



great ESCAPE

LIKE A *good book*,

WRITER LAURA CHESTER'S RURAL RETREAT

ASSERTS HER LIFE STORY *and*

offers quiet reflection

at the SAME TIME

Written by ROBIN CATALANO *Photography by* JANE FELDMAN

A tall, almost imposing figure, Laura Chester greets guests with a firm handshake, a strong voice, and a no-nonsense approach to tackling questions. Despite her thirty-plus years as a novelist, poet, and prose writer; her long-held, deep connection to the spirit of the horse; and her talk of personal epiphanies coming to her in dreams, Chester is all substance. She is the rare artist who is both creative and highly practical, prone to mulling over the meaning of dreams and remaining grounded, an adventurous soul who thrives on habit and who likes nothing better than to curl up on her porch with a cup of espresso and a good book.

It follows, then, that Chester's home in Alford, Massachusetts, mirrors the artist herself. Set on twenty acres high on a hillside and up a narrow, tree-canopied dirt road, the approximately 2,500-square-foot gray contemporary possesses the same blend of earthiness and imaginative flourish that characterizes Chester and her work. "I like things to be beautiful," she says. "I think a home needs to be like a three-dimensional piece of art. I'm always rearranging things to be very appealing on the visual level, and comfortable."

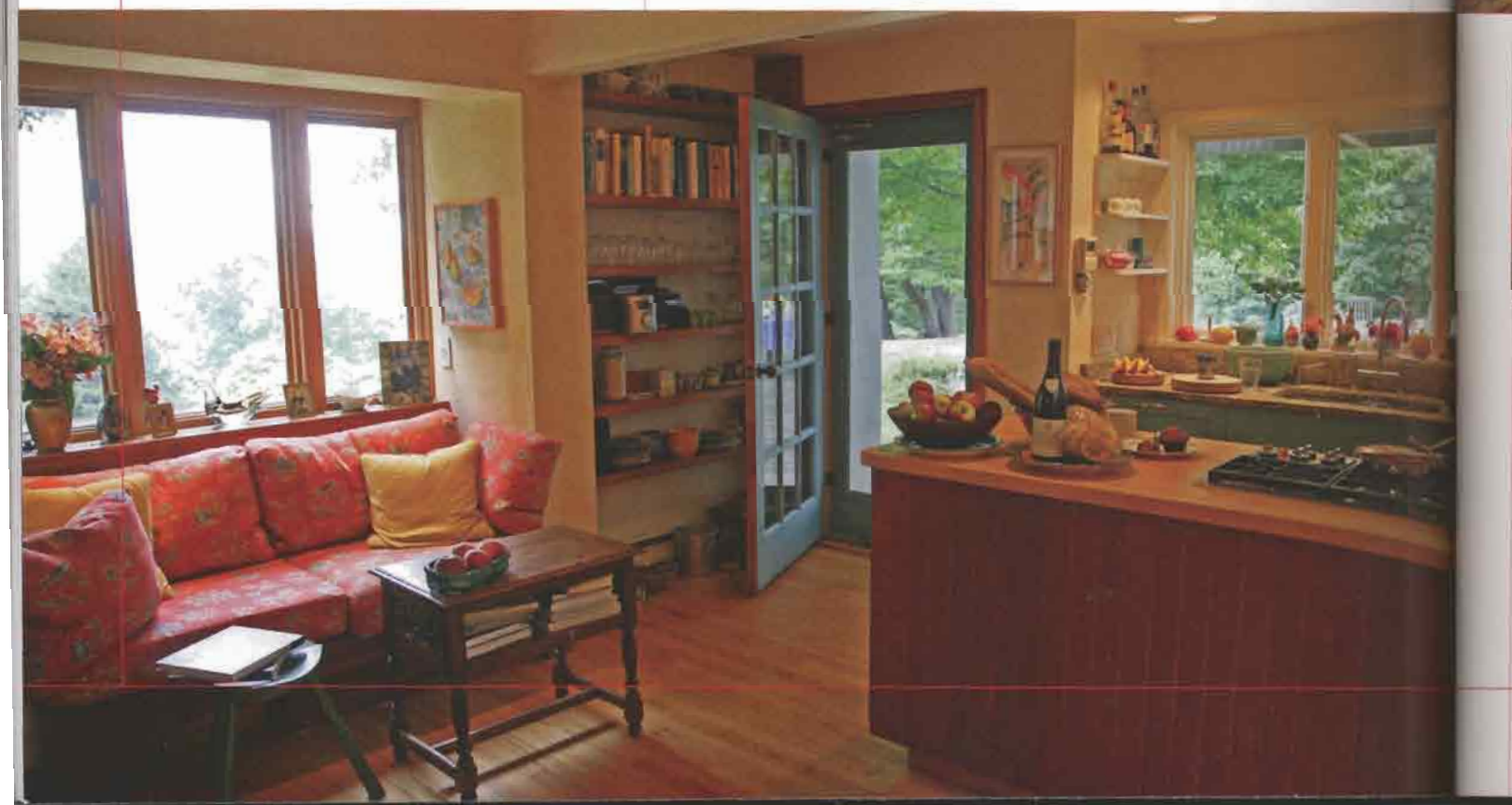
Chester's artistic and aesthetic senses weren't always so well developed. Growing up in Wisconsin with a large, extended, horse-loving family, Chester recognized writing as "a very early calling." She recalls a family road trip in Ireland when she was just ten years old, on which she made her first foray into narrative. "We were driving, and my father said we were lost and would never get back," she says. "In the back of my diary, I very dramatically wrote, *The valley of no return*. That was a pivotal moment for me."

