

Author Interview:

What made you decide to write this book?

Way back, I fell head over heels for the Newbery Medal winning book, *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle, and began to fancy myself a writer as a result. I was so smitten, that I actually inflicted my prose upon my entire third grade class. Given the disinterested reaction of classmates, I swiftly put the notion to rest. But the longing to write fiction still stirred, so many years later, after finishing my non-fiction book, *The Rebellious Body*, I challenged myself to learn to write.

Several New-Age events inspired the platform for this book. I met a healer, whom I took to be a saint, who actually laid hands upon me and seemed to cure me of an illness. Sometime after that, I tried to reconnect with him and learned that he was serving prison time for sexual assault. Assuming a huge miscarriage of justice had transpired, I began to investigate, only to find that the man I'd revered was not such a good guy after all.

About that time, drawn to the humble modesty of its founding director, I attended a school for enlightenment and healing. Word got round that our holy, revered guru was sleeping with students and teachers alike. Three years later, when confronted at our graduation, he denied it. I figured that the details of his private life were none of our business, but the incident did unmask him when he raged at us for questioning him.

Last I heard this man re-titled himself a Swami, meaning, *enlightened master*, moved to the East Coast, and established an ashram. By chance I came across a cult-related blog post about his establishment, wherein a father was desperately trying to extract his son from the clutches of this Swami's teachings.

Not that I have personally been harmed by a guru or a teacher, but these two incidents set the stage for this novel.

What has changed for you since the publication of your first book,

Oh, gee, the world of publishing since 1996, when *The Rebellious Body* came to print, is vastly different. Back then, I had an agent, and a real live publishing house took my book. I went through all the gyrations authors go through: talk shows, radio interviews, wrote articles, and attended book signings. Also, book reviews and news articles were written about the book.

Pretty much, I was hands-on regarding the publicity for my first book, so I have a realistic grasp of the challenges as to what it takes to sell a book. I'm game to do it again, but this time I know what actions are a waste and where my time and attention are best focused. For instance, I do not excel at public speaking, so I plan to minimize my focus for this novel in that direction.

I am not techno-savvy, so it's tough for me to stay abreast of the swiftly changing world of social media. I do, however, plan to challenge myself in that regard; it might help keep my brain juices youthful.

Are you ready to see your novel as a movie?

I'd love to have *The Worship of Walker Judson* made into a film, but that would be a huge longshot. My sister-in-law, Cristen Carr Strubbe, works in the industry, and so I have a pretty keen sense as to how impossibly tough it is to succeed in that scene. As a film, the story would need to be greatly condensed,

which is fine with me.

When I began writing the book, I imagined Uma Thurman as Lauren. Given the long interval taken to write it, I believed she's aged out.

You've worked in mental health for over 30 years and are familiar with the world of energy healing as well. Did you base any of your characters on people you know?

In many regards, Lauren is an autobiographical character. I wore a brace much like the one described in the book and got shunned, as well. Another influencing factor, being raised Catholic, I adored martyrs and fancied that I just might become one.

Walker Judson is a combination of junk from my brain and personal experiences, positive and negative, with teachers and healers. Basically, the other characters are composites of individuals I encountered over time. Due to confidentiality, I cannot share names of patients whom I worked with in mental health, but my contact with hoarders gave me an inspired wealth of material to work from that landed on the novel's pages.

What authors have influenced you?

I gulp down books, be they wonderful, complex, outstanding, or poorly written—even stupid ones. Truly, I enjoy reading really bad—sometimes popular—novels, as they give me hope that my book too may find acceptance.

Mostly, I enjoy a specific book, not necessarily the author's entire works. Right now, I'm enamored of Lionel Schrivner, In particular, I'm astounded by her novel, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. In her interviews she comes across extremely blunt and doesn't seem to give a hoot what others think; I admire that about her. While I can't say that I loved Jon Clinch's debut novel, *Finn*, I was spellbound by it. One of the more disturbing books I've read was *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy. Very spare, incredibly chilling; its essence clung to me days after. And of course, I've learned much about courtroom, legal, and prison-related topics from John Grisham's novels. My favorite novel of all time is *A Fine Balance*, by Rohinton Mistry. Its a magnificent tale that captures the heroic dignity and heroism found in human suffering, set alongside the cruelty and corruption that is India. I adored the characters and was greatly impacted by the writing.

What have you given up to write?

The better question may actually be: what did I give up to not write? Since this book has been nearly twenty-five years in the making, there were long intervals when I was unable to write. For a long periods I was ill and unable to write. There have been family crises, when I had to stop writing to take care of ill family. I stopped writing during a three year interval to take care of my Mom subsequently died. During those roughest of times the idea of this book's existence kept me going and sparked hope within me.

Since I'm a fiercely tenacious, disciplined sort, I don't really feel that I gave up much to write. I'm not a big socializer, am not much of a joiner of groups of any kind, and so what I gave up to write this novel was my unstructured, sitting around time.

What does it take to write a book?

As mentioned, a serious writer needs to be tremendously tenacious and focused. While writing this book, I spent heaps of time living inside my head. This was particularly true during a two year interval while I was ill and bed-bound. When fully immersed, when the muse overtook me, be it mid-conversation, while grocery shopping or out for a walk, I'd grab a scrap of paper, a napkin, a page from my check book, and write down words as they burst forth. Neglect to do so, and they'd fade, as if I'd dreamed them.

