
Saralee Rosenberg

A Little Help from Above
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The following interview was done as a group project. Friends, families and colleagues all posed questions to me, and I answered them as honestly and succinctly as possible. The honesty part came easy. The succinct part? Always a bit harder.

Q: Where do you get your ideas from?

A: I really dread this question because the truth is, most days I haven't a clue. And how embarrassing is that? I'm in the idea industry. It's what I manufacture. How can I not know where to get more product? It's like a guy in the drapery business not knowing where to buy silk. Funny thing is, most people seem to think that lightning bolts strike writers and *voila*, amazing story. But it's a universal truth among anyone in a creative field that wishing and praying for lightning bolts pretty much guarantees a power failure. Inspiration is more like a 16-year-old with car keys. You know something is going to happen, you just don't know when.

Boring as it sounds, most of my "brainstorms" occur while in the midst of doing the ordinary and mundane—running carpools and errands, chatting in a waiting room, shopping, etc. Basically I've become a master eavesdropper and inhale details that I find revealing. How people drive, dress, flirt, make a point, make a salad, talk to their children, talk to waiters. I pick up on word choices, favorite expressions, body language, and often the most telling, the way they handle adversity, confrontation and disappointment. For example, when the woman in front of me at the dry cleaners starts to carry on that there is still a huge wine stain on her blouse and she specifically pointed it out to the owner when she brought it in, I know that as a writer, this might be a gusher of ideas, so I pay close attention.

Q: So your characters are based on real people?

A: We all know people we swear could be characters in a book because they're so eccentric, cheap, hilarious, obsessive, egotistical, annoying or related to us. But that unto itself doesn't qualify for immortality. Which is why when friends beg to be a character in my story, I have to be honest. No matter how much I love them, readers will not be intrigued by, let's say, insurance agents who play golf every Saturday, or women who sell personalized stationary from their homes. Perhaps if there's a murder weapon and/or a lover hiding in their closet, then we'll talk.

Truly unforgettable characters do take on real personality traits, as well as imagined ones, so that readers can recognize their idiosyncrasies and relate to them. "Oh my God, he sounds just like my ex-husband." Or, "I swear she's been spying on my mother-in-law." But there has to be more "stuff" below the surface. To hold our attention, vivid characters must also be conflicted, perplexed, unpredictable and in big trouble. Really big trouble.

Q: Does this mean that the characters come before the story?

A: No, it means that the characters are the story. If they start to keep me up nights worrying and wondering what's going to happen to them next, I know I'm on to something. But true bliss is when I'm flushing out details of the plot, and the characters blurt out lines of dialogue that ring true. Soon I'm not the writer, more like the designated typist. These little demon voices take over and run away with the story, and things happen that I'd never imagine in a million years. How crazy is that? I'm supposed to be in charge, and most days I need a literary leash.

When I was creating the protagonist, Shelby Lazarus, I knew that I wanted this character to be a New Year's baby so that there would be a reason for her picture to appear in the paper. I thought that this might be the catalyst for her having an interest in journalism when she grew up. It was a stretch, of course, but it opened up a whole can of story possibilities. And the other by-product was, that by knowing her date of birth, January 1, 1960, it occurred to me that I could go online and order a natal chart for her. Natal charts are like the AAA of personality roadmaps. They uncover unique personality traits, desires, issues, conflicts, karmic lessons, and loads of insight as to why people who are born on this day live, think and feel the way that they do. Reading Shelby's chart was like panning for gold at Fortunoff's. Suddenly, I had handfuls of rich material, and off we went.

Q: What inspired you to write this particular story?

A: In its original incarnation, this was a story about a single, tough cookie/career woman in her 30s who was proud of the fact that she had dodged the marriage and family bullet, yet was starting to read the "New York Times" wedding announcements with greater angst each week. Another biological clock story basically, but from there it evolved into a suburban family whodunit, complete with deception, loss, sickness, and a deceased mother who ran the whole show. Did I mention that I thought it imperative that the book be laugh-out-loud funny?

Q: How much of the story is autobiographical?

A: The two locales, Chicago and Long Island, are my former and current home towns. Oh, and I have a sister. Other than that, nada:

Q: Who was your inspiration for Sandy Lazarus's character? Was she based on your own mother?

A: No. About the only things my mother and Sandy Lazarus have in common is that they both have wicked backhands and very headstrong, bossy daughters. The real inspiration for the mother's character came from wanting to explore the question of who gets terminally ill and why. Is disease random, or is it karma, baby? I also wanted to look at the issue of death and dying from the perspective of someone who, up until then, had lived a completely charmed life.

Q: Were you concerned that readers would be turned off by Shelby's caustic, bitchy behavior?

