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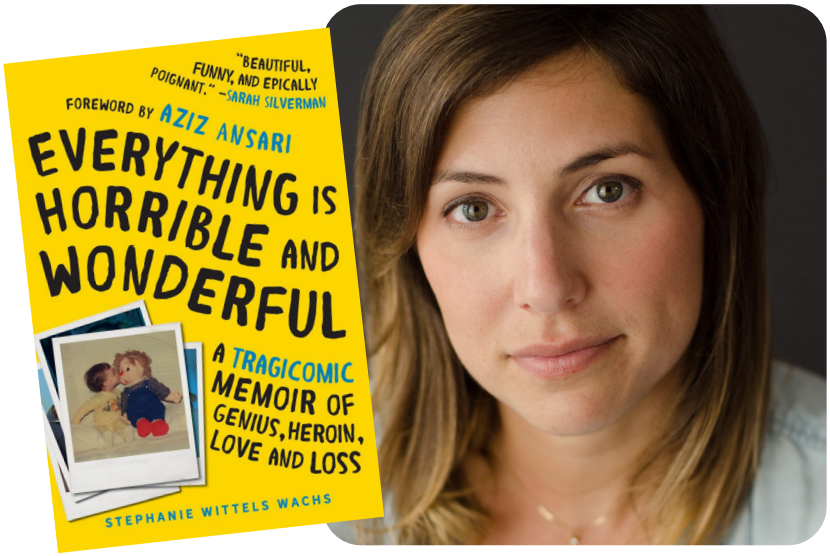
10 QUESTIONS WITH STEPHANIE WITTELS WACHS



hoopla digital: **Can you tell us about your development as a writer? Did you foresee yourself writing a book before this life-changing event?**

Stephanie Wittels Wachs: I've always enjoyed writing but certainly didn't dive into it with such whole-hearted commitment until I desperately needed an outlet. And even once I started writing as a way of processing my grief, I certainly never intended to write a book. For months after my brother died, I wallowed in what can only be described as The Darkness. I needed somewhere to put all of those gigantic, unmanageable feelings. The only thing that kept me going was my one-year-old, who refused to nap anywhere but in the car. So I would sit there with her in the driveway or in parking lots for hours on end, and occupy my time by pouring all of my sadness and anger and toxic rage into my iPhone notes app. It was truly like exorcising demons.

Writing it down certainly didn't make me feel better—nothing made me feel better—but it gave me a concrete place to put my grief. At some point, my husband suggested that I publish this stuff online. And for some reason, I did. Probably because I didn't have the energy to even think one step ahead at that point. I was in such a full-bodied emotional state that my rational mind wasn't in control. So I didn't second-guess myself. I didn't think much about what would happen as a result of sharing my story. I just felt the need to share it.

That first essay was called "The New Normal," which was painfully raw and vulnerable and honest. After I published it on Medium, a literary agent reached out and asked if I had any desire to turn the essay into a memoir. We talked for a long time, and she was very pressure-free in her approach, so I said yes. Because A) writing was something I could control at a time when everything felt very out of my control, so I was doing a ton of it, AND B) it was a legitimate relief to be so honest about where I was.

That first year after Harris died, I would get in bed every night and write about what happened that day or what I was thinking or feeling. I would write for 3 – 4 hours a night. The book is a record of that terrible time. It's what came out.

hd: **The book follows the first year of your grief following Harris's death, interspersed with chapters traveling back in time to depict Harris's life and your close relationship with him. Why did you choose to structure the book this way?**

SWW: When I started writing, I naturally started speaking to Harris directly. That's just the way it came out. I wanted so badly to talk to him again, so I did through my writing. The other thing that I did tons of during that time was to reflect back on how we'd gotten to this point. So when I thought about how to structure the book, the interwoven quality of past and present seemed like the only way to go.

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hd: This book was published on February 26, 2018—just three years and a week after Harris's death—which means you were writing it much before then, certainly in the height of your grief. How do you think this book would be different if you were to write it now versus throughout that first year after losing your brother?

SWW: Great question. I think it would be a completely different book. Completely. Part of why I wanted to write everything down immediately, in the moment, while it was so fresh, was so I wouldn't forget the details. So time wouldn't inevitably blur the lines. I also think a lot of that palpable and raw emotion—most notably anger and sadness—wouldn't be in it. It would be much softer and more careful, which ultimately feels like it would be less impactful.

hd: Can you tell us about your writing process—what was horrible and what was wonderful? Is there something that's come from writing this book that you never expected?

SWW: When I published that first essay on Medium, it was equal parts terrifying and liberating to be so vulnerable and transparent with the Internet. I wasn't sure who would read it, but I figured, at the very least, it would explain to my friends and family why I wasn't responding to text messages or taking more than one shower a week. On a good week.

What ended up happening was unexpected and sort of magical. Once I put my story out there, this massive community of people who had walked a similar path came out of the Internet woodwork to share their own stories. And this was strangely comforting because it was the first time since my brother died that I didn't feel so alone. Once I put myself out there honestly, I felt a sense of connection that I didn't even know I needed until it showed up.

Through the writing of the book, I really started to heal bit by bit until I got to a point where I could get out of bed, go to a birthday party, direct a play, genuinely laugh, and after about a year of wanting to die, ultimately decide I wanted to live. Really live.