Almost a decade later, she attended Skidmore College and then the University of New Mexico in the hopes of becoming a teacher, but soon realized it was "too exhausting" and returned to writing and editing. She published her first chapbook at the ripe age of twenty-one, and has since written or edited more than twenty anthologies, short story collections, prose poetry collections, novels, and even a children's book—all sold to publishers without the help of an agent. The list includes the well-reviewed novel *Kingdom Come* and *Holy Personal*, which profiles the spiritual sanctuaries of such disparate people as an Hispanic statue carver and a New Orleans voodoo priestess and gave Chester the opportunity to express her innate sense of personal spaces.

Another major achievement came in the form of her acclaimed 1987 nonfiction book, *Lupus Novice*, born out of her struggle with lupus erythematosus, a debilitating autoimmune disease that she successfully treated through a combination of Western and homeopathic medicine, as well as an extensive self-discovery process. "It made me more of a spiritual person," she recounts. "When you're completely frozen and feel so isolated, you just become more aware of the spiritual world, I wanted to find some balance between the psychological, spiritual, and physical." After twenty years, the book is still in print, and Chester, who hasn't relapsed, describes herself as "extremely happy with life."

When it comes to her literary contributions, Chester is less inclined to effusive-ness. Fellow author Summer Brenner, who first met Chester when they were both in their twenties, fills in the blanks: "Laura has an extreme, almost musical relationship with language. But she employs that in very quirky, textural ways. Over the years, her writing has become deeply—and somewhat darkly—personal. She's been willing to explore the underside of family life and domestic life." When asked about Chester's impact on the modern literary landscape, Brenner states, "I think that through her anthologies and her own writing, Laura has made a tremendous contribution to the life of women—both as mothers and as sexual and domestic partners. I think this will be very valuable to young people someday."

More than any single piece of writing, Chester is proudest of her decision to stick to her guns. "I've really followed my nose," she says. "I've been told that it would be better to just be a poet or just be a novelist, but it's sort of like walk, trot,





GLOBAL CHIC: Laura Chester's decorating style reflects her love of the American Southwest, accented with treasures, keepsakes, and artwork from around the world. Cello, inside the screen door, and Bali, outside on the step, (top right) are Chester's apricot standard poodles.



and canter. Why should I always be walking or always be trotting when I have these five gaits? One thing leads to the next, and I like to stay open."

This willingness to engage in a variety of experience has also led to some globetrotting, including residencies in such contrasting locales as Albuquerque, Paris, and Berkeley. Nowadays, though, she prefers to stick to her roots and spend as much time as possible with family. Her other great love is, of course, horses, with which she's lived since she was "old enough to be strapped into the saddle." She currently shares her stunning property with three: young, amber-eyed Jalisco, who is not quite ready for riding; Rocket, a new horse from Wyoming; and Barranca, a sturdy, six-year-old bay beauty for riding. Chester also has written or edited several books about horses, including the popular *Eros & Equus*, which explores the sensuality of the human-equine relationship, and *Heartbeat for Horses*, an





examination of the profound connection between young girls and their four-legged companions. "I wanted to introduce young, horse-crazy girls to good literature about horses that they probably wouldn't stumble on themselves," she explains. "When eight-, nine-, or ten-year-olds get into horses, it's kind of romantic."

