

REEL LIFE

A NOVEL

By Jackie Townsend
AUTHOR Q&A

1. What inspired you to write this novel?

I'd always wanted to write a book about sisters, and one day my sister and I were walking out of the theater, I don't remember the name of the film but it must have been particularly affecting, because it spurred some interesting discussion between the two of us later (over drinks), a deeply personal discussion that would have not otherwise taken place. The universe had been slightly altered, hadn't it then? By this movie we'd seen? Years and many movies later, I thought, what if I created two sisters, added in these iconic, sometimes obscure, sometimes wacky movies they see either together or apart, couldn't I make up a story of their lives? Which is what I did. I picked the movies, those that had particularly moved (or in some cases disturbed) me. I put them in their respective, sequential timeframes, set the chapter in that period, and then let the movies drive the narrative thread. The mood or feeling that that particular movie provoked in me is where the story went.

2. What aspect of the writing did you find particularly challenging?

The timing and sequencing. Each chapter is based on a movie watching experience. Chapter One's *The Wizard of Oz* is set in 1972 and the girls, 8 and 9, watch it in color for the first time on a new TV. Mostly though, the movies they

see were released in theaters the same year the chapter was set in. For instance, Chapter Two's *A Star is Born*, the Barbra Streisand version, came out in 1974, when the girls are 12 and 13, and they sneak off to go see it in the theater with a neighbor. Chapter Three's *Little Darlings* came out in 1976, it's about losing your virginity, as one of the girls is about to do. Chapter Eight's *Blue Velvet* came out in 1987, the girls are twenty-one and twenty-two and watching the movie in an old dingy theater when the film reel breaks, which sets off a sequence of unexpected events. The chapters oscillate between the sister's voices, and go on until the girls grow into women almost forty. Also, there is a present narrative going on in the present at the beginning of each chapter, where the sisters are on the cusp of forty and their relationship is in deep crisis. The past catches up with the present in the book's climax, Chapter Twelve's *Kill Bill Vol. I*. Getting all the timing right almost drove me crazy. But it was very exciting to see it all come together. I sometimes had doubts that it would.

3. The novel vividly portrays the complex relationship between sisters. As one of three sisters yourself, how much of the novel is based on your own sibling experience?

The sisters in the novel are an amalgamation of every sister I've ever known (or imagined): aunts and step aunts, cousins and cousins-in-law, sisters of friends, step sisters and their friends... a world of sisters, but I could NOT have written this book if not for the experience of having sisters myself, such a unique, idiosyncratic, and deeply personal experience. Sisters are not friends in my perspective. If one has no sister, then the ways in which these two rather desperate characters relate may not resonate or make sense, for there's this expectation out there that when you're sisters you're automatically there for each other. But are you? One answer the book plays with is: no. In the end, though, the answer is certainly something else. Isn't it?

4. How did you select the movies for *Reel Life*?

Painful. I went to IMDB, listed out all the movies that resonated with me each year going back to 1972. Then I watched them. I spent a lot of mornings in my pajamas in front of the TV while my husband went off to work, concerned about our future. I saw *Blue Velvet* way too many times. I think I might have some irreparable damage from that. I tried to pick some movies that were iconic, but this wasn't my focus. I knew from the start that I couldn't alienate readers who

had not seen the film. So I made sure the chapter was about the movie going experience, and that the movie itself was simply a theme, a tone, something easily understood, felt, and described. *Little Darlings*: losing your virginity; *Primary Colors*: believing, really believing in somebody; *Unfaithful*: self evident; *Unforgiven*: can we forgive people for who they are?

5. One of the characters gets cancer in the book. How did this element come about? Is this a personal story?

Many of the things that happen to Jamie in the novel have happened to me. Jamie gets cancer at the age of twenty-one, for instance, as did I. Cancer is not a primary story-line in the novel (nor is it in my life), it is an current that runs beneath the girls' ongoing lives, as there are repercussions to be dealt with later on, like infertility. Jamie is semi-autobiographical, and I fear she got bogged down by me, the real me, which is why Betty turns out to be so much more interesting.

