

THE THINGS THAT HAUNT HER

For novelist Caroline Leavitt, her stories begin with a character and a question, and sometimes her own life or phobias

By Robin Garland

Caroline Leavitt's aspiration as a girl growing up in Waltham, Mass., was to be a writer. Reading and then writing, she feels, saved her life. "They gave me a way to escape life," she says, "to imagine worlds where things might be better or different.

"As a little girl, I was sickly. My older sister and I used to buy notebooks to write 'novels,' always about orphaned girls being taken around the world by their millionaire nannies. Illustrated, too! I just loved writing so much; I knew it was what I wanted to do."

Today, Leavitt is the author of nine novels, many articles and essays in leading publications, and four children's books. With her use of dramatic issues involving family, relationships and love, she has earned comparisons at times to Anne Tyler, Sue Miller and Jacquelyn Mitchard.

Some of her novels have been inspired by her own experiences. Writing *Living Other Lives*, for example, helped her move on after her fiancé died in her arms of a heart attack—two weeks before their wedding. In the novel, a man's accidental death leaves three women from three different generations—his young daughter, fiancée, and mother—all coping with

their grief, their needs and resentments, their pasts and futures. Her novel *Coming Back to Me* reflects her experience with a serious, yearlong illness. She wrote *Girls in Trouble*, about an open adoption gone wrong, after she and her husband unsuccessfully tried to adopt a child. In reviewing that novel, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* remarked, "Leavitt has a reputation for writing real-life issue books. But here she does more than present an issue: These characters suffer and triumph with difficulty and complexity. Engrossing."

At the start of her most recent novel, last year's *New York Times* bestseller *Pictures of You*, Leavitt creates a mysterious car crash on a foggy, deserted road, bringing key characters quickly into the story: a photographer fleeing her philandering husband, an asthmatic boy with a terrible secret, and a husband who realizes he never really knew his wife. Leavitt's "near bottomless reserve of compassion for her imperfect characters," *Publishers Weekly* said, "will endear them to readers."

Describing the origin of that novel, Leavitt told a friend, writer Leora Skolkin-

In some of Caroline Leavitt's novels, including these two, the author draws in part on personal experiences or things that haunt her, including personal illness and car crashes.



Smith, in remarks quoted online, how she learned from scriptwriting the value of using character need in developing a story. With the characters in *Pictures of You*, she said, “I tried to build on what they each desperately wanted and couldn’t have versus what they ended up realizing they needed. I kept homing in on why they wanted what they wanted and why they couldn’t get it. The more I kept that idea in mind, the more my characters began talking to me, and the more plot seemed to evolve for me.”

What makes Leavitt’s fiction unique? She told me it is her “fears and phobias” that cause her story ideas to come to life. Interested in this idea and inspired by her tenacity, I talked to her recently about her writing process.

How did you come up with the premise of *Pictures of You*?

Like many writers, I tend to write about what haunts me. I focus on some questions that I think I might be able to answer, when my subconscious kicks in and I start to write. ...

For me, it was the whole idea of car crashes, about how you might feel if you accidentally killed someone, and how you might forgive yourself. You see, I’m phobic about driving, which is why I live in the New York City area. I have my license, but I’ve always been terrified about driving and killing someone.

I really wanted to explore how it might be possible (or not possible) to forgive the unforgivable. But as I wrote, one of the characters began to emerge—a 10-year-old boy with terrible asthma, and suddenly, I was also writing about my childhood as an asthmatic—a shameful, terrifying time for me that I thought I would never, ever write about.

What have you learned about blending your characters into your plot?

I’m a big believer in mapping out my character arcs as much as I can before I even start to write. I try to figure out what it is that each character desperately wants, what flaw is in the character that keeps him or her from realizing what he or she needs, and how these characters are going to journey through the novel and change in some way.

I make tons of outlines, tear them up in frustration, and then write them again, even as I am writing my novel.

What do you work on first, characters or plot?

Characters always come first, because the plot, I believe, comes out of the characters. Usually they bring some question with them that the novel is going to answer. For *Pictures*



Leavitt maps out her character arcs before she begins a story: What does a character desperately want, what flaw will prevent it, and how will he or she change?

of *You*, it was, “How well do we really know the ones we love?” I wanted to explore how we see what we want to see and ignore the rest.

I have to add that even though I might have a pretty detailed outline, the outline is more of a life raft for me so I don’t panic, flounder, and wonder where to go next. The outline almost always changes and changes and changes, but I like the feeling that an outline is there and proves to me that yes, I know how to tell a story.

If you tend to write about your real-life phobias, is writing, then, a way to heal from these and grow stronger?

It’s my attempt to heal my fears. I’m not always successful. I tried to heal my fear of driving with *Pictures of You*, but it didn’t work. For the four years I wrote it, though, my asthma vanished, and I excitedly thought I had healed it. I

marched into my pulmonologist’s office and said, “Hey, guess what? I’m cured!” He laughed and gave me a lung-function test and said, “No, you’re not.”

But if I didn’t heal myself of my asthma, I did heal myself of my shame about my childhood, which really was terrible. By giving so much compassion and love to Sam, my child character, I ended up giving it to myself.

