

## Companions in the Mirror: How My Novel Characters Are Allies in My Healing

By Jendi Reiter

Creative writing has magical properties for me. It's a practice by which I transpose the inner truths of my experience into a new key, to discover their underlying patterns and real emotions, disentangled from autobiographical "facts" and the old beliefs that my brain has proliferated around them. For Peter, the main character of my new novel *Origin Story*, writing a gay superhero comic book is how he finally cracks the code of his repressed memories.

My story is both the same and different from Peter's. For me, childhood trauma was more like air pollution than a car accident. It affected my whole body without having any visible point of impact. There wasn't a single incident I could point to, without sounding trivial to myself and possibly other people. How could I explain an atmosphere of invasive intimacy and physical surveillance that (to the best of my recollection) didn't involve sexual touch?

My history as a fiction writer is one of seeing myself reflected in a community, feeling I belonged there, but despairing that my body made me an impostor. How messed-up is it to *wish* you had sexual abuse memories because you act so much like an incest survivor? My fictional characters have rescued me, time and again, by letting me play out alternate life paths in which the conflicts that cloud my mind are amplified and resolved. Maybe Peter and his friends are spirit allies, maybe parts of my higher self, but when I am loyal to them, I always heal. It happened with my first novel, *Two Natures*, when I asked myself "Why does it feel autobiographical to write in the voice of a gay man?" and then realized I was transgender.

When working on the first book, I confided to a friend about my trouble convincing Peter, a supporting character in *Two Natures*, to open up to me or his lover. A survivor herself, she diagnosed that I had unwittingly created (or channeled?) another one—my love-avoidant, kinky, nerdy alter ego with engulfment issues. If Julian, the dazzling and big-hearted protagonist, was my aspirational male self, Peter was the part of me who needed Julian's love to coax him out of the shadows of shame. Several years of therapy and two books later, I was sort-of ready to take the first steps of the hero's journey into the Underworld with Peter.

*Origin Story* is set in the 1990s, a brief period of cultural credibility for repressed abuse memories, before disinformation about "false memory syndrome" muddied the waters. Its multi-vocal story structure imitates the fragmented nature of flashbacks and the detective work that one must do to reassemble one's life from the archives. Peter's first-person narration is interspersed with his comic-book script, letters and emails between the characters, diary entries, social worker reports, and other fictitious "documents" to add backstory or conflicting perspectives. This approach also provides breaks from the intense emotions of the main storyline. Peter needs time alone to recover from intimacy with the reader, you might say!

Peter's central question is why he's sabotaging himself. He's in his first committed relationship with a glamorous man who adores him, but he has risky sex with other men behind his back. As a youth mentor at a group home where his mother is the social work director, he's fulfilling his dream of making a difference, but he puts both his job and his relationship with his

mother on the line when he supports one teenage client's gender fluidity and starts creating a subversive comic book with them. He reaches a point where he has to find out the truth or die trying. (He doesn't die.)

Though my personal life unfolded quite differently, Peter's shame and perplexity came out of my feelings of being unable to participate emotionally in my own life. I was a new adoptive parent, but I couldn't enjoy my baby because I was having what turned out to be flashbacks of the terror, engulfment, and loneliness I had felt as a child. I made my character a writer like me because we both had a love-hate relationship with going deep into our creative unconscious. Incompetent clinicians in our adoption process—probably themselves unaware of their trauma histories—had questioned my fitness to be a parent because of complex PTSD that they misdiagnosed as a personality disorder. I guess they did me a backhanded favor by prompting me to research my symptoms and learn the concept of "emotional incest". I went no-contact with my abusive parent three years later.

Still, I was afraid that my creative writing would unwittingly reveal that I was insane or perverted, just as my physical mannerisms and vocal pitch repelled the clinical psychologist who judged me a failure as a neurotypical woman. Never has an inkblot been made to bear so much tendentious meaning. Peter similarly sees his comic-book world as both a refuge from a life of masking his symptoms, and a mirror he's afraid to look into. I had to heal enough to look back at him and say, "You're not alone."

By the time I cloistered myself in a lovely bed-and-breakfast for the weekend to write Peter's climactic flashbacks chapter, five years after I started the book, I was full of adrenalin for battle. I was ready for whatever my mind would throw at me. Those three days of marathon writing sessions, long walks with "Exile in Guyville" and "Abbey Road" looping on Spotify, and warming up frozen food with a hairdryer, are among the most satisfying memories of my creative career. I didn't uncover any new "facts" about my childhood, but I found my warrior self. I was able to dwell on the details of Peter's abuse and suicide attempt without losing my mind.

Everything else has seemed possible since then. I got the courage to work through my gender dysphoria with my loving husband and bring us to a place where I could start testosterone and have top surgery. Now that my son is twelve, presumably I've vested as his "Mommy-Man," so I'm finally daring to talk about the mental health stigma I experienced in the adoption process. I've been invited as a presenter at a gay men's retreat this coming summer—something that Peter does at the end of the novel. Writing really is magic!