Chester's other romance began when she met Mason Rose, a former Wall Street executive and later the founder of Pasta Prima in Guido's Fresh Marketplace, in 1990; they married in 1992. (Both have adult children from previous marriages.) Rose, who has lived in the Berkshires for most of his life, had built the original structure of their Alford home in 1976 (before adding to it in 1980) with the help of his architect brother, Jonathan, on property abutting land owned by his mother and his brother. Chester loved the majesty of the landscape and the intimacy of the house and was happy to bring to it her beloved horses and her artistic sensibility. The couple now divide their time between Alford and a second home in Patagonia, Arizona.

Over the years, Chester's Southwestern bond has informed her work and her approach to decorating. "There's a sort of circular feeling, a flow from inside to outside, that you see in a lot of Southwestern homes," she explains, a Midwestern accent still clinging to the edges of her speech. The turquoise doors are an homage to the Southwest, where the color is believed to rebuff evil spirits; the front door also displays a *milagro*, a metal votive offering to a family's favorite saint (theirs is St. Therese of Lisieux). Desert colors also dominate the interior, with bright corals, earthy clays, sea-foam blues, autumnal yellows, toasty browns, and sunset purples punching up walls, furniture, and accent pieces.

Each room has that made-for-editorial mix of upscale and shabby chic aes-

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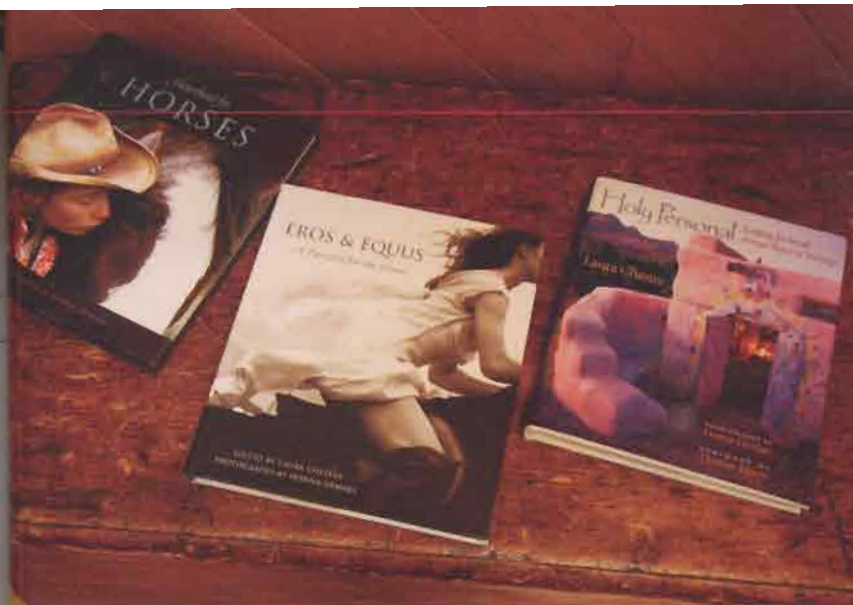
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thetic—a stunning hand-painted antique Bavarian armoire in the living room is topped with lumpy handmade pottery, for example; in the dining area and adjacent hall, antique furniture is juxtaposed with wild, eclectic art. Chester's interior decorator friend Marty Gwinn sometimes lends a helping hand—she's found some of Chester's favorite pieces herself in antique stores and flea markets. "I really love working with Laura because she is so adventuresome and brave in her choices," Gwinn explains. "She has a wonderful sense of color. But she also has a great sense of what can go together from different countries and time periods."

Thus the home's artful, thrown-together appearance isn't dictated by shelter-magazine formula, but by Chester's own imagination, plus her tendency to acquire objects—whether in the form of gifts, travel keepsakes, or unexpected finds. "I like things that come together in a more haphazard way than as decorating specifically," she states. "It's similar to the way I approach editing; I am very eclectic in my tastes, and I appreciate lots of different styles."

