

8 QUESTIONS WITH PAM JENOFF

hoopla digital: I understand you had a career in government before you began publishing and still work as a university law professor. Wow! When did you begin writing? Can you talk a little about how your writing life and other professional experience has converged or diverged?

Pam Jenoff: I always wanted to be a writer. Ever since I was a small child, I was scribbling down stories and showing them to anyone who would look. And I always wanted those stories to be novels. For many years, though, I could never quite get started on my dream. The epiphany for me was 9/11. I had graduated from law school and begun practicing law exactly one week earlier and, on that fateful day, I realized that I did not have forever to realize my novelist dream. So I took a night course called "Write Your Novel This Year" and started writing. I had to write from five to seven in the morning each day before going to the law firm and it was many years before my first book was accepted for publication.

Now I teach law school and there is a wonderful synergy between my law teaching and writing. I can bring fiction writing techniques to my legal writing students to help them jumpstart creativity and know themselves as writers. I bring the revision skills I learned as a lawyer to my novel writing. I love the solitude of writing and the human connection in teaching. The two go hand in hand on so many levels.

hd: Was there a moment you felt like you "made it" as a writer?

PJ: I used to joke that I couldn't hit a bestseller list with a baseball bat. So when *The Orphan's Tale* hit the *New York Times* bestseller list (on March 1, 2017 – exactly ten years to the day after my first book published), that was a huge moment. I joke that I was an overnight hit ten years in the making!

hd: What was the research process like for *The Orphan's Tale*? We're particularly interested in how you learned about circus life and the aerial arts. Was this story brewing in your mind for a long time or did it come together quickly?

PJ: I found the story about the German circus that had rescued Jews in the Yad Vashem online archive, as well as the tragic story about the boxcar of unknown infants. The two stories came together pretty quickly. Then the most amazing thing happened: I was at Rutgers where I teach and I walked across the street to the library to browse the collection of historical books on World War II and I found a book, *Jewish Identities in Popular German Entertainment 1890-1933*, with an entire chapter about Jewish circuses in Europe before the war. I had no idea!

From there, of course, I had to learn about circus arts. I was amazed at all the planning and skill that goes into it, the seating, the staging of the acts. For the aerial arts, I had an aerialist help me, though it was not until nearly the end of writing the book that I knew what I wanted to ask. And no, I never got on the trapeze myself.

hd: The story alternates first person accounts from your two central characters, Astrid and Noa. Can you tell us about the development of these characters and why you chose to structure the novel this way?

PJ: Right from the beginning, I saw these two very different women coming together. The question for me was always whether they could save one another or whether their secrets would destroy them both. I find it interesting how one needs the other more than the other for a bit and then it seems to change back and forth.

Also surprising to me was the order of their chapters. I assumed it would go back and forth, alternating. But I soon found that at different points one woman or the other needed more space to tell her story. So the ultimate goal became balance, rather than perfect symmetry.





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hd: This book has a lot of dark and harrowing moments for your characters that I'm sure you felt keenly as an author as well. On the flipside, was there in a scene in the novel that was the most satisfying to write?

PJ: There are two: first, a big growth moment when Astrid has to hide and Noa realizes how much Astrid needs her, and second, the wedding of Astrid and Peter in the face of such overwhelming odds.

hd: Your novels typically have settings in WWII-era Europe. What is it about this period that draws you back? Are there other time periods in history that pique your interest?

PJ: More than twenty years ago, I was sent to Krakow, Poland, as a diplomat for the State Department. It was right after Communism had ended and there were a lot of issues from World War II that had never been resolved, such as anti-Semitism and preservation of the concentration camps. I found myself working on those issues and I became very close to the surviving Jewish community in Krakow, with the elderly folks becoming like grandparents to me. My love for the period is very much driven by those experiences.

While I lived in Poland, I also found my preconceived notions about the war tested and changed. I like to explore the gray areas in people and the individualized ways in which people chose to act during the war.

Also, one of my favorite things as a writer is taking a character, often a woman, who in normal times would have lived a very standard life, but through cataclysmic world events is thrown off her normal path. I like to see how she is challenged and transformed, how she grows and rises to the occasion. The war is the perfect setting to do that.

Finally, World War II, with its dire circumstances and stark choices, is just such fertile ground for storytelling. The period really enables me as a writer to put the reader in the shoes of my protagonist and have him or her ask, "What would I have done?"

While my first love is World War II, I enjoy other periods in the 20th century. I've written about Weimar Germany and the Paris Peace Conference, and also about life on the home front during the war.

hd: What do you hope your readers take away from this novel?

PJ: Herr Althoff, the real-life circus owner who inspired the book, said, "We circus people see no difference between races and religions." This book is about refuge and sanctuary and our own moral obligation to help those who need it.

hd: What authors have inspired you as a writer? What are you reading now?

PJ: Judy Blume of course inspired me as a child. Twenty years ago I wrote to her for writing advice and she responded. More recently I met her and she continues to inspire. Natalie Goldberg inspired me through her book *Writing Down the Bones*, which just completely broke me open as a writer. And I am inspired daily by too many writers to name, kind and generous mentors who have helped me along the way: Kristin Hannah, Christina Baker Kline, Jane Green, Robyn Carr, and Mary Kay Andrews, just to name a few. There is this great community of writers out there, cheering one another on. It really is the very best time to be a writer.

I'm reading so much. I just finished *Unsheltered* by Barbara Kingsolver. Presently, I'm undertaking my second #100daysofbooks challenge where every day for 100 days, I post about a book I have loved on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and post a review online. It is just a tiny way to pay forward the many kindnesses I've received from other authors and to connect with readers about our shared love of books.