

K N O P F Q & A



A conversation with

MARCY DERMANSKY

author of

VERY NICE

Q: Where did *Very Nice* start for you?

A: *Very Nice* started as a short story published in *Lenny Letter* in a summer fiction issue. I set to write about an inappropriate relationship between a teacher and student. I, personally, never had one, but I had crushed on teachers, an English teacher in high school, especially, but I certainly never let him know.

Zahid, the writing professor in this novel, is based on several writers I know who teach. Writers who have not behaved inappropriately with their students, but who seem to let it all out on Twitter. I am fascinated and amazed by what people reveal about themselves on social media. It almost feels sneaky to me, the access I have to certain people's lives, almost as if I am reading someone's journal. Looking at pictures of their vacations, the clothes that they wear to parties.

The story started with the student and the teacher (and his standard poodle) and somehow kept growing from there.

Q: At the center of your novel is a fascinating love triangle – one between a mother, daughter, and the daughter's creative writing professor (gasp!). What was your inspiration for this?

A: Gasp!

I didn't know at first that was going to happen. I didn't know *Very Nice* would even be a novel. But not long after finishing the short story, a friend suggested that I try another POV. And then another. So, I gave it a shot. There came the mother. And then Zahid. Zahid's subletter, Khloe with a K. She really came from left field.

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I was so surprised by the chemistry on the page between Becca and Zahid. It was thrilling and fun and I knew almost immediately that I wanted to take the book there. I also have this guilty secret: *General Hospital*. I have been watching for more years than I want to admit. Right now on GH, there is a mother character, Ave Jerome, who had an affair with her daughter's boyfriend. Mother and daughter were somehow able to make peace after this, but then, her daughter Kiki had an affair with her mother's new boyfriend Griffin. Soap operas really take their plots to interesting places. I had this impulse: Why not write a book like it was a soap opera?

Q: Which character was the most fun to write? The toughest?

A: Zahid was probably the toughest but he was also *a lot* of fun. He was a composite of so many writers. Male and female writers. He's also a tiny part me – even though I am neither male nor a literary celebrity. I just loved writing his inner monologues. The sometimes pettiness of his thoughts. His appreciation for good food, too – or being taken care of. I always want to have someone take care of me. I could use a good wife.

The writer Emily St. John once observed in a Q&A that I didn't seem to ever write about the inner workings of men and was I interested in trying. Until she pointed it out, I had not given this a thought. I remember telling her that I was not interested in writing about men, but that struck me as *wrong*. As I was saying the words. I think I took this on as a challenge, though it was more than a year later before I started writing *Very Nice*.

I also write from the point of view of Jonathan Klein, another male POV, an older guy in finance. In one part of the novel, he makes rather frank observations about his girlfriend's pubic hair. I had no idea he was going to have thoughts about this until he had thoughts about this. I was so entertained by myself, writing that.

And this is why I love to write. Surprising myself. This entire novel was a surprise.

Q: *Very Nice* gives readers a glimpse into some pretty elite social settings – everywhere from the world of Manhattan investment banking to the wealthy suburbs of Connecticut. What about these settings drew you in?

A: I was definitely stepping outside of my own small world with this novel. I grew up in what was a very middle class suburb in New Jersey. My father sold packaging machines and shrink wrap. He had a small factory in New Jersey at one point. And later, he ran his business from the attic of my house.

The setting of *Very Nice* started with a house. I have a friend who has a sister who lives in a house in Connecticut that is like a dream to me. I think I am like Zahid in that Connecticut actually seems a little bit like paradise. The big beautiful house. The pool. The beach so close by. Houses with private beaches. I had never been to one before.

I also found the CT town itself strange. Very quiet and white and clean and a maybe a little bit dull. I put all of my characters in my friend's sister's house – where I have probably spent maybe three hours of my life. An outsider looking in, though I was technically inside for a short while.

I hope my characters don't come across as awful people just because they have money. Or, perhaps a bit awful, but also good. What happens to me, when I write, is that I become fond of all of my characters.

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Q: You also touch on the coddled milieu of writing, publishing and academia, and do so in a very entertaining and insightful way. Did you always plan to include this thread in the novel, or did it come later on in the writing process?

A: None of this book was planned. I am so worried that the writing community is going to be mad at me when this book comes out. I might be making fun of the very people I respect and admire. It is done with love and affection. I am also the writer that stares at her phone, desperately waiting for an email from her agent or editor as if it was everything.

I exist in the literary world, but up until now I have been careful about what I write (and post) outside of my fiction. I am fairly quiet. I follow the writers who are constantly tweeting away, about everything, their new books, their jobs, about politics, the Oscar nominations, their mental health, etc. I am always paying attention, which of course, is something that writers do. Which can be dangerous. With this novel, once I put something in – and the writing was very stream of consciousness – I had trouble taking it out.

Q: Your novel is very much of the moment – it analyzes the collective breakdown that is our life right now. Why was it important to you to capture this in a novel?

A: I remember after the election, so many writers, myself included, thought *What can I possibly write now?* Maybe that is one reason I turned to soap opera. Escape. I definitely read to escape, but that does not mean that I don't care about the world anymore. I want to lose myself to a story and to characters. One thing that I don't like about soap operas is that they don't seem to exist in the actual world.

Whereas I am often thinking about what is happening in the world, even when I try not to. It is impossible to avoid politics. I worry about people who remain completely oblivious. I want to shake them. I worry that my novel is quickly becoming dated as Donald Trump gets somehow impossibly worse and worse still.

During the time of the presidential election, it felt like you couldn't escape this conversation. It was, for instance, always a topic of conversation at my parent's house. I often felt like the petulant child, bored by talk of the latest awful thing Donald Trump did. And liberals arguing with each other seemed so ridiculous and unnecessary. FB and Twitter became one of the most boring, maddening, but also necessary places on earth. I learned so much through my liberal friends. Which is lucky. I have some friends who are appalled because I don't read a newspaper properly.

It all slipped into my book. I would take a break from writing to check FB and there was a shooting in Texas. And so that happens to Khloe, too. Though she also sees pictures of her girlfriend's cat, because that is how FB works. Rachel Klein's parents fight about politics. And I have donated to the same GoFundMe campaign that Rachel does, helping the family of an immigrant unfairly deported. I am constantly, impulsively donating money. It feels hard not to.

Q: This will be your fourth novel – how is this one different than your previous three?

A: This book is longer than my others. The multiple POVS are new for me. With my first novel *Twins*, I wrote about two sisters, but with this book, I take on a whole family – and outside voices, too. This book addresses the

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political climate, which I haven't done in my previous novels either. I did return to standard poodles. There was a poodle in *Twins* and in some of my first short stories. I grew up with standard poodles.

Q: What's next for you?

A: Good question. I have a friend who has asked me to do the illustrations for a children's book. Up until now, I have only drawn for myself. I give away my watercolor paintings as gifts. But this is a serious conversation. We are focusing on my limited skill set: cats and flowers.

I also am thinking about my next novel. I don't know exactly what it is going to be yet, because sometimes my brain needs a little bit of time between books. But I find that I am happier when I am writing and so I feel certain I am going to be starting soon. I don't believe in inspiration, but at the same time, I am not sure where that first idea comes from. I might be waiting.

FOR BOOKING INFORMATION:

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