The upstairs holds the master and most of the guest bedrooms, as well as a newly renovated bathroom featuring a tub from the old Curtis Hotel in Lenox, Massachusetts. Bricks bedecking the fireplace and chimney that spans the living room on the first floor up through the second floor are from a Housatonic, Massachusetts, mill that was demolished in the late 1970s. Rose was so enamored with the bricks that he painstakingly chipped away the old mortar from each one before reusing them.

The upper level may combine comfort and character, but it's the downstairs that feels homiest. Guests enter through a French-tiled entryway, with walls of clay-red beadboard and floral wallpaper that borrows its color scheme from October leaves, and hang their coats on the hooks beside Rose and Chester's own—and the stray horse bridle. Through a set of pocket doors that looks pilfered from an old New England barn awaits a cozy living room, with oak floors, exposed beams, built-in bookcases, horse-printed drapes, a neutral sofa, a floral-upholstered window seat, a pull-toy horse from the 1940s, and a writing desk set with horse figurines.

Looking closely at the living room, one might notice that the Fortuny fabric—made in the same mill in Italy since the early 1900s—on the sofa pillows matches that of the lamp in the opposite corner. Gwinn chuckles at the almost magical coincidence. "Laura said her grandmother had owned some Fortuny fabric that they'd made into draperies," she says. "She decided to use them outside for a party under a tent, but it rained and they were damaged. What Laura was able to salvage, she turned into pillows. When I saw it, I couldn't believe it! I [already] had a lamp[shade] made of the same fabric. It was an exact match."

At the other end of the first floor, through a soothing, yellow-beige Venetian plaster entryway outfitted with a retro apple-green laminate chair and four pieces of bright, dynamic art from New York City-based artist Trevor Winkfield, is a long, narrow, peach-hued guest room, and the heart of the interior: the kitchen and dining room. The kitchen is designed around an eye-catching contrast: turquoise base cabinets and white wall cabinets, tied together with stainless-steel appliances and mottled-gray honed-granite countertops. The small dining room, again with walls

