

A CONVERSATION WITH



ANN PACKER

AUTHOR OF

SONGS WITHOUT WORDS

Q: SONGS WITHOUT WORDS is your first novel since *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*. Did the success of *Dive* surprise you?

A: It was a huge surprise. The first hint I had was at a booksellers' dinner just before publication, when I was surrounded as soon as I arrived and asked rather passionately how I could have ended the book as I had. I remember thinking it was strange that they seemed to care so much. Then several of them told me they'd been unable to put the book down, and I was really surprised—I had no idea it would be suspenseful. Funny how little you can know about the other side of the experience.

Q: SONGS WITHOUT WORDS, like *Dive*, explores the ties that bind both family and friends. Does the friendship in SONGS mirror one in your own life?

A: Not a single friendship, no. I think it comes more from the sense I have from many of my friendships, and also from observing other people, that the dynamic between people can remain the same for a very long time—often way beyond its usefulness. In general, I'm very interested in how we rely on, or try not to rely on, each other.

Q: The main characters in SONGS WITHOUT WORDS—Liz and Sarabeth—lead different lives: Liz is a suburban mom who goes to yoga class and makes dinner for her kids while Sarabeth lives alone and routinely forgets chores like washing the dishes. Do you think the bonds we forge in childhood outride our differences as grown-ups?

A: Yes, I think that's the case a lot of the time. We have friends in order to be known—that's one of the reasons, anyway. And we have the idea about our oldest friends that they know us better than others do because they've known us longer. Also, I think enjoying the same activities or living the same kinds of lives as your friends becomes less important as you grow older—especially for women.

Q: You are a mother of two, and your daughter is around the same age as the teenage girl, Lauren, in SONGS WITHOUT WORDS. Did this make it easier to write this character, or harder, given the difficulties Lauren faces?

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A: It's funny—I started writing the book when my daughter was nine or ten, not focusing on the fact that it would take a while and that when it came out she might well be fifteen, Lauren's age in the book. I had Lauren in mind before I ever had a teenage daughter. Writing Lauren was surprisingly easy for me—she was by far the easiest character in the book, and the one who changed least as I revised.

Q: *SONGS WITHOUT WORDS* deals with the anxieties of contemporary parenting (Liz is a stay-at-home mom who feels tremendous guilt about not recognizing her daughter's cry for help). Is this a common fear among parents: the fear of helplessness, of missing warning signs from their children? And have you had personal experience with teen depression?

A: I think fear in general is incredibly pervasive among my generation of parents: of missing warning signs, of making poor choices, of doing the wrong thing. The idea of not seeing something until it is too late and your child is really in trouble: the specter of that—really, of the regret it would create—is very powerful. It could be depression we're afraid of missing, or it could be something very different—though of course with depression the stakes are terrifyingly high. As for me and teen depression: I don't think I have any experience as an observer—certainly not as an adult observer—but I was a depressed teenager myself, though not nearly to the same degree as Lauren.

Q: *SONGS WITHOUT WORDS* looks at the impact of a teenage girl's attempted suicide on her life, and the life and relationships of her family. It also gives us a portrait of a woman, Sarabeth, whose mother committed suicide decades before the main action of the book. Do you think tragic events such as this redefine the way people look at the world?

A: I think events like this can have an enormous influence. What I find especially interesting is the way the influence can be occult: not something you could easily observe or identify, and yet fundamental to the way people look at or live in the world.

Q: In interviews about *Dive*, you responded openly to questions about your father and his suicide, and suicide plays a large role in *SONGS WITHOUT WORDS*. Is it hard for you to write about this or does writing provide an outlet to deal with the feelings you have about his death?

A: It isn't hard, but it isn't really an outlet, either. At least, I don't think of it that way; I don't choose themes in order to process my experience. But of course that's what happens. Though not exactly: it's not really a matter of processing; it's more a matter of making something—art, one hopes—out of what you've got. Transmuting might be the right word. And having done that can bring you to a different stance about your experience.

Q: Your novel is bound to touch people in similar circumstances. Can novels help us through difficult experiences?

A: I think novels help us know how many different ways there are to experience life. I think they can be tremendously helpful, but I suspect the help is often not immediate. Reading a book about loss may prepare us for losses we have yet to face, just as reading a book about people much younger than ourselves may help us understand who we were at an earlier time of life. When I think of the books that have meant the most to me emotionally, I come up with a map of life experiences, but with the territories completely out of order.

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Q: In *SONGS WITHOUT WORDS*, Lauren's depression is treated by therapy and antidepressants. Teens and antidepressants are a hot-button issue these days. What are your thoughts on medicating teens? Are you nervous to address something that is so rabidly debated in the press?

A: It is a hot-button issue, and I particularly didn't want the book to come down on one side or the other. My understanding is that if suicide has been attempted most doctors will medicate, so that's what I chose for Lauren. Since finishing the book, I've learned that in the studies that prompted the worry that antidepressants can cause teens to attempt or commit suicide, medication was given at a point in the illness when the kids in question were so severely depressed that they had almost no energy. It's thought that the medication offered just enough relief, restored just enough energy, that these kids regained the capacity to act. I was glad to learn this—it made sense, and it's heartening.

Q: The protagonist in *Dive* used sewing as a mechanism of escape and to help cultivate her identity. Sarabeth in *SONGS WITHOUT WORDS* makes artistic lampshades as a therapeutic—and somewhat lucrative—hobby. Why are you drawn to the metaphor crafts allow in your writing? What does the lampshade making represent?

A: When I first started writing Sarabeth, I had a sense that she had a kind of patchwork existence professionally, but I don't remember how I came to lampshade making as one of the things she was going to do to earn a living. She had to make something—her life would have been too barren otherwise. I don't think analytically in the early stages of writing, but I can see now that it was a way of planting some hope for her, some idea that her feeling of being not whole might wane a little or even be replaced by something steadier and more satisfying. If she is able to complete these objects, the thinking would have gone, objects that are going to be useful to other people, then readers will have reason to believe she might eventually be able to complete what? Her development, I suppose. Or continue it, anyway, picking up from where it was stalled, first by her mother's life and then by her death.

Q: What's next for you as a writer?

A: My next book will be a collection—a novella and stories. I'm working on the novella now. It's based on some pages I wrote a really long time ago, and it's been fun finding my way back to this old material, remembering what drew me to it in the first place, but also seeing things I'll have to change in order for it to be interesting to me now.

**To request a review copy or schedule an interview, please contact:
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