If I don't give writing precedence over other matters and create time for it, clearly no prose ever shapes itself. I write best first thing in the morning, going straight to the computer while my mind is fresh. I cannot write late in the day, as my brain becomes mush. As I get older, my attention span has diminished, so I need to take frequent breaks.

Now that the book has been written, how challenging is it to sell?

These days, the challenge is immense. When a novice writer sets out to create a book, they rarely grasp that success does not merely mean that one has written a book; success means that you have to be willing to also get out there and sell it. When I finished my first book, I had no idea that selling was part of the deal. But, unless you're famous, a John Grisham or an Alice Munro, your book won't come to public attention unless you're willing to devote heaps of time and energy to letting folks know that it exists. Depending on your personality, this part can take more effort the actual writing. —Not exactly an author's dream function!

Many marvelous authors write book after book and publish them, but are unwilling to push for sales. If a writer merely wants to write for the sake of writing, that's fine. However, if a writer truly wants to be read, which, in my opinion is what its all about, they have to get out there and self-promote.

Its hard work, not much fun, and can be never-ending. My style is to do a little bit on the sales end each day, dedicating about a half an hour on promotion and then let it drop. Follow-up, though, is critical, because the information you send out will, likely, not come back in search of you. One needs to get back out there, email, call, text, and knock on those doors, yet again.

Who influenced your world as a young person the most and impacts this novel?

First off, during junior high, while I wore the back brace and was at my most miserable, my mom awaited my arrival every day after school. Often, I was in tears and she'd, essentially, fluff me back up. One day, probably sick of my blubbering, she encouraged, "Someday you'll be able to take that brace off, but there are many people who have infirmities that they'll never be able to leave behind. So how about you figure out a way to make the best of the remainder of time that you have wearing it?" That moment was seminal, life-changing. No longer did I see myself as a victim; I saw that I could choose to shape my life, and volunteered at our community association for the disabled.

A couple years later, my pal's mother, Patricia Bradley, invited me to see a so-called healer, Doctor Plumb, who operated out of a storefront church in Mountain View, California. Never imagining such things as healers actually existed, to say nothing of the fact that the gent's hands actually seemed to disappear inside his patient's body, my mind boggled. That incident, be it real or imagined, triggered a lifelong fascination with the realm of subtle energies. I'm forever grateful to Patricia for stimulating it.

Why would the general public be interested in this topic?

News today is rife with stories of abuse: the Catholic Church has priests who sexually abuse children; and Buddhist monks, who claim celibacy and embrace poverty, require disciples to fork over riches and then to have sex with them.

Over the years, other sordid tales of misconduct have also graced the headlines; I'll gab a bit about some of them:

- Yogi Amrit Desai,, spiritual director of Kripalu Yoga Center in 1994, was forced to resign under allegations of sexual misconduct and abuses of power. At some point, he actually acknowledged his actions, and wrote letters of apology to those he'd harmed.

- In 1983, the San Francisco Zen Center was rocked by sexual scandal, resulting in the resignation of Abbot Richard Baker.

- Dharma heir, Osel Tendzin contracted and later died from complications of AIDS. Knowing himself to be infected, he had unprotected sex with at least two of his male students. One of them later died of the AIDS virus.

Cults, at the behest of megalomaniacs, such as Jim Jones, require their followers to commit mass suicide. Along a slightly different vein, politicians, athletes, and entertainers, specifically, Bill Clinton, Anthony Weiner, Tiger Woods, and Michael Jackson, violated the trust of their supporters and fans, destroying more than a few lives in the process. Curiously and notably, other than the mystic, Mother Meera, I am not aware of any abusers being female.

So why are tales of manipulation and abuse rampant among the powerful? Clearly, many of these men possess enormous, profound intellectual, charismatic gifts. At risk of seeming nutty, as many will have trouble wrapping their minds around this, I'd like to use the subtle energy paradigm. By subtle energy, I refer to the universal life force that runs between, and unites all things, sometimes known as energy or vibration. Presently, no scientific basis for physical manifestation of such energy exists, however, using this model, due to the notion that these men tend to channel tons of energy through their bodies, their abuse may be due to the fact that certain of their so-called energy centers are so wide awake and open, this also subjects them to imbalance. In simplistic terms, most would just would say that it is their very brilliance that leads to their undoing.

Then again, why are the followers, the devotees, so easily swayed as to basically place their common sense and discernment in the hands of holy men who manipulate and abuse them? Having briefly been a bliss-ninny myself, there seems to be an annoying tendency for followers to blindly accept authority from a leader or teacher who claims to have the inside track to higher states of consciousness, hoping this will speed up their own path to enlightened.

A possible simpler answer is that most of us want to have a daddy, someone who makes us feel safe, to feel loved, who will treat them special. In Western culture, where many lack a positive father figure, and there is a deep longing to have that influence. So we fork over our lives, giving up personal responsibility and judgment, to someone whom we assume to be smarter, wiser than we are. In turn, that person tells us how to act, what to think and how to feel.

At some point, when and if we wake up, that teacher-daddy disappoints. Along the way, many discover

that they were manipulated, duped, worse yet abused. Rather than take responsibility, they blame the teacher or guru, go off in a huff, and never learn from the grand opportunity to gain insight.

Make no mistake here, I am not about blaming the victim, I am merely encouraging the person who has been harmed to empower his or herself. Otherwise, instead of finding resolve, and seeking help to heal, nothing changes or gets learned, and they stay deeply, irrevocably harmed.

My final plug: I would be honored, delighted to have folks buy this book. Also, if inclined, please write a review and post it on Amazon.