

Q&A

A Conversation with **Sidura Ludwig**, author of *Holding My Breath: A Novel*

1. What inspired you to write *Holding My Breath* ?

There were a couple of moments which led to the writing of *Holding*. One was a conversation I had with a cousin of mine, the oldest of my mother's generation. She was telling me a story about growing up in her grandfather's home in the North End of Winnipeg and mentioned sharing a bedroom with her aunt. I was fascinated by this concept. In my generation, it's obviously common for siblings to share bedrooms, but I wondered what kind of relationship an aunt and niece would develop if they not only lived together, but slept in the same room.

Then, later on I attended a writing workshop when I was living in England on historical fiction. The writer leading the workshop handed out a pile of old photos for us to choose from and asked us to pick one and start writing what we saw. The photo I chose was of a young girl, maybe 7 years old, standing by a public pool watching a group of young women swim. The girl became Beth, the woman she was watching, her Auntie Sarah, and the short story which came out of that workshop became the swimming pool chapter in the book. As I wrote more stories using these characters, and exploring others, the book began to grow and take on a life of its own.

2. What is *Holding My Breath* about to you?

To me, *Holding My Breath* is about having the courage to not only dream, but to take the steps necessary to pursue that dream. Each of the major characters--Beth, Goldie, Carrie and Sarah--have ambitions and for various reasons are held back from achieving them. Beth, in particular, has to learn not to be shackled by the issues that plagued the generation before her so that she is free to explore her own life on her own terms. This, I think, is the universal aspect of the book--learning to be true to oneself while still honouring those who love you.

3. Each of the characters -- Goldie, Carrie, Sarah and Beth -- are strong, unique and memorable characters. Were they inspired by people in your life?

Yes and no. The more I explored these characters, the more I felt that each of them were a part of me, of my own struggles and of my own story. I can completely relate to Goldie's need to control, to Beth's desire to both break away and hold her family close, to Carrie's aloneness, to Sarah's ambition. At the same time, when I started writing, each of these characters probably grew out of some story I had heard somewhere in my family. I couldn't pin point exactly what for each one, but I can say that I am always listening to stories that people tell me. I am always evaluating situations as to whether or not they will "be good in a book one day". I am constantly fascinated by the way that people relate to one another and how our actions affect how other people respond to us. So when I start writing about a character, I start with an image, like a snap shot, and I ask questions: Why is this character doing that? What is she feeling? What was she doing before to get her to where she is? And then the characters start to take on a life of their own and they become their own people.

4. Which of the four main characters is your favourite and why?

I love Carrie because she is the quietest of the four and therefore was the most intriguing to me to write about. Her story was also the hardest one to tell because the telling of it needed to reflect her character. Sarah, who is so dramatic, was easier to write because she was all action. Everything she did was seen by everyone. But with Carrie, it was all under the surface and that was harder to draw out, like making someone who is shy talk to you. But then when it did come out, when the story telling felt right, it was so gratifying to me as a writer.

5. Many writers have brought different aspects of Winnipeg to life, such as David Bergen, Miriam Toews and Carol Shields. How is your novel unique? How is it similar? Has your writing been inspired by these writers or others from Winnipeg?

I have long been inspired by Manitoban writers--from Margaret Laurence, to Carol Shields to Margaret Sweatman, and others. Growing up in Winnipeg, I was exposed to the rich writing community that exists there. As an aspiring writer in my teen years, I always found it inspiring to be surrounded by writers who were making my city, and therefore my life, come alive.

That said, what I have found with Winnipeg, or Manitoba, writers, we all focus on our particular community. I am doing the same with *Holding* by writing about the Jewish community. It is not only what I know, but what I most want to explore both as a setting and as a community dynamic in which one grows up. I have not recently read of someone of my generation exploring my community in Winnipeg, and in that way I think this book is unique amongst the wonderful company of other prairie writers.

6. Family is a dominant theme in *Holding My Breath*, and the desire to honour family and cultural tradition yet create a separate identity from it is also a dominant theme. How has this informed your own life?

To a degree, I think this is the struggle everyone can relate to. I left Winnipeg to move to Toronto for university when I was 18 years old. I am the oldest in my immediate family, and was the first to leave. I have struggled ever

since then to reconcile between the guilt of living far away from my family, and the joy I continue to experience building my community and my own family here. Also, as a young adult, I made the decision to lead a more religiously observant Jewish life than I had been raised with. And even now, as I enter my early-30s, I feel the struggle between being true to myself and my life, and wanting to honour my parents and family and the way I was raised. That said, what I have discovered, and to a degree I think what Beth discovers in the book, is that by building that separate identity, by finding out who I am, I am honouring my parents. I am constantly building on the foundation they gave me and using that as a reference to the foundation I hope to give my own children.

7. Set between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, the birth and rise of feminism, female empowerment takes many forms in this novel. Can you expand on this?

This is one of the reasons why I think the book had to take place during the time that it did. Beth's mother's generation did not have the freedoms that Beth is afforded later on in the book. We see the consequences of the struggle of that generation through Goldie, Carrie and Sarah (who really straddles two generations) and the choices that they make. It is then up to Beth to embrace the rise of feminism, and honour these women's struggles by choosing the career path that she does. I have long been fascinated and excited by this time in our history, and, of course, I am grateful for the advances feminism has brought to my generation of women. Choices that we now take for granted, Beth could not dismiss. I really wanted to explore that struggle, maybe even as a way of not forgetting where our current freedoms have come from.

8. *Holding My Breath* also touches upon the differences between different generations of women, which is a dominant theme in many other novels. Why did you make this a dominant theme in the novel? Why do you think this captures an audience's imagination?

I never intended to make any theme a dominant theme in the novel. My purpose was always, from the start, to explore the way that characters interact with one another and to be true to the stories that they needed to tell. Whenever you write about mothers and daughters, this theme of generational difference is going to come through. And I think it is universal. As women, I believe that at one time or another we have all struggled to distance ourselves from the similarities we may have with our mothers (or other women of that generation) as we try and carve our own paths and identities. In this way, I'm not sure that it matters what time period the book takes place because in any time you will find mothers who have expectations of their children, and children who have to struggle to shed that.

9. Which authors have been most influential to your own writing?

I have been influenced by different writers at different times of my life. In many ways, I have been more influenced by certain books than certain writers, but to start:

- Chaim Potok
- Alice Walker
- Alice Munroe
- Carol Shields
- Cynthia Ozick (For her short story "The Shawl")
- Herman Wouk (for *Marjorie Morningstar*)
- LM Montgomery (for *Anne of Green Gables*)
- And many southern American women writers, such as Fannie Flagg and Sue Monk Kidd, for the way that they tell women's stories.