm looking at, I'm looking at intently.”

Perhaps the difference is her intensity, the license she allows herself to go pretty much wherever her curiosity takes her. This summer, she and a friend are traveling the Lewis and Clark Trail.

Then, we got distracted by all the neat stuff in the artist's Greenwich Village apartment. Toscanini's pants, for instance.

They're hanging in the living room like a work of art, a religious relic or at least a conversation starter. “I say I won Toscanini's pants at auction,” she explained. “It's his jacket, too. He wore these pants, they said, to conduct the first performance of the Palestine Philharmonic.”

The pants are important, setting aside for a moment the comic potential of pants, because Ms. Kalman's family moved to Tel Aviv from Belarus in 1932. “I imagine Toscanini would have met my mother,” who according to her daughter was a beauty, “and be smitten by her.”

The coincidences don't end there. The family moved to the U.S. in 1954, when Ms. Kalman was 4. "Toscanini came to America and moved to Riverdale," she explained. "We came to America and moved to Riverdale. I went to the High School for Music and Art, now La Guardia."

I was interested in the more literal aspects of the pants. For example, how much did Ms. Kalman pay for them? "There was only one person bidding against me," she stated in a tone of mild disbelief, as if expecting Toscanini's pants to have provoked a bidding war. "Eight-hundred bucks."

And had she ever worn them (even though she's rather short and the pants looked pretty long)? "I've only worn them twice," she said. "I'm happy to say they're big on me." They even have the name Toscanini written on the lining, though who knows if by the maestro himself.

That passion for storytelling—"I was sure I was going to be a writer from the time I was 8 and read *Pippi Longstocking*," she said—informs her apartment's décor.

The maestro's garments are only part of the fun. There's a large black-and-white, somewhat phallic photograph of a homemade rocket on an upstate neighbor's lawn. It seems a companion to an oil funnel on a nearby shelf; a collection of miniature Vitra furniture; and Shriners hats with rhinestones spelling "Lulu."

"Lulu is my daughter's name," Ms. Kalman explained, as well as the location, apparently, of a Pennsylvania Shriners temple.

For the record, Lulu's middle name is Bodoni. "That was Tibor's favorite typeface," Ms. Kalman said. She was referring to her late husband, Tibor Kalman, a noted graphic designer.

On the way out, we stopped by Ms. Kalman's studio, on a lower floor in her apartment building. A map of the U.S. made by her mother at her daughter's behest decorated one of the walls. It might have alarmed anybody except Maira Kalman. Nevada, Texas and California stood side by side, but at the top of the country, where Washington, Montana and Idaho are typically located.

Alaska, New Hampshire and South Dakota were all on the West Coast. "Sorry," her mother scribbled when she completed the assignment, "the rest unknown. Thank you."

"We never had to know anything," Ms. Kalman stated with affection. "And we never had to discuss anything. It was more odd stories. The point was she couldn't care less."



Toscanini's pants and jacket hang in the living room.

The artist's own process seems a good deal more rigorous. She carries a camera and sketchbook to document her daily encounters. One of them was with a young woman standing in front of Strand Book Store wearing an eye-popping pink coat over a red dress. "The shoes are cracked," Ms. Kalman said with excitement of the woman's saddle shoes, as her subject entered the shop while speaking on her cellphone. "She looks like something is wrong. She's coming back out."

Ms. Kalman, trying but failing to appear nonchalant, readied her camera. The woman,

immersed in her conversation, hardly noticed. "It's better to ask forgiveness than permission," Ms. Kalman explained.