

Powells.com Q&A: Debra Gwartney

Posted by Carson K. Smith, January 29th, 2009

The prologue of Debra Gwartney's memoir, *Live Through This: A Mother's Memoir of Runaway Daughters and Reclaimed Love*, begins with her riding a bus. She's describing her surroundings. Her voice has a sense of authority, critical to memoir. The former reporter gives you the facts. You're with her on the bus.

She becomes angry, and it's not just bus anger. The girl next to her sets off a diatribe. She smells like "dried urine," the "stale-ashtray stench of a binge."

The well-written detail shines on. Gwartney notices her "sallow skin, half-shut eyes, haunched shoulders...her spoiled parka tent." And she wonders, Does anyone else notice this girl next to me? Why am I disgusted by her? Why am I like this? How did I get this way? These, textbook memoir questions.

Then the realization: This isn't her daughter but it is. It reminds her of what her daughters were. Ten years ago, Gwartney's two oldest daughters stopped going to school, stopped coming home. They ran away. Jumping on trains, they left Eugene, and eventually the state of Oregon.

From Portland's Pioneer Square to the Tenderloin District of San Francisco, from Austin to Boulder, Colorado, Gwartney's *Live Through This* contemplates what it's like being a mother to daughters that don't want one.

Gwartney teaches nonfiction writing at Portland State University, where I was her student. After I read *Live Through This* I emailed her a few questions about it. Below are her responses.

Your memoir takes up much of your daughters' lives, spanning almost 30 years. How were you able to capture that much time from memory?

The first piece related to the book (written before I even imagined the possibility of a book) was the story of looking for one daughter in the Tenderloin District, which was published in the journal *Creative Nonfiction*. Then I wrote a story about a particular dinner with another daughter at a Chinese restaurant that was published on Salon. Obviously, these events had taken place in the recent past, so my memories about them were still vivid. I also found that once I started writing about my family's dynamic, about the nitty-gritty of our lives during this period, earlier memories came gushing back. I also found that once I started writing about my family's dynamic, about the nitty-gritty of our lives during this period, earlier memories came gushing back. I wrote down the images as they came to me, fleshing out these moments that rolled up in my mind, figuring that at least some of it would be relevant when I turned to the larger project. If I couldn't remember a scene well, I either didn't include it in the book, or slid over it fairly quickly. After the book was finished, the girls recited some stories that I wished I'd remembered

myself — they would have fit well — but those tales came from their memories, not mine.

You made the decision to leave your first husband. You were 'two people who didn't belong in a marriage.' Tom, your ex-husband, ends up being a concrete but somewhat villainous character in this book. Is it fair in memoir to portray someone this way?

The book is primarily about my personal growth as a mother and woman, and my aim was to present all of us as complicated characters who had to deal with a pretty intense period of family trouble.

In this memoir there is tension between you and your daughters and you and your ex-husband. How important is it to create novel-like tension?

When I first started thinking about a book, I realized I'd have to discover scenes that would drive the narrative, and that those scenes would have to escalate the tension — much in the way scenes work in a novel. The book ended up being largely chronological because that made most sense, though I purposely used flashbacks to help build the tension of that rather linear time line. I thought about tension a great deal — is this scene doing enough work? Are the characters, including the narrator, becoming more complex as the narrative progresses? Will the reader be able to detect the deepening emotional turmoil? My main concern was to show myself, the "I" in the book, as becoming more and more in turmoil and confusion, and then the first signs of movement toward reconciliation.

Much of your memoir leads up to locating one of your daughters who ran away from home. Was it essential to reconnect with her and her sister before you knew you were able to write a memoir?

Oh, sure, yes. I had no perspective on these episodes until they were over — until I was out of the survival mode I'd been in for some years. Once I knew the girls were safe and settled, I could begin to think of what it would be like to write about our experience. Once I knew the girls were safe and settled, I could begin to think of what it would be like to write about our experience. Even then, it took a very long time — I've worked on the book for more than eight years.

You take the blame for a lot. Was the writing process essential for you in obtaining that perspective?

I wasn't trying to ascribe blame (to myself or anyone else) but instead hoped to come to a better understanding of my own role in our difficulties — to find the distance necessary to examine the dynamic we'd become caught in and how I helped fuel that dynamic. Sometimes the self-examination felt like a bottomless pit. The only way I could figure out any of it — the parts I have managed to come to terms with — was to write it all out.

Then write it again and again and again until I'd gained some measure of clarity about my own culpability.

You work throughout your daughters' adolescence as a single mother in creating a career in writing, a time-consuming vocation. Did you ever ask yourself, Wouldn't it be easier not to write?

I still ask myself if it would be easier not to write, and the answer is always, yes, it would be easier — but then I end up back at the keyboard aching to write, and I'm constantly thinking about how to shape certain events or experiences into a story. I'm not a person who writes every day — it just doesn't work out for me to do so. But I take it very seriously and want to continue to express myself through nonfiction writing.

You introduce a few new members (a grandchild, and Barry Lopez, who Gwartney recently married) of your family later in the book. Do you have a second memoir in you?

I'd like to think so. I've got some ideas swirling around.

Carson K. Smith works in the Blue Room at Powell's City of Books. He recently completed a Master's in writing at Portland State University.