I sort of think that writing this book saved my life. It forced me to honor my grief and focus on it and make it the central aspect of my life. I wasn't able to bury it or deny it or hide it away somewhere to fester. It was all out in the open. And, ultimately, it helped me work through all the complicated emotions that accompany the grieving process.

hd: You discuss in the book the way that the grieving process for a tragedy such as this is never really over—that finding a new normal happens gradually. The book took us through the first year after Harris's death. Is there anything you would share about how your experience has changed or stayed the same now that you are three and a half years out?

SWW: Sadly, not having Harris here is our new normal. We've come to terms with it. We've accepted that he is gone and that he is never coming back again. I still miss him with all of my heart and soul, but the weight of that has lessened over time. Most of the time, I'm able to move through life like anyone else, focusing my energy on all the little daily things that occupy our time as humans. But every once in a while I'll have days where it hits me hard all over again and it feels like I just lost him yesterday. Major milestones are also hard. Every joyous occasion is tinged with sadness that he isn't there to celebrate it with us. I recently gave birth to my son, Harrison, and the fact that Harris can't be here to meet him, hold him, bond with him, get to know him—it breaks my heart. I think it will always break my heart.

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hd: The memoir delves deeply into your personal experience of grief, but it also powerfully reveals Harris to the reader. After finishing the book, I felt like I knew Harris in all of his brilliance, charm, and flaws. How does it feel to have captured this portrait of your brother in this way?

SWW: Like I said in the Epilogue, my biggest concern was that I would unintentionally make Harris look bad or paint him in a negative light. This was the last thing I would have ever wanted because I think the world of my brother. I was, and continue to be, his biggest fan. So I hope the book ultimately feels like a tribute to him. I was as honest as I can be about the good and the bad. But I hope my love comes through. I'm glad to hear that you also got his brilliance and charm. Those things were such a big part of who he was.

hd: The opioid crisis has affected so many lives, yet so many families stay out of the public conversation, whether due to shame, grief, or even wondering what their lost loved one would think. What gave you the courage to share this story? What do you think gave Harris the courage to tell you and to eventually be open even with his peers and fans about his addiction?

SWW: I shared the story because I had to. I didn't really have a choice. Like I said, I wasn't thinking much about it—I just did it. I think Harris and I both got some weird gene that causes us to say whatever we feel when we feel it. We come from a very direct and honest family. Honesty and vulnerability are how we relate to the world. And for Harris, it was such an integral part of who he was as an artist, comedian, podcaster, and writer. Harris was also very compassionate. He looked at the world with a sense of empathy that a lot of people don't have. One time on Facebook I was ranting about all the stupid things people say to me about my daughter who wears hearing aids, and Harris called and was like "People are just tying to relate to you. They just don't know what to say. People are trying to be there for you but they just don't know how." If we could deal with this issue with that level of compassion then maybe we'd be closer to finding a solution.

hd: You said in an interview with Seth Meyers that if "being smart and funny and talented and the most charming person in any room could win drug addiction, then Harris would still be here," but, ultimately, "we lost." You talked a bit about stigma and how anyone can be an addict. Can you elaborate on that sentiment—on how you'd advise others to encourage open conversation?

SWW: I think something like 66,000 people died from overdose-related deaths last year alone. And the vast majority of those deaths are opioid-related. Harris was the most successful, brilliant, funny, charming person I've ever known, but the drugs still killed him. It's not a willpower issue. It's a disease issue. It's cancer or diabetes or any other chronic, deadly illness. Willpower isn't what we need to focus on. Harris wanted to be sober, but the drugs still took his life. I hope that comes across in the book—how badly he wanted to do the "right" thing. But he was so completely consumed by this addiction that it ultimately won.

When a successful, well-known person like Harris passes away, it brings awareness to an issue. I hope people realize a drug addict isn't just somebody living under a bridge. It certainly can be. But it can also look like this. Like mental illness, it's not just someone ranting and raving on the street. The person working next to you every day could be mentally ill. Your father, mother, sister, brother, child, best friend. There's a lot of invisible stuff out there that people are battling every day.

I would encourage people to open the lines of communication. To talk about it. Don't pretend it isn't there. Try to get your loved one into a treatment program that is longer than 30 days. I've heard from many people through the course of this journey that 30 days just isn't enough. 30 days sober is another sort of high unto itself. For families, just be there for your loved one. Encourage them. Be part of the rehab process. Go to Al-anon. And try to stay away from being judgmental. They hate themselves enough for the both of you, I guarantee it.

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hd: The opioid epidemic continues to be a national crisis. As a past educator of high school students and now as someone who runs community arts programming, you likely have faced the topic in the classroom and studio now and again. With the prominence and urgency of the current national conversation, do you feel young people today are any better prepared to navigate the dangers associated with this crisis than past generations were?

SWW: I honestly don't know the answer to this. I certainly hope so, but in my experience, drugs are so powerful. It's hard to know.

hd: Your book is lifted so beautifully by Iris and through how your daughter's wonder, growth, and own brand of comedy have helped you and your parents through your grief—and even helped Harris through his own tough times too. If we could close with a happy little #humblebrag about Iris or her new sidekick Harrison, what would you share?

SWW: The other day, I begged Iris to stop growing because she's getting too big. And she told me that if she wanted to get "new grown-up teeth," she has to grow. "But what if I don't want you to get new grown-up teeth?" I asked her. "What if it makes me sad?" And she looked at me with her big sparkling eyes full of love and said, "Mom, it's gonna be okay. It's not the end of the life."

I loved that. She's like a tiny little prophet!

But on a less profound note, at dinner a couple of weeks ago, she (loudly) asked: "What does f*cking mean?"