

Shedding Light on the Dark Side of Love

— AN ESSAY BY —

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For me, every book starts with a longing, with something that haunts me so fiercely that the only antidote is to write about it. But sometimes, the book isn't ready to be written—not yet. It was that way with *Cruel Beautiful World*.

The seeds for the novel sprouted when I was sixteen. I went to a rough high school in a working-class neighborhood where being smart and different in any way was a curse. But I had a few allies. In study hall, my protector and friend was this girl I'll call Sally. She was pretty and kind, and at sixteen, she had a boyfriend who was in his thirties. "Oh, it's fine," she always insisted. "Age makes no difference." They had been going out for years, she told me, and her parents loved him, though her sister felt he was too controlling. "But what does she know?" Sally said, laughing. They were going to be married as soon as she graduated.

I was in my first year of college when I heard the news. She had decided not to marry him; she wanted to play the field, to be a girl instead of a married woman. She was going to tell him when he came to her house that night. Instead, they both vanished, never to be heard from again.

Sally's parents began to fall apart, but her sister kept searching for answers. What happened that day? And why? And how?

Sally's story and her sister's search haunted me, but I didn't know how to write about it. Not then. I hadn't experienced that kind of loss.

And then, years later, two weeks before my wedding, my fiancé died suddenly of a heart attack. I grieved for months, unable to eat or sleep or write. One especially debilitating night, I realized I couldn't grieve anymore. I had to move forward, so I decided the only thing that might help is if I got involved in another relationship.

I met a man who seemed pretty nice, smart, and he wanted to be with me all the time, which kept me so busy that I didn't have time to grieve. And it was this man who made me understand what storms might lurk inside a bright exterior. Though he always spoke in a sweet, loving voice, he controlled every aspect of my life—from what I ate to whom I saw—as if it were perfectly normal. I finally left him after he went into my computer and rewrote a page of a novel I was working on. It was then I realized that even the closest relationships had to have boundaries.

Years passed. Eventually, I got happily married. I had a son. One day, I happened to see a message from Sally's sister online. She was still searching and wanted to know if anyone had any news. The past flooded back to me, and I knew then that I could write this story. I understood what it was like to be haunted by loss. I knew what it was like to be controlled under the guise of love. I just had to burnish it into fiction.

Cruel Beautiful World is about a young woman named Charlotte, a disciplined college student searching for the truth about what happened to her wild little sister who had run away with a much older and controlling boyfriend to live off the land. But it's not just a quest for answers; it's also a journey of self-discovery and change for Charlotte, who begins to realize she can't fix everything that's broken in her life, and the truth might be more fluid than she ever imagined. Because this is a book about the positive and negative kinds of love, I felt there was no better time period to set it in than when the free-loving, freewheeling sixties morphed into the tumultuous seventies with Altamont and the Manson family murders. I began researching the Manson Girls, how they were willing to do anything he asked, how their love for him bordered on worship. I researched the back-to-the-land movement of the late sixties and early seventies, when magazines like *The Whole Earth Catalogue* told you you could get rich by raising worms for fun and profit. I found story after story about runaway girls who thought the world was going to be their Utopia. They were seeking adventure and freedom but instead ended up scavenging for food or sleeping on the streets. I wrote about someone like my friend Sally, a young girl swept away by a heady romance who couldn't see the dangers a controlling man could bring—something I knew about firsthand. But not everyone in that era was a flower child, and so I created Charlotte, who had been responsible

for her sister growing up and was desperate to find and save her—from herself and from the times.

Cruel Beautiful World explores dangerous relationships, just as I did in my own life when I was young. But, like my characters, I learned from those connections what I really wanted and needed in a partner, and what I didn't. There's also real, hard-won love in my novel—and in my life—and I know now that it would not have shone as brightly had I not experienced a darker side of love.