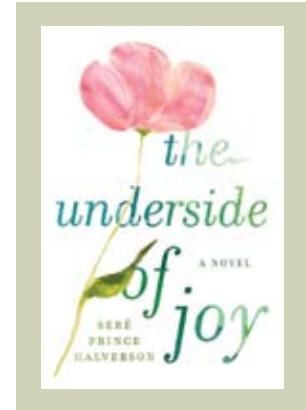


A conversation with Seré Prince Halverson



Like your protagonist Ella Beene, you are a stepmother. How did that experience help you write this book?

Yes, I'm a mom and a stepmom. And I have a mom and a stepmom. My sons have a mom and a stepmom. And so do my stepdaughters. Even today, most stepmothers in fiction are evil, but most of the stepmothers I've known love their stepkids. A lot. I know I do, my stepmom does, and my kids' stepmom does.

Still, the mother/stepmother relationship can be complicated. Both love the same people, which, in the best circumstances can be uniting. But the relationship can also be a minefield of comparisons, jealousies, and insecurities. And let's face it, to a writer, *minefield* is just another word for *candy store*.

Speaking of autobiographical connections: are there any parts of *Joy* that were pulled from or inspired by your life?

There are a few facts I gleaned from my own life. I lived in San Diego, was divorced, moved to Northern California, drove a Jeep, am remarried and a stepmom. I borrowed some of the motherhood moments from memories with my kids. But that's about it. Ella is not me and her story is definitely not my story.

That said, I did pour my own emotional truth into this book. I know what it's like to love my children deeply and to learn that it's okay that another woman loves them deeply too. I also know what it's like to love my stepdaughters deeply and yet understand that my place in their life is different than their

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mom's. Like most of us, I have experienced the feeling of drowning in grief. And there have been times in my life when I've chosen to see only what I wanted to see and ended up paying a high price for that type of unexamined bliss. So emotionally, I did pull some from my own experience, even though the circumstances were quite different.

What inspired you to incorporate post-partum depression and post-partum psychosis into the story?

I didn't set out to write a book about post- partum depression or psychosis, but Paige showed up and started revealing herself to me. I hadn't suffered from post- partum depression but I'd read about it. And I'd heard the tragic stories in the media about post- partum psychosis.

I'd also been thinking about mothers who leave their children, and how in our culture, we most often respond to that behavior as if it's The Unforgiveable Sin. But there are times when a mother leaves because she knows it is the best thing for her kids, given her circumstances. There are situations where leaving is not a selfish act, but a most difficult sacrifice. I wanted to explore the question: How could a loving mother leave her own children?

Have you read many other books whose main character is a widow? Were you tempted to create new love interest for Ella by the book's end?

First of all, let me say I'm absolutely positive that if I'd thrown another guy into the mix, along with everything else, Ella would have scaled a redwood tree and refused to come down.

Good Grief by Lolly Winston is the first book that comes to mind when I think of books I've read whose main character is a widow. I love that novel. But the narrator was not a step-mother; she didn't need to dig herself out of a financial mess or fight for the right to keep her kids, so she had time to meet a guy. Plus, my novel takes place over a six- month time period, which is nothing when it comes to grieving and loss.

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It's a little - known fact that the U.S. imprisoned Italians and Germans in addition to the Japanese during World War II. How did you first learn about it, and why did you decide to incorporate it into *Joy*?

My friend Kelly Stogner, who is an incredibly smart history teacher, mentioned it to me one day, as we were driving home along the Russian River. She said that Italians in the area had been interned. I stared at her, open-mouthed. I hadn't known. (I want to mention here that Kelly and her family also lent me their cabin for a month-long writing retreat. Needless to say, I'm extremely grateful to Kelly.) I read and researched the little that had been written about the Italian internment, especially the book *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment during World War II* by Lawrence Distasi. I was surprised by the deep sense of shame many of the interned and their families felt, even though they had done nothing wrong. Childhood shame was also doing its number on many of my characters. Shame, secrets, silence—these three braid into a thick rope that can tie up a person up for years, sometimes a lifetime. I also saw parallels in war and custody battles, including the ways the innocent always suffer, no matter what.

What were your biggest learning experiences throughout the publishing process?

First, never give up. It's a cliché because it's true. I wrote for over twenty years before my novel was published. Keep writing. Keep knocking. Eventually, someone might answer the door. And then one glorious day, you might be invited in to join the party. (And even if you aren't, you still spent time doing hard work that you love, which is a good way to live your life.)

Lesson Number Two: The publishing industry has a lot of generous, smart, talented, approachable people working in it. Yes, it's a subjective, imperfect blend of art and commerce trying to find its way through a kooky time. But. Everyone shares a passion for books. That's my kind of people. I know I'm in the honeymoon phase right now, but I'm so impressed with everyone I've met and worked with. I feel extremely fortunate.

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Looking back, what did you do right that helped you break in?

I never gave up. (Except for about 12 minutes one terribly bleak afternoon.)

What's your next project?

A novel set in Saudi Arabia about a young American artist. I'm going from the forest to the desert. I like to change things up.