



A conversation with

AMITY GAIGE

author of

SEA WIFE

Q: What inspired you to write *Sea Wife*?

A: I got the idea for *Sea Wife* in April 2014, when a friend sent me the link to a news story was about a family who had just been rescued by the Coast Guard. The Kaufman family was sailing across the South Pacific with their two young daughters when they lost steerage of their boat, the *Rebel Heart*. The Kaufmans survived; the *Rebel Heart* was lost at sea. They faced a lot of criticism as parents for taking their young kids on a potentially dangerous journey. People also complained about the \$800,000 cost to the taxpayer for their rescue.

My novels are often inspired by provocative real-world stories. I like to dare myself and the reader to sympathize with folks who do rash or passionate things. To me, the *Rebel Heart* story was irresistible. My previous novel, *Schroder*, featured a father who lands in jail for kidnapping his adored daughter and taking her on a road trip around New England.

But a novel is always personal, too. I'm an artist and a mother, and the tensions of motherhood are real to me. Juliet's experience with post-partum depression was informed by so many women – several close friends, my formative poetic influences like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, and my own mother. My own experience with post-partum was brief but scary enough; I knew what it was because my mother had already described it to me.

Sea Wife is a survival story. The Partlow family has to survive the sea, of course, but it also has to survive itself.

Q: *Sea Wife* is narrated alternately by a husband and wife who have left behind their ordinary suburban life to travel the world on a sailboat. Introduce us to this couple: who are they, and how would you describe them to someone meeting them for the first time?

K N O P F Q & A

A: Juliet and Michael Partlow met in college in Ohio, fell in love, and started a family. And as in a lot of marriages, their differences didn't start to matter until they had kids. Juliet, who in college was a free spirit, succumbs to despair, and loses interest in her own career. Michael is a good guy, a bit strait-laced. He is both attracted to and frightened by his wife's depression, unpredictability, and sharp wit. They do their best. I like them very much.

Out of all the characters I've created, those in *Sea Wife* are the closest to the bone. They inhabit the milieu I actually inhabit in real life. (I live in a semi-suburban town steps from Hartford, Connecticut.) In this milieu – despite its privilege and relative safety – there is palpable tension around keeping the tradition/myth of the nuclear family together. Add to this the stress of our political climate, a degrading environment, a heightened awareness of racial, economic, and gender inequality, and the anxiety of our over-parented and over-informed children.

Q: Motherhood and marriage are put under the microscope in *Sea Wife*. What do you most hope readers take away from these elements of the story?

A: Even today, women succumb to the myth of what a woman “should” be. A “good woman” is one who defers, and gives, and gives, and takes care of other people. And that's a formula for depression. Because where did “you” go? As Juliet says, in the early pages of the novel, “I am a mother. Gradually, I just gave them all away, all my spaces, one by one, down to the very last closet.”

Sea Wife describes this extremely common phenomenon, which is frankly a risk to women's health. *Sea Wife* also dramatically breaks Juliet out of this myth. I'd like for readers to debate whether or not the events in Juliet's life – the sea voyage, and all that follows – are empowering or not, on some level necessary, or not. I'd like women to ask themselves how they can avoid giving up “all their spaces.”

As for marriage, that's just a terribly juicy and eternal subject, one of the persistent topics of literature. I'm a woman, but in order to write Michael convincingly, I also had to imagine the deficiencies of the marriage from a man's point of view. There are several moments when I am ventriloquizing my own husband's complaints about me!

I do have questions about the future of the contemporary marriage. Gender roles and norms are changing – gender identity is exploding. But a traditional marriage is not an especially creative contract; it doesn't always allow for this kind of huge personal or social change. How do you ‘sail the ship’ together for a lifetime?

Q: *Sea Wife* is very much a novel of this political moment. How did national politics influence your writing?

A: It is really hard to keep scratching away at your made-up novel when the world is in such tumult. I started *Sea Wife* before the election of 2016, and throughout, I wondered how the story of this nuclear family's sea voyage was remotely relevant to what was occurring politically. Then this lightbulb went off, and I saw something that was already in the writing: Michael is a conservative, and Juliet is a liberal. Their political affiliations start to strain their marriage more than anything else.

K N O P F Q & A

I'm interested in whether or not there are temperamental aspects to one's political affiliation. The Partlow marriage became immediately allegorical to me. As the daughter of an immigrant, the American project is so important to me, as it saved my mother, and was so superior to the Stalinism she was fleeing from. I'm terrified by how casually we are disrupting norms of our democracy and losing our common ground.

Again, the ship metaphor comes into play. How can we, as a country, red and blue, sail this ship together? Because we have to.

Q: Tell us about the way you've structured *Sea Wife*. How does the book's structure relate to its plot?

A: Well, you can see the themes of political division, gendered difference, and marital tension echoed in the typographical design of the book. One part of the page "belongs" to Juliet, and another part "belongs" to Michael. The dual narration of husband and wife is a huge part of *Sea Wife*. The novel is a dialogue, a duet, and a debate.

As for the narrative structure, it's kind of a mind-bender. The two characters are speaking in different time frames yet simultaneously. I think part of the narrative tension of the book comes from the author's stress in trying to pull it off.

Q: Are you a sailor? What kind of research went into writing about sailing with such authenticity?

A: I have no sailing experience. I had to learn how to sail to write this book. I went on a sailing course in the Caribbean with a hilariously dysfunctional crew and half-crazy Captain. Additionally, I followed several "sailing families" for years, visiting their boats and their blogs. I owe them a huge debt, especially my pal Ben Zartman, captain of the *Ganymede*, who would email me answers to the most specific questions like, "How would the sails be set if you are sailing north into north-east winds?"

I do not think there is one right way to raise children. I am fascinated by the non-traditional lives of people who live at sea. The more I learned about life at sea, the less I judged families for choosing to live there. I'm too conventional to cut the cord from modern life, but almost every day, I fantasize about it, some kind of escape, some kind of comprehensive solution to my problems – paradise, frankly. Paradise for me would mean a relief from all problems.

But what defines Paradise? It's the place you get kicked out of.

Q: In what ways is *Sea Wife* a departure from your previous novel, *Schroder*? What do these two novels have in common?

A: *Schroder*'s themes of parenthood, childhood trauma, and identity are also at play *Sea Wife*. Both Eric *Schroder* and Juliet Partlow are hurt by others as children, and for all their intelligence, they still aren't able to master their own lives until they are forced to. The tension of both books comes from wondering – and hoping – that everyone comes out all right.

K N O P F Q & A

Like Eric Schroder, Michael and Juliet are also unreliable narrators. But they are unreliable in a much more subtle way. They are unreliable due to the singleness of their perspective, to the fact that they are narcissistically constrained by their own points-of-view. This is not a criticism so much as a statement of fact; incomplete understanding of the other (in marriage, in society) seems to me one of the more poignant aspects of the human condition.

FOR BOOKING INFORMATION:

Abigail Endler / aendler@penguinrandomhouse.com / 212-572-2015