

A conversation with

Sarah Sawyer



1. The disappearance of Deecie Jeffries is the catalyst for the novel. How did you develop this mystery, and what role does it play in the characters' arcs?

During Covid, my husband and I watched an inordinate number of British detective shows. I think we really enjoyed the fact that, unlike the pandemic, there was an order to the narrative, a beginning and an end, all within a tidy hour. The more I thought about the nature of those stories, though, the more I thought that the trope of the missing girl might have a more metaphorical meaning: where does the “girl” in all of us go? Without revealing too much about the end of the story, Deecie is an extension of that curiosity.

2. What inspired you to create the character of Bee, and how did her struggles with postpartum depression influence her growing obsession?

I was thinking of the three mothers in the story as three versions of motherhood, or extreme versions of emotions that motherhood might cause. When I started writing, I wasn't even really thinking of Bee as having postpartum depression, but as I developed her character, her depression became a bit more pointed and caused her to fixate on the mystery of Deecie as a potential lifebuoy. I also love the way that new mothers tell and retell each other their stories of the physical nature of childbirth and the early days of motherhood. I think that's because that experience feels violent and essential, like you have become the animal that you really are. Bee struggles with this, but it also helps her become more herself and find the truth.

3. The book features multiple perspectives and timelines. What challenges did you face in weaving these together, and how did you ensure each character's voice was distinct?

This was difficult! I'm not sure why I did that to myself, except that I was so sure that who we are as adult women has everything to do with the voices and experiences of our mothers, so I had to get everything in there. The characters feel very distinct to me; their orientation to the world is in the cadence of their language and in the nature and content of their observations (I hope!).

4. Motherhood is a central theme in *The Undercurrent*. How do the experiences of Bee, Mary, and Diana reflect different aspects of motherhood?

When I started writing *The Undercurrent*, my children were in their late teens, and I suddenly had time to look at the experience of being a mother with greater perspective. When your children are small, you're sort of “drinking from the firehose,” making sure they don't run into the road or eat quarters (well, my daughter did do that, so I guess I failed in that regard!). For me, motherhood accesses some very deep and essential aspects of character, some good, some not so good, so I made characters who embodied those traits. Bee is in that stage of just feeling overwhelmed by the all-encompassing nature of motherhood; she can't believe how thoroughly it has consumed her. Diana experiences motherhood as a distraction from her work, and Mary has been steamrolled by the experience entirely. These women aren't content—they haven't found a balance between selflessness and selfishness—but they love their children deeply, and the choices they make, good and bad, are in the service of that love.

5. Small towns often have their own unique dynamics and secrets. How much did your own upbringing influence this story and how did you capture the essence of Texas?

The neighborhood in Austin should be deeply recognizable to my family! Austin in the 1980s was a fantastic place to grow up. We lived next door to a field, and although it wasn't off-limits, or I don't think it was, I definitely did quite a few poorly executed gymnastics routines there. My neighborhood was very ordinary, but to me, it was filled with intrigue. I can remember finding a shotgun casing in the field and bringing it, with great ceremony, to my neighbor, Mr. Fisher, who was a state trooper. (He was gracious enough to pretend to be fascinated.) My childhood memories are very sensory and specific, so I think that made it easier to add similar physical details.

6. Themes of obsession and uncovering buried secrets are prevalent in the novel. What drew you to explore these themes, and how do they shape the narrative?

I think about secrets a lot, or to be more precise, I think about what truths we choose to disclose about ourselves to other people. A secret can forge a bond between people or it can destroy them. To me, that paradox is great fodder for a story. In *The Undercurrent*, the characters' failures come from their inability to see the truth of their own lives, and uncovering those truths is both painful and powerful.

7. How did you balance the elements of suspense and mystery with the emotional depth and humanity of the characters?

This is probably obvious, but suspense comes from the reader caring about what happens to the characters. Telling a good story means thinking about the pace of revelation and putting interesting characters into positions that require them to reveal their true selves. When I'm writing, I love my characters, especially their flaws, and I hope that gives them humanity so that the story feels like it matters.

8. How do complex family dynamics and the fallibility of memory interact in the story?

I'm no Tolstoy, and I do understand what he meant with his famous "happy families" line, but I also don't believe that there's such thing as a perfectly happy family. Families are made of people, deliciously complex people who make mistakes, and that's where stories come from. Memory is the story we tell ourselves about what happened, and it rarely has much to do with what actually occurred, especially when emotion is involved. This dynamic is Bee's discovery in the novel: she has been telling herself the wrong story about her past, and she has unwittingly been destructive of herself, her brother, her husband, and her oldest friend as a result.

9. What do you hope readers take away from the book?

I hope the book will help readers look a bit more gently at their past selves! I also hope it helps people consider the way the past informs the present, in positive and negative ways. Understanding that connection is so vital for contentment in adulthood, I think.

Also, and most importantly, it's incredibly important to protect children and listen to them when they are speaking the truth about their lives, especially in the case of abuse.

10. Can you speak to your writing process? Do you follow a routine? Do you write at specific times, in a specific place?

When I am writing well, I write for an hour at a time, with breaks in between. I have such a crazy teaching schedule that I can't rely on a particular hour to be free, so I try to make myself sit when I can. I used to write at a coffee shop in town, but then came Covid, so now I always write at my desk at home. I have a great view of a quad at my school, so there's always something to distract and/or inspire.

11. What books have you read recently? Are there any forthcoming books you're looking forward to reading?

I just read Kaveh Akbar's *Martyr*, which is amazing and wise. I tell everyone to read it. I recently had the pleasure of meeting the delightful Chris Whitaker, so I read *All the Colors of the Dark*, which was a lesson in creating fabulous, page-turning momentum. Right now I'm deep into Rachel Lyon's *Fruit of the Dead*, a scary meditation on patriarchy. I have loved all of Sally Rooney's books, so I'm excited to read *Intermezzo* once I get my hands on it.

12. What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

Three gems, all of which I have stolen from others:

The oldie but goodie: butt in chair. This advice is, for me, the hardest to follow. I am a VERY wiggly person! I have to set timers, pomodoro-style, and bribe myself with promises of outside time, like a toddler.

From George Saunders: proceed with joy, not fear. I have this one on a Post-it note on my desk. It's so important to quiet all concerns except those of the story, and to believe that if you write joyfully, a reader will respond to that plucked string.

Beyond that, I think the best advice I've gotten, from my friend Kate Hope Day, is that the writing is the best part. It's fun to go through the steps of getting an agent and selling a book, of course, but for me, all that is secondary to the pleasure of invention and expression.

13. Are you working on anything new?

That depends on how you define "new"! I'm working on a novel that I have been puzzling my way through for a few years now, and I also started something that can best be described as a rumination on love in the era of AI. We'll see where they go!