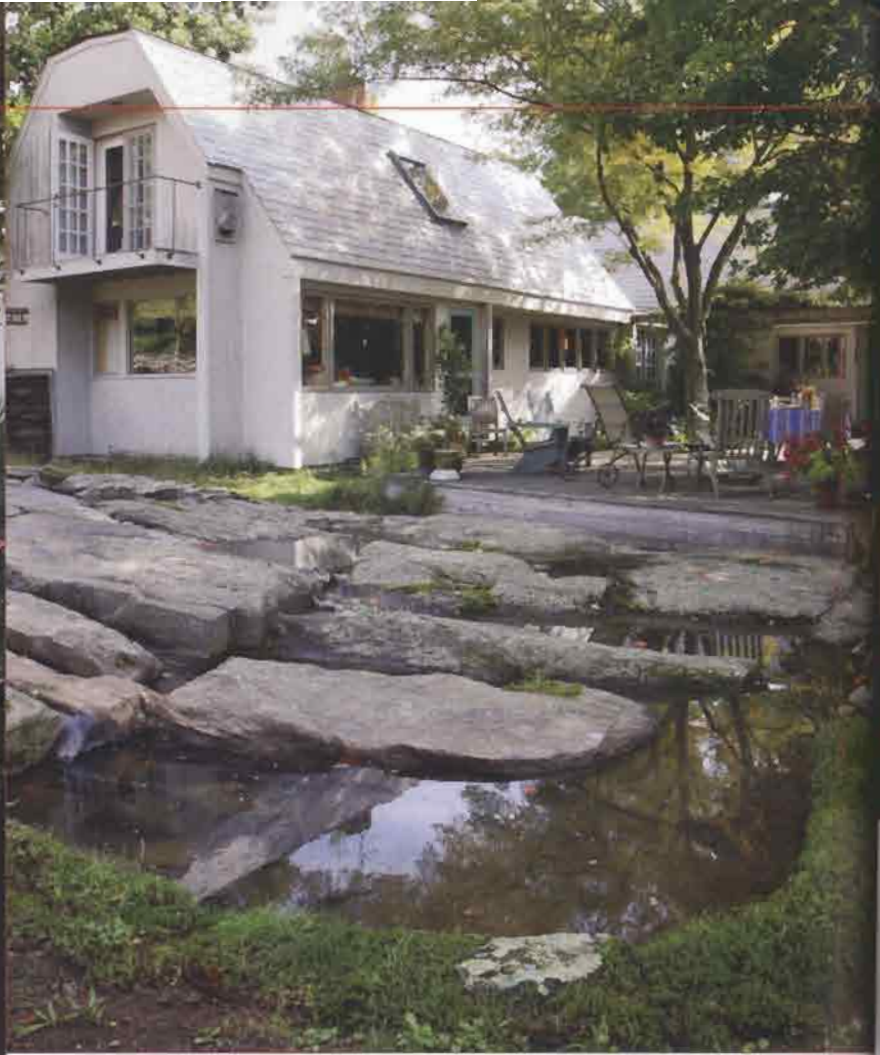


COLOR SENSE: A hand-painted Bavarian armoire and (right) a retablo from New Mexico reflect Laura Chester's eclectic taste. A photograph by Donna DeMari (top right) hangs in the guest room; it was used as the cover of one of Chester's books (top left). French doors in the writing cottage (opposite top) offer a view of the hills. (Opposite) Chester with Barranca, a six-year-old boy.





A natural woman: *Laura Chester's horses are elegantly stabled. The water feature (top right) next to the patio took two summers to perfect. The Alford, Mass., property is enhanced by Chester's charming writing cottage (opposite left) and a tiny chapel (opposite right).*

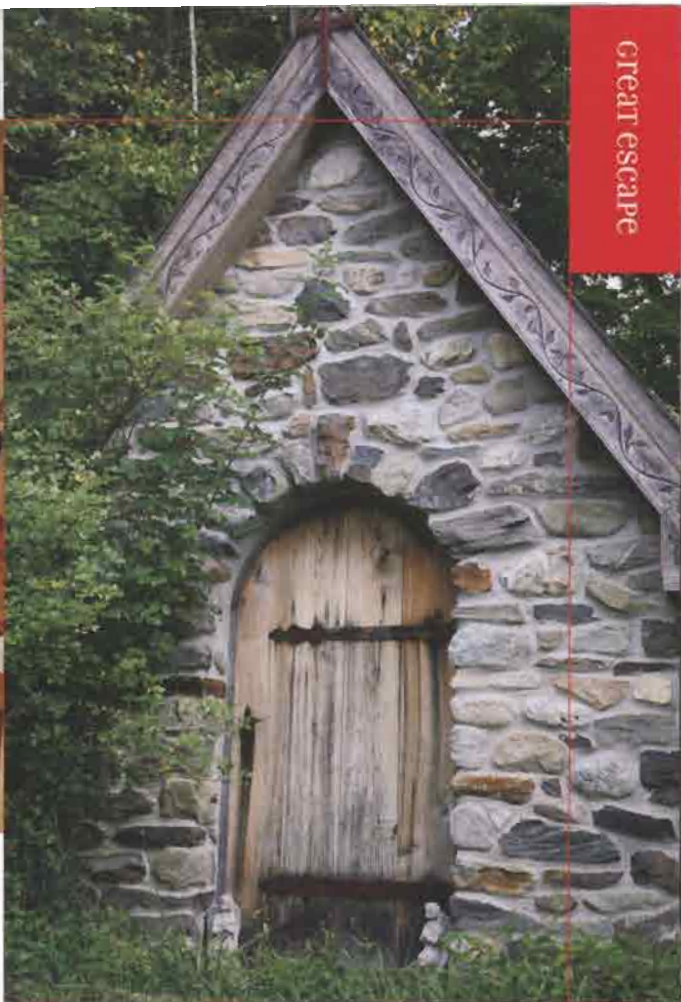


covered in Venetian plaster—this time in terra-cotta tones—utilizes tall furnishings to elongate the room visually—a wood cabinet, handmade by Rose, decorated with a seemingly incongruous mix of country-cute (rooster-painted plates) and worldly sophisticated (a yellow-and-navy Moroccan *tagine*) items; high-backed dining chairs painted—what else?—turquoise; and a large, rectangular piece of dreamlike modern art that fills almost an entire wall.

