



Juliette Fay

Shelter Me
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Q: What inspired you to write a novel? What led you to this particular story?

A: I never really set out to be a writer, but when I look back, there may have been some early indications. For as long as I can remember, I've told myself stories when I'm bored—during long insufferable car rides with my younger sisters' legs actually touching mine, Mr. Todd's mind-numbing geometry class, work meetings bogged in detail, nights when sleep eludes me, etc. Sometimes I was the protagonist (in adolescence aren't we always the lead characters in our own little dramas?), but increasingly since then, these stories are about other people. And I've always been a voracious reader. As a general rule, I don't buy a purse too small to hold a paperback. One of the greatest benefits of being a writer is that reading is now a job requirement! (I really wish I had time to weed the shrubs, but I have to go read now . . .)

During my teens and twenties I was also an avid journal keeper. This, more than anything, helped prepare me to be a storyteller. I learned to express myself to myself, without fear of anyone looking over my shoulder, telling me the punctuation was wrong or the story was inconsistent or that they couldn't quite envision the setting. I took literary license while narrating my own life. An embarrassing story could be made funny, a sad story could be made even sadder, a victorious moment could be exulted—not so much by altering the facts but by consciously choosing which facts and descriptors to highlight and which to set in the background. I learned to please myself before I ever had to please anyone else, and this helped me to develop my own writer's voice.

I was inspired to write a novel, finally, when my friend Amanda was trying to unload some books she'd been given, and handed me a paperback with the words, "It's beach reading, just take it." I was about to go to Cape Cod for a family vacation, so I brought it and read it. It was so unbelievably awful, I couldn't put it down! The plot was absurd, the characters were barely two-dimensional, and the dialogue was hilarious. ("Oh, darling, we mustn't!")

Being on vacation, I had more time than usual to spend thinking about what I would have done differently, and actually starting scribbling down my ideas. I found the story taking off in some very unexpected directions. After I got home, I'd steal an hour or two every day to see what the characters would do next. I was very secretive about it at first, but once I had a hundred or so pages, I admitted to myself that I was writing a novel.

The story of *Shelter Me* has been in my head for a long time, in various forms. I think its first cell-divisions began when I got married. I had never loved anyone the way I loved my new husband, and had never felt so loved. I became quietly, privately terrified of losing him. I wonder if everyone doesn't have these thoughts at some point. You love someone— your spouse, children, best friend, aunt, dog—so much, you know that if anything happens to them, you might not be able to put one foot in front of the other anymore. Nothing would make sense. You'd forget how to do simple things like make toast or swallow.

Then we started having children and I thought, "Okay, now I'm really in trouble." Not only did I worry that something might happen to them, I still had the fear of losing my husband, and I now had to worry on my kids' behalf about losing their father. Making up stories about how I would manage was a way for me to process my own fear. But after a while it morphed into a plotline about someone else. I had begun writing by this time, and decided to try and put this new person, who was thankfully no longer me, down on paper and see what I could make of the situation.

Q: What are your writing routines? How do you balance your writing career with the demands of a family with four young children?

A: I love to read about other writers, what their credos are ("write every single day" or "read the daily paper to pick up new ideas"), what their routines are ("light special incense ordered from Oregon" or "dance to the Talking Heads' Burning Down the House—the live version, not the studio one"). I wish I had the luxury of a credo or a routine, but I just don't. If I had a credo, it would be something like "Don't make eye contact with the kids while you're writing unless they can prove they're bleeding from a major artery." My routine is something like "Go to Whole Foods, buy five gallons of milk, remember to put them in the fridge, throw in a load of laundry, eat the leftover toast crusts from breakfast, sit and write."

I'm lucky in that I seem to be able to get in the zone pretty fast. I've written in a lot of noisy, distracting places—Starbucks, hair salons, surrounded by chatting friends on a weekend away, for example. I can't possibly write every day, though it's the ideal to which I strive, but I don't find it too hard to jump back into a story after days or even weeks away. Sometimes I think it's good to take a few days off and let the story float around in my head for a while, picking up details and ideas for plot threads in my travels.

I started writing when my youngest was two, and at first I could only get in an hour or so of writing during nap time or an exceptionally convivial playdate. I would write at night or early in the morning, sneaking it in when I could. To be honest, I just love to do it, and I think if you really love something, you can carve out the time for it somehow. I learned to let things go—let the house stay toy-strewn a little longer, say no to volunteer activities a little more—and I learned to take my writing seriously. I tell the kids, "I'm working, this is my job. Just like you have to do your homework, so do I."

An unexpected bonus is that my kids are excited for me. Occasionally, I'll be talking to a teacher or the mother of one of their friends, and they'll say, "I hear you're a writer." The kids talk about it to people outside the house. Often they'll ask, "Was that your agent? What did she say?" They like to feel that they're a part of it. My teenaged daughter has read some work I've done on adolescent girls, and she's very helpful with whether the dialogue sounds right, or the thought process makes sense. It's great to have in-house editorial staff.