Betty's character is completely fictional. I could make Betty do whatever I wanted her to do, be whoever I wanted her to be, and I found this very powerful and freeing. I started out thinking Jamie was the more intellectually interesting character, but by the time I was done I realized that it was Betty who really palpated, resonated as human. She's a very interesting, vibrant woman—a searcher, a believer in the ultimate good in people. I find her fascinating.

6. Speaking of real, there is word play going on in both the title and throughout the novel between “real” and “reel.” Was that your intention?

No intention. In fact the title didn't come into play until the book was mostly written; a freelance editor suggested it and it stuck. I never went back. What is real verses reel? It gets blurry, for we often times fictionalize our lives for the outside world, have them believe what we want them to believe. Jamie does this with her obstinacy, Betty with her optimism, their mother with her entire existence. We make stuff up, nothing grand, but little things, things that add up and suddenly you're in a movie. You, yourself, are the movie. You're waiting for that final climax, the one that's going to change your life forever. But it doesn't come. Hopefully that's when you wake up and realize it's time to step out of the reel.

7. In the novel the sisters reach crises in both their lives and relationships. Have you experienced a climax-like crisis with one of your siblings?

Actually no. In fact, my “real” sibling crises are much less interesting than Betty and Jamie’s. Originally I wrote the book with this banality in mind, for I do not believe there to be a dramatic arch, climax, or altering resolution between sisters. Rather, the relationship between sisters is found in the culmination of little moments, those hidden in their everyday stories, those that unfold during the course of their lives and in consequence to immediately family, their mothers fathers, for instance.

The original version of this book was written as a series of short stories that depicted the ebb and flow of Betty and Jamie’s relationship. I wanted the reader to make his or her own interpretations, to takeaway a feeling or a sense. But I needed an arch to the overall narrative, I kept being told, and I listened. I wrote in this whole present conflict between Betty and Jamie, what flows in parallel to their backstory, and then unraveled it only to discover that in the end it was just the two of them, back in the same place as they started. Home. Following each other around those hazy, dust filtered rooms.

8. Betty wants to name her baby after their mother’s adopted mother in order to maintain the mother-daughter chain of her existence. Adoption, infertility, surrogacy, maternity—all themes that permeate throughout the novel. How did this develop?

I’m infertile. My mother’s adopted. And my sisters and stepsisters have loads of kids. It’s all so circular, the dynamics of what drives us as women, breaking free, filling our wombs, and then wanting back in ourselves. Why do some women feel nurturing and others don’t? Is it really innate? And then to give up a child, it must be so difficult, let alone surrogacy, in that same vein, what a gift. In fact one of my sisters offered this to me once. I blew her off as crazy, but I know to this day that for her this was no whim, that she would have gone through with it in a heartbeat. Sisters. Amazing.

9. What is your writing process?

I have never been one to procrastinate. "Work hard play hard" has always been my motto. Nine to five every day, sometimes weekends, sometimes seven to seven. Five years of this. I edit more than I write. I edit until I'm blue in the face. One might wonder if a novel can ever be done, but it is. This one is done.

10. What authors have influenced you the most?

Jonathon Franzen's characters are very real to me. I know nothing about his childhood, and yet I feel like we might have been raised in the same family. Melissa Bank's *Wonder Years* taught me the power of subtly, how to find words in pauses, in what's between the lines. Joan Didion writes as if she's swirling around in my mind. My favorite quote of hers: "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear."

11. What projects are you currently working on?

I've completed a first draft of my second book, "Hurray for the Bride and Groom!" In Italian it's *Viva gli Sposi*, a proverb cheered at weddings, though according to the protagonist, Jamie from *Reel Life*, Italy with an Italian is no fairytale. It's my first love story, REAL love story, or, in other words, the antithesis to the "Eat" in *Eat, Pray, Love*.