Although she whiles away many an afternoon on the settee in front of the dining room window, Chester spends a good deal of time outside, and her expansive, weathered deck reflects this inclination. Running along the entire south side of the house, it's where shrubs and trailing plants in rock and container gardens (courtesy of landscaper Jenna O'Brien) mingle with built-in benches and Adirondack chairs that offer the ideal vantage point for savoring the Berkshire hillside. At one end of the deck, a realistic waterfall splashes over stones and into a placid pond, from which a miniature cherub peeks. Chester adores the sense of serenity imparted by the waterfall, but she doesn't look back fondly on the two-summers-long process of chiseling stone and wrangling with water pumps.

Today is the birthday of Rose's daughter-in-law, and Chester, who is a natural hostess, has transformed the deck into a scene befitting an English tea party. It's set with two dining tables, complete with cushioned chairs, flower centerpieces, linen napkins, silver tea service, and delicate pink-and-white china. "I love the feeling here that you can live inside and outside," she says. "Whether I'm outside riding or walking, or here eating on the deck, I like to feel that it's all connected."

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The grounds, which, in addition to the yard, barn, pastures, and flower gardens, also encompass Rose's own smokehouse and a private stone devotional chapel much like those dotting the Italian countryside, are also home to Chester's personal writing cabin. It is, as she calls it, a "house within a house"—a place so cozy and beautifully appointed that it's hard to leave work behind for the day and go back to the main residence. "When I married Mason," she explains, "I had been on my own for eight years. I really needed to maintain my sense of privacy and have a separate place to work. It's like a little nest."

While cozy, little is not the word that comes to mind when describing the cottage. It not only houses Chester's desk, computer, and reference books, but also a stark-white Swedish-tile fireplace (decorated with her collection of Black Madonnas), a peaked ceiling with exposed beams, a full bath with clawfoot tub and ivory lace curtains, a floral armchair positioned toward the French doors and the rolling hills of the property beyond, and a platform bed set beneath three paned windows. With an overstuffed mattress topped with a coverlet in quilted sage satin and numerous plump pillows, the bed practically begs to be dived into.

Everything about the bungalow has presence, much like its owner. It's here that Chester, who occasionally entertains the likes of playwright Kathleen Tolan and novelist Anne Rice, feels the most at home and where she accomplishes her considerable output of work. These days, she's focusing on two projects: the first, a book of short stories called *Rancho Weirdo*, and the second, tentatively titled *Scraps*, a biography of sorts of her late father, whom she describes as "Oscar Wilde-funny" and who left behind eighty-three scrapbooks about his life. "It's the doing, the actual writing, that's good," she says. "It's not always about the finished product."

For Chester, a sense of home is as important as continually tweaking the physical space to reflect the concept. "I'm a real nester," she says. "I want comfort, coziness, and beauty all around. I think we should try to love everything we surround ourselves with. You might as well get rid of that chair you don't like and have an empty space until you find something you love. In the end, your home has to be the place you can't wait to return to, day after day." **BL**

Robin Catalano is a contributing editor to Berkshire Living.

THE GOODS

Marty Gwinn
Interior decorator
23 Stoddard St.
Northampton, Mass.
413.374.4865

Jenna O'Brien
Landscape
Monterey, Mass.
413.429.6752
viridissima@gmail.com

Marvel the Marvelous
Written by Laura Chester
Illustrated by
Gary A. Lippincott
Willow Creek Press
www.willowcreekpress.com

GALLOPING FORWARD

July marked the release of Alford, Massachusetts, writer Laura Chester's latest young-adult fantasy novel, *Marvel the Marvelous* (Willow Creek Press), illustrated by award-winning artist Gary A. Lippincott. The 168-page tale features a supernatural pink pony on an adventure to bring a lost child home, encountering natural disasters and creepy creatures along the way—a follow-up of sorts to *Hiding Glory* (2007), which is also set in the mythical land of Joya. Though deemed appropriate for kids ages eight to twelve, animal lovers beyond that range may enjoy Chester's colorful saga.—*ARB*



the REST of the STORY

Join us for a conversation with acclaimed area author **Laura Chester** on **Sunday, September 21 at 11 a.m.** at the Triplex Cinema in Great Barrington, Mass., as part of **The Rest of the Story**, our free, award-winning public forum, moderated by *Berkshire Living* editor-in-chief Seth Rogovoy.

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