

Q&A WITH ERICA WITSELL



Q: You've said that *Give* actually started as a memoir and then became a novel later. What shifted the direction for you? Do you still feel the desire to write a memoir?

A: I spent every summer of my childhood visiting my biological mother, a very complicated woman who had granted my father full custody when I was a baby, and I had long felt compelled to write about that time in my life. However, as I began to move beyond my own memories to the lives of my parents before I was born, I knew I was treading on very sensitive ground. It seemed impossible to tell the whole story without betraying the trust and the privacy of the people who had confided in me.

As I began to trim those sensitive areas from my writing, it soon became clear that to leave things out was to change the truth of what had really happened. And once I began to do that, it was thrilling to realize that I wasn't bound to the actual events of the past. I could make stuff up! Settings changed, new characters introduced themselves, the plot took unexpected turns. I had set out to tell a true story, but then I allowed that story to flower into a work of fiction.

Although *Give* is undoubtedly a novel, it contains enough autobiographical elements that I don't think I will ever need to revisit that territory in a memoir. However, I'm not ruling out the possibility of writing about some other area of my life. I wrote the early scenes in *Give*, in which Laurel struggles with new motherhood, in tears, and I suspect I may have more to write about that stage in my own life.

Q: What began the story for you? Was it an image, a conversation, a memory? What was the leaping off point?

A: Really, there were two. One was the memory of my mother selling my pony when I was very young. The despair I felt over losing that pony was very tied up in my complicated relationship with my mother. The pony became a symbol of how out of touch my mother was with my true feelings. As a mother, I now understand that sometimes we have to disappoint our children, no matter how painful that is for us. Little girls always outgrow ponies; I imagine that for many, saying good-bye to them might even be a right of passage. But for me, it wasn't like that, because I didn't have a secure relationship with my mother to begin with.

The other memory that became a jumping off point for the story was when my birth mother showed me, when I was about five or six years old, that she still had the breast milk from when I was an infant. I don't want to give too much away from this scene in the novel, but for me, it was a very powerful and troubling moment. By that time, my allegiance to my stepmother was already very strong— for me, *she* was my mother— and so it was very difficult to see this physical evidence of my biological connection to my birth mother.

Q: How did you imagine the trajectory of story going when you started getting into the fictional aspect? What shifted or changed as you wrote?



A: I think that when I started writing *Give* as fiction, I intended to stay as close to the truth as possible without violating my family's privacy. However, I was surprised by how quickly the plot took on a life of its own. In fact, for me, writing a novel felt a lot like reading one, except much, *much* slower! I often couldn't wait to write, because I couldn't wait to find out what was going to happen.

Q: Are there specific books or writers that inspired you to become a writer? Did you read specific writers during the process of writing *Give*?

A: When I was a young, my favorite books were the ones in which the main characters long for a home of their own—*Goodnight, Mr. Tom*, *Mandy*, *My Side of the Mountain*—although at the time I never really considered why it was that those particular stories resonated with me so powerfully. Looking back, I am not at all surprised that the book I wrote three decades later is about many of those same themes of home and belonging.

Although *Give* is my debut novel, it's actually not my first; I wrote a novel in college as my senior thesis. I remember well how my advisor, after reading a few very mediocre chapters, asked me rather bluntly how I could expect to write fiction without reading it. I took his words to heart, and they have proved to be the best advice about writing that I have ever received. While I was writing *Give*, I read Cheryl Strayed, Jeannette Walls, and Sarah Waters, to name a few of my favorites. I also feel particularly indebted to Sarah Viren's remarkable memoir, *Mine*; her evocative prose helped me through a particularly rough chapter in *Give*.

Q: The landscapes of California are so richly written. When and where did you fall in love with the state? What made you choose this as the setting of *Give*?

A: Thank you. I went to California for the first time when I was eighteen, to work at a summer camp on an old homestead near Hayfork, a very small town in northern California. I had spent most of my life until then in suburban Florida, but I'd never really felt that I belonged there. California was a totally new world, a place where I could be my true self, much the way Jessie in *Give* feels that she is more fully herself in Baymont. I think that because California hosted, if you will, my coming of age, it will always be an emotionally resonant place for me.

I chose California as the setting for *Give* because of that emotional connection, but also because it has the variety of place that I needed for the story: the suburban dullness of Bakersfield, the gray fogginess of Arcata, the anything-goes atmosphere of the Bay Area, the rural wildness of Mendocino.

Q: You deal with a number of difficult issues here—belonging, home, polyamory, infertility, and desire to name a few. Was there anything that was particularly difficult for you to write about?

A: It was definitely difficult to write about polyamory, because in general I consider myself to be a very open-minded person and I don't think that I, or anyone, has the right to make judgements about who another person loves or how they might choose to structure their lives. However, I suspect that there may be people within the polyamorous community who will take issue with how polyamory is portrayed in *Give*, and I was very sensitive to those imagined criticisms as I wrote. Ultimately, though, I knew that the theme was essential to the story I was telling, so I couldn't just leave that part out. I try to remind myself that this is only one fictionalized relationship in one novel; it should not be held up as representative of an entire community.

Q: You also explore motherhood from a number of different perspectives. Laurel is a biological mother, Sara an adoptive one, then there are the incidents later in the book that blur the lines of motherhood even further. What prompted you to take so many different views of what is considered a very natural state?

A: Because of my strong relationship with my stepmother, I have often felt hounded by the question, “But who’s your *real* mother?” As you suggest, this seems like it should be a very simple question, but it’s really not. In this age of modern fertility and many different kinds of families, it is a question that is growing even more multifaceted. *Give* is just one exploration of a very complex question.

Q: What, if anything, surprised you as you wrote *Give*?

A: For a long time I thought that *Give* might go no further than my Google drive. Even after I made the decision to fictionalize, I didn’t want to risk endangering my relationships with the people I love. However, I have been bowled over by my family’s support for the book, and in many ways, I think that *Give* has brought us even closer. That was definitely a surprise, and it has been the book’s true gift to me.

Q: As a writer, what did you learn by writing this story?

A: I read somewhere that the true challenge of being a writer is not coming up with the story—there are stories everywhere—but rather having the discipline to actually sit down and write them. Although I do think that there’s a lot of truth to that, one thing I learned from writing *Give* is that unless you have a story that you feel deeply compelled to write, it is very difficult to make yourself sit down at the computer, when there are so many other important things to do. When you do have such a story, it is painful not to.

Q: What’s next?

A: My in-laws have said that the sequel to *Give*—which they have *not* read—should be called *Take*, and that has become a kind of running joke in our family. However, my daughter said to me recently, as I was spending way too much time on something book-related, “Momma, *please* don’t write *Take*.” So I think I’m going to take a break from any big projects for a while and give my children more of my undivided attention. That said, there is a new document on my Google drive titled “new novel” and it’s very exciting for me to know that I’ve got that journey ahead of me.

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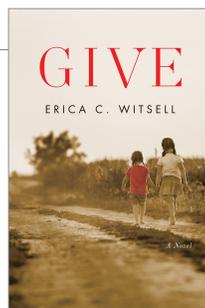
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(678) 316-4150 | terri@bqbpublishing.com

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