



## Marya Hornbacher

**The Center of Winter**  
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**What effect did you want to create in having *The Center of Winter* narrated from the different perspectives of Claire, Esau, and Kate Schiller?**

It's really interesting to me how all of us can experience the exact same event, and yet come away with wildly disparate interpretations of what happened. We each have totally different ideas of what was said, what was intended, and what really took place. The individual stories we come away are all based on the same "facts," but what we see as "fact" differs from person to person. In telling the story in *Center of Winter* from the perspectives of Claire, Esau, and Kate, I tried to write a book that was narrated more by the individual characters than it was by me as a writer. I wanted these three characters to tell an intimate, accurate story that reflected their true beliefs and experiences. I believe that the way in which we say things, hear things, and act as a consequence says a great deal about who we are, and I felt that the best way I could show the characters' true colors was to let each of them speak their piece. I had to get into the minds of each of the characters and see through their eyes. It was important to me that the story of six-year-old Kate be told as a six-year-old would tell it, and specifically as Kate herself would tell it. Esau is a very specific, unusual character with an unusual mind and experience of the world, and to understand and write him, I had to get inside the world and the mind of the person he was. Writing Claire was completely different, for she was a complex person whose understanding of and reactions to the world in which she lived were dramatically different from that of her children, and really from anyone else in the book. Each of them lost a different person — a father, a savior, a husband, an adversary, a friend, a disappointment — and each of their lives was irrevocably altered, in completely different ways. I told the story from the three perspectives because I, too, wanted to get deep inside the minds and lives of characters who fascinated me and who I cared about a great deal. I wanted to explore the idea that each of us is truly defined and set apart by our own perspectives, and that one of the ways we learn to live in relationship with other people is to learn, as much as we can, the language of another person, which we will never fully understand.

**To what extent is the town of Motley, Minnesota, as you've rendered it in your novel based on the real town of Motley?**

The Motley I wrote about is really a combination of Motley and Staples, Minnesota: Motley is a smaller town, and lent itself well to the kind of people and community I was writing about, while Staples is physically larger and has the businesses and churches I described. The Schillers' house is right near the road as you pass through Motley heading north on County Road Ten. Frank's bar is based on the Hi-Top Bar, a dark, smoky hole in the wall, always full of locals, where everyone knows each other and each other's business. The fields surrounding the town are cornfields and soybean, and the lake Kate and Esau play by is actually based on Big Detroit Lake, which is about an hour north. The train runs just to the west of town.

**How would you classify Esau's mental illness, and what kind of research did you do in order to depict his condition?**

Esau's illness combines features of both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia: His rapid, extreme shifts of mood are typical of bipolar, which is classed as a mood disorder, while schizophrenia is a thought disorder, and would account for the breakdown in his language and the disorder of his thoughts when he is having an episode. His visual hallucinations could be indicative of either disease. I had a great deal of prior knowledge of mental illness, as people in my life have suffered varying degrees of it. In addition, I read a great deal about the symptoms of both disorders, and read the work of many people who have them. Lastly, I've visited many psychiatric wards, so I'm familiar with the kind of world I described.

***The Center of Winter* examines sensitive issues like alcoholism, mental illness, marital infidelity, and suicide. What drew you to explore these subjects in your fiction?**

To me, all of these have one thing in common: they affect the way people relate — or fail to relate — to the people around them. Each of these are issues in people's lives that have a ripple affect, changing the landscape of any relationship — in this book, the primary relationships of love, marriage, parent-child, family, sibling, elders, and friends. I am often drawn to what appear at first to be "dark" or "difficult" subjects, but which, upon further examination, are always and only reflections of the ways human beings attempt, however clumsily, badly, or well, to connect with others. I believe that the urge to connect, to reach out, to hold on, are features of all people, and that that urge determines the extent to which we will know sorrow and joy. None of us exists in a vacuum, and in this book, I wanted to explore how even the tiniest phrases, gestures, expressions, all have ramifications for our relationships, and each will shift and change the direction of our stories, for better or for worse. This book is about trying to connect. The issues of alcoholism, mental illness, infidelity, suicide, and even winter, are things that come up to some degree in our lives or the lives of someone we know, and profoundly affect everyone nearby. These are our mistakes, our burdens, our challenges, the things that make us who we are and determine how, and if, we will be able to reach beyond our isolated selves and connect with something larger than we are.

**Prior to writing *The Center of Winter*, you wrote a memoir, *Wasted*. How did your compositional methods change in your transition from nonfiction to fiction?**

Actually, my compositional methods were more or less the same, although I wrote the novel several years after the memoir, and so I would say I was in better command of what I was doing. But in both books, my goal was to tell a good story. That's what I do. I tell stories. To do that, I learn about my characters. I did this both in the nonfiction and the fiction book. Both books involved a great deal of work on dialogue, and on plot development. And, of course, I put a lot of emphasis on the style and language of my work, because I am trying to create a specific kind of conversation with the reader, one that gives them full access into the emotional, visual, relational, and physical world I'm trying to create. I don't like holding my readers at bay. To me, that's a waste of a book. If I wanted to hold people at bay, I'd stop writing. So the entire focus of my "craft" or "technique" serves one end: I'm telling a story and I want it to matter to you. My ability to make it matter lies both in the research, reading, interviews, and technical efforts I make for the book, and in my

own ability to completely dive into the world I'm creating. Writing a book feels more like hearing a story than telling one. I'm just following where it goes. But in order to follow it and tell it at once, I have to have a good grasp of my tools: character development, narrative voice, plot progression, dialogue, description, image, and a lot more of the apparently boring subjects matter incredibly if I am to tell this story effectively. So I can't just slouch on my technical methods, because if I do that, I might as well be talking to myself, since only I will understand the garbled nonsense I put out. The trick for me is to keep myself alert to every detail of what I'm doing, in an ongoing effort to tell the story right. Those details were there in both books. Technical precision, content, language, style, and all of that are the things that went into writing both books.