

“The First Spark—How I Became a Writer”

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I had my first thoughts, first baby steps. Both exciting and nerve-racking. I'd been wanting to write fiction ever since I was a child, and my childhood friends thought I was a great storyteller, a confabulator to be sure, so much so that when I was reporting on actual events, I was often dismissed as constructing another unbelievably tall tale. So why not take the leap into the realm of storytelling? Everyone thought I was telling stories anyway.

So how did I arrive at the crazy idea that I could write a novel and have it published? I didn't just wake up one morning and decide to write the Great American Novel. I had been an academic—of Buddhism, no less, so fiction was only something I read in my spare time, albeit obsessively. But then again, Buddhism had influenced me deeply. I wanted to write a novel incorporating the theory of karma. And I wanted to contrast it with my upbringing as a Catholic in a convent school.

I wanted to look at how we form our own identities, where we think they come from, how we can make up myths for ourselves and believe them. I had spent much of my academic career studying, teaching and writing about Buddhist myths, and now I wanted to write about a family entwined with both Catholic guilt and Buddhist karma.

I had been a scribbler as far back as I could remember: childhood diaries, high school newspaper editor, college student writer for Cliff Notes. But what did I have to say that was a fully constructed novel? I wanted to write like my favorite authors: Anne Tyler, Tracey Letts, Elizabeth Strout, J. Courtney Sullivan. A family saga. What our parents give us from their own history, and how that shapes us as human beings. How much are we the product of the cultural and familial myths that gave

rise to us? Family is our earliest social bond.

I wanted to write about family saga within the Buddhist/Catholic dynamic. A story of the moral choices we make: trying to do the right thing, sometimes doing the wrong thing, leaving family exposed and in a vulnerable position. The challenge was to figure out how the various elements flowed, how they came together to tell a story that was resonant not just for me, but also for the reader. Perhaps as the writer, I would be the only reader—but I needed to write the story anyway. The time was now or never, at least for me.

My debut novel, *Things Unsaid*, has been with me, in the works, for more than five years! It seemed a bit embarrassing, saying I was writing a novel to my friends. “Oh yeah, sure, write a novel—ha, ha, ha. Doesn’t everyone?”

But I knew I would be disappointed in myself if I didn’t even try. I might not get my story published, but I was determined to keep going and find out. So, I laid out a plan to write on a daily basis. Sometimes that plan didn’t happen. It took me almost five years to complete *Things Unsaid*.

My novel portrays three generations of a highly dysfunctional family, filled with heartbreak and torment. I feel very strongly about Jules Foster, the main character, and her family and their agonized interactions because they are essentially sharing the secrets that families had in the sixties growing up in the Midwest. The narrative combining the protagonist’s Catholic upbringing with the karmic consequences of her actions poured out of me onto the page in a nearly constant stream, writing pages that later, when I read them, seemed as if they came from another writer.

The publication of *Things Unsaid* is a dream come true, one I thought, in the beginning, was far-fetched. So if you ever have thought about being a novelist, don’t give up on your dream. It’s incredibly hard work. And you must have extreme confidence in yourself, even when the critic inside you raises its ugly head. But if

you are determined and put everything you can into it, you'll get there. And many writers will support you on that journey.