Flaubert said that *Madame Bovary* was him. In a way, all of my novels are about me because they are about issues that haunt or obsess me. I’ve only written about my real-life experience a few times. Once was with *Living Other Lives*, which is about a woman whose fiancé died very suddenly—which happened to me.

Coming Back to Me was about my year of a mysterious, critical illness. I wrote it because I had to. I had been given memory blockers while in the hospital, so when I got better I couldn’t remember what had happened to me. But I kept having these disturbing dreams and memories. A psychologist friend told me that I should create a story about my year of illness, and that way I could work through the post-traumatic stress. So I did, and it worked!

Girls in Trouble, about open adoption, came after a year in which my husband and I tried to open adopt. And of course, in *Pictures of You*, Sam’s childhood asthma is mostly mine.

This isn’t something I deliberately try to do. It just happens. The subconscious opens up, it’s stubborn, and suddenly I’m writing about myself!

Does every novel you write seem like you’re starting at the beginning of your writing career, as if you’d never written a word before? How does your process get you through?

Oh boy, you hit it on the head. Every novel is a totally different creature, and it is always terrifying to start something new. I never know if I can pull it off. I whine and carry on and obsess.

As I mentioned, I always start with a character, and some question the novel will be answering. I also try to have a working synopsis to hang on to for dear life.

I try to write in the morning for four hours every day. Some days I produce seven pages, other days nothing.

How much do you revise and polish your novel until you feel it is worth sending off to an agent?

I rewrite about six times, then I show to three writers and rewrite again, then I show it to my agent. She always makes me rewrite it at least another three times. But I'm always thrilled to have the input, because I see how much better it gets from the rewriting.

How did you sell your first book? What did you do to make the publisher sit up and take notice?

My first sale was to the *Michigan Quarterly Review* for \$50. A story about a daughter resisting her psychic mother that later became my second novel, *Lifelines*.

I had been sending stories out for about 10 years before I got a nibble. When I got the envelope, I cried. Many agents read these little literary magazines, and one in New York did and contacted me, wanting to agent me. I was thrilled!

This agent asked me to come up with an outline and pages for a novel. I had no idea how to write a novel. What I wrote was abysmal—truly terrible. The agent tried to help and was very nice, but I later heard through the grapevine that the agency felt they had made a mistake signing me and they were going to drop me!

Then I won a prize for “Meeting Rozzy Halfway” [a short story], and things took off.

How did you feel when *Meeting Rozzy Halfway* was published as your first novel?

Meeting Rozzy Halfway came like a miracle. I had entered a young-writers contest and hadn't expected to win, but I did—first prize! Instantly, I had an agent who sold the [expanded] story as a novel. I had no idea how to write a

novel or what the publishing business was like, so I had no idea how lucky I was.

I was flown to New York City to be interviewed by *Publishers Weekly*, I was on TV and radio and had millions of rave reviews, and I took it all for granted. I still considered myself a short-story writer, so I wrote and sold another short story, and my agent at the time sold that one, too, as a novel, which became *Lifelines*.

You write about marriage, family and loss. How do you make the transition from hardship to happiness in your novels? Or do you?

Well, someone once asked me, “Why does such a happy person like you write such unsettlingly dark novels?” I think the answer is because it helps me be happy in my real life to explore all the darkness. I do ruin lives in my novels, but I try not to end them. I try to give people some sense of hope, though I never have people walking off into the sunset with everything solved.

Has social networking been a successful tool in getting the word out about upcoming books and tours?

The social network saved my life. I'm always chaotically busy, and I don't have the time to go to a lot of literary events or readings. And even when I do, it's not always optimum, to meet people in anything other than a superficial way.

Facebook and Twitter have been incredible. I've met tons of other writers (and gone on to meet them in person) and had fabulous opportunities simply because I'm on there all the time. Plus, I'm addicted to it. I find it is so much fun to be able to talk to other people without leaving my chair!

Where do you see your writing taking you in the next five years?

I'm hoping to have a movie deal. That's my next dream. I've come so close, but Hollywood will break your heart all the time.

Robin Garland

Robin Garland is a freelance writer currently shopping her historical-romance novel and her original children's series, *Cowlicks and Freckles*, to publishers. She is a script reader for the Scriptwriters Network in Los Angeles. Web: livingtreemedia.com and robingarland.wordpress.com.

THE CAROLINE LEAVITT FILE

- Caroline Leavitt's essays, stories and articles have appeared in many publications, including *Salon*, *Psychology Today*, *New York*, *Parenting* and many anthologies. She also reviews books for *The Boston Globe* and *People*.
- She is an award-winning senior instructor at UCLA Writers' Program online, where she teaches “Writing the Novel” online, and also mentors privately.
- She lives in Hoboken, N.J., with her husband, writer Jeff Tamarkin, and their teenage son, Max.
- Asked once for advice on breaking into fiction, Leavitt told *Psychology Today* interviewer Jennifer Haupt: “Don't give up, no matter how many rejections you get. Write and read every day because that's how you'll get better. Get your name out there by submitting to literary

magazines, online magazines, anywhere people will see you. Network like crazy on Facebook and Twitter because it really does help. Go to writing conferences and enter contests. Start a blog. Self-publish if you have to because some of those books get noticed by traditional publishers. People are always going to want and need stories. It's hard-wired into us, I think.”