Q: Are you a baker in "real life"? Did the idea of the Pology Cake come from your imagination or does it have true-to-life origins?

A: I bake, but I'm not particularly great at it. The idea of Pology Cake just popped into my head one day. However, I really like the concept of "restorative justice," which involves performing a service for the wronged party. Apologizing is such an essential skill, but sometimes words alone aren't enough.

I do believe in the power of baked goods. One day a friend came to me with the idea that we could get the children in our town to make bread and decorate the loaves to give to food pantries and soup kitchens, as a way to get them involved in philanthropy and community service. We planned the kickoff for October of 2001, which happened to follow the 9/11 tragedy, so we decided to give them to police and firefighters, as well. It took off like a rocket, and by now tens of thousands of breads have been given. There are "bread spreaders" in all contiguous forty-eight states and several foreign countries. For more information about Spread the Bread, check out www.spreadthebread.org.

Q: In a story about relationships, why did you choose to give one of your characters Asperger's syndrome, which is often characterized by poor social skills?

A: Asperger's fascinates me because it's such an interesting brain configuration. Often people with the syndrome have a particular interest or strength, and in the context of this area, they can be near genius. But social interaction can be uncomfortable. Asperger's was a good vehicle to talk a little more about Robby, Janie's dead husband. His ability to connect with Mike contrasts nicely with Janie's own difficulties with her brother. I think in families we get used to people being a certain way, and we adapt to it, but that doesn't necessarily mean we fully understand them. We also don't expect our family members to grow and change. Janie's surprise that Mike had finally found a woman who "gets him" was a way to look at that.

Q: How did you get into the mindset of the women in the self-defense course? Have you ever been attacked yourself?

A: Years ago I took a self-defense course that was something like the class Janie takes. It left an indelible impression. I have never been physically assaulted myself, but several of the women there had, and watching them learn not only to defend themselves, but also to further process the past was incredibly moving. They were changing right before our very eyes, getting stronger, more confident, and as a result, so were the rest of us. I felt the hum of sorrow with those women, but I also felt hopeful at the same time. I worked for years in the field of child abuse prevention, so I drew on stories I knew to flesh out the characters and their backgrounds.

Q: Are any of your characters based on real people? Where did your ideas for them originate?

A: None of my characters are specifically based on real people. I feel it's my job to create people, not to copy those I already know. Also, I think the possibility for hurt feelings would be enormous. I do constantly make note of interesting habits, gestures, vocal patterns and the like. But I go out of my way not to assemble a character that someone might confuse with themselves or someone they know. I also like to pick up on interesting phrases people use. My friend Karen is a particularly good source. Her husband was talking to me about a colleague of his who had recently lost a son. He sighed and said, "We're all on loan." I mentioned this to Karen and she told me, "I say that! He got that from me!"

I got the idea for Tug a few years back when we put an addition onto our house, which included a screened-in porch. I got to be friendly with the contractor, who was nothing at all like Tug. I found it funny how spending the day with strange men roaming around your house, talking about their wives, children, sports teams, health problems, you name it, as they tore the back off your house, you could get to know a lot about them. I was also surprised to see how much control the contractor had over the end product, no matter what the plans (or for that matter, I myself standing right there in front of him) said.

Aunt Jude was always a member of the cast, but she changed over the course of writing the story. She started out a lot more abrasive and irritating. I was surprised to find that she was so sweet, if a bit annoying. Shelly came out of nowhere. I started writing and within a couple of pages she was knocking on Janie's front door, fully formed. She came to me just as you see her, impeccably dressed and bossing me around.

Q: Religion, specifically the Catholic Church, plays a pivotal role in the story. Are you a member of a faith community? How did you come up with the character of Father Jake?

A: I am Catholic, and have known a lot of priests, and have found some of them fascinating in that they have chosen a life that is so different from the way that most of us live. When I began writing *Shelter Me*, we had recently had the clergy abuse scandal that seemed to break first here in the Boston area: The news, the allegations, the depths of deceit, the damaged lives of the victims broke our hearts on a daily basis. I wanted to talk about that, and I used Father Jake as both a priest and a victim. I didn't want him to be a hero. I wanted him to be, as Janie ultimately concludes, "just a guy."

Also, I have always had a secret desire to write homilies. I sit in church, listening to the readings and thinking, If I were the one up there with the robes on, I'd be talking about such and such. It was a nice added bonus to finally get my wish.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I am working on a story about a divorced woman with an eleven-year-old daughter. The social scene in middle school and issues with body image and self-esteem with which the daughter struggles are not so different from the ones her mother faces in her forties. I think that some human interactions—power struggles, loyalty, peer pressure, being popular, keeping true to oneself—seem to go on in one form or another no matter what your age. It's fun to try and talk about that while devising a plotline that will, with any luck, keep readers turning the pages.