A: You betchA: In fact, one highly respected former publisher told me that I was in very risky territory because women readers much prefer female characters who are exactly like them: hard working people pleasers who never try to rock the boat unless it is absolutely necessary. (Ironically, women are much more accepting of male characters who are no good, dirty bastards, as long as they eventually redeem themselves). So yes, I was concerned. Particularly after so many "A" list editors rejected the manuscript, often citing Shelby's

unlikable, hard nosed personality as the cause. What made me hold and not fold was my beloved agent. She refused to buy into any of that sexist nonsense, and insisted that in the hands of the right editor, this story would fly high. And she was right, bless her smart, little experienced soul.

Q: Do you believe in the afterlife? Specifically, do you believe that spirits in the afterlife can affect events among the living?

A: I do believe that when we leave the earth's physical plane, we don't die, we simply move into another realm of existence. And even though we lose our physical bodies, we retain all of our senses. Sight. Sound. Touch. Smell. This means to me that the dearly departed can and do communicate with us from the other side on a regular basis. We just may not be aware that our sudden brainstorm or gut instincts are divine inspirations. So the next time you encounter a strange coincidence, lucky break, close call, or some other unexplainable event, consider the possibility that not only are you in God's hands, you are also getting a little help from above.

Q: Did writing this book help you to rethink or mend any of the relationships in your life?

A: It probably should have, but it didn't. I'm only human.

Q: Did you always want to be a writer?

A: No, I always wanted to be a model, but obviously God missed the memo.

Q: Do you find that you get very attached to your characters?

A: Absolutely. Even the ones who are pains in the asses. They're like your kids. They're yours so you love them no matter what. But unlike kids, if you create a character, you can put words in their mouth *AND* make them grow up. The interesting thing about *A LITTLE HELP* was that two years had gone by between the time I'd last worked on the manuscript, and the time it was sold and in the editing stage. I remember worrying that I wouldn't be able to get back into the heads of Shelby, Lauren and company, because I was already two-thirds of the way through another novel (writing, not reading). How could I divide my attention between my two fictional families? But, as how I'd always thought of the characters as "real", it was easy to go back, and the reunion was great. Turns out they had a lot more to say, and were wondering where I'd been.

Q: Do you know how the story is going to end before you start writing?

A: Yes, I have a basic idea of how I want the story to end, but this is a little like the parent who says he knows exactly how his child will turn out. Ha! "Man makes plans and God laughs" also applies to writers. We no more control a character's destiny than a parent controls a child's. We may think we can dictate direction, but characters, like children, have minds of their own. So although the end of the story may have been determined from the onset, how characters get from point A to point B, if they get there at all, sometimes seems to be entirely up to them.

Q: What person, place or thing had the greatest influence on your writing?

A: Encouragement from family and friends is a huge, positive force in anyone's life, but particularly for an agentless, insecure writer who was spending month after month in a freezing cold basement, trying to write compelling stories while kicking icky spiders across the floor and tuning out her baby daughters who were upstairs wailing for Mommy. No way would I have persevered without the love and support of my husband, sister and dear friends who insisted that I hang in there because I had the goods.

Q: What is it like sending your "baby" off into the world to be read?

A: It's scary as hell because your writing is so precious to you. But, years worth of rejection letters tend to prepare and harden you for the avalanche of criticism that's bound to come. At the same time, the older I get, the less I feel threatened by failure. Ten years ago I would have felt my entire self worth was riding on the outcome of this one book. Fortunately, maturity has a way of putting things into perspective. So did a post 9/11 awakening. Bottom line is that there are much more important things in life than a book review: family, friendship, love, health, security, and hot-out-of-the-oven chocolate chip cookies. Everything else is just window dressing.

Q: Who are some of your favorite authors?

A: Believe it or not, some of my favorite writers are newspaper columnists, not authors per se. I happen to be a big fan of Maureen Dowd, Andrea Peyser, Gail Collins, Tom Friedman, Dave Barry, Erma Bombeck; and in her brilliant essay days at *The New York Times*: Anna Quindlen. I admire their ability to drive home a point in a few thousand words, and to do it with a skillful, one-two punch week after week.

As for other novelists, I like to be entertained and enlightened as much as the next guy. My favorites are Susan Isaacs, Elinore Lipman, Anne Lamott, and Olivia Goldsmith.

But the author who had the greatest influence on me is a writer named Sol Stein. In college I read two of his novels, *Living Room* and *The Magician*, and was so beguiled by his seamless blending of story and character, that I tracked down his home phone number and called him from my dorm room to gush. He was gracious and polite, but mostly curious how the hell I got his phone number. Suddenly he wasn't some wizard behind the curtain, just an ordinary guy who wrote books from his house. I thought, *Hey. Maybe one day I can do that, too!*

Q: Mom, what are you going to do with all your royalties?

A: I plan to hoard every last penny in the event that my children abandon me in my old age. However, I am willing to pay \$50 to the first child who cleans his or her room. I'll even throw in an extra 10 bucks for finding a formerly living thing in the rubble. *I would like to thank the following people for coming up with such great questions: Hinda Abramowitz, Risa Sidrane, Susan Kaufman, Lyssa Keusch, Judi Ratner, Mira Temkin, Harlan West, and Sue Zola.*