

Sarah Relyea

Q & A

Congratulations on your second book, Sarah! How long did it take you to write it?

I worked on the early drafts for three-and-a-half years, until I had something that felt complete. Because I was working a lot from memory, supplementing that with research on a place and time that I had experienced, the sense of completeness was hard to pin down but very real. Although I had a nagging awareness that the book needed more work, the process had been exhausting. So I put the manuscript aside for a couple of years and drafted another novel. Then I went back to *Playground Zero* and spent about a year revising.

Do you remember when you first began to write?

I enjoyed writing as a child, mostly playing with language and humor. I had a sense of the absurd from an early age, and that was a way of amusing people, or trying to. Once I got to high school and realized that the schools don't do much to encourage self-expression, I began writing more seriously. I wrote a novel with an absurdist title.

Tell us about your writing regimen.

I write best when I can regard it as a job. Jobs should be stimulating and fun, right? And writing books is certainly as time-consuming as most jobs. I often use pen and paper for very early, sketchy drafts. More rarely, I've begun scenes by speaking into a recorder. That works, by the way. Then I type it up, developing the scene as I go. I find that the process of transcribing can help get ideas flowing—as I transcribe, everything's in flux. I never write anything but notes in a public place. That's not because of the distraction, but because I need privacy. Accessing my unconscious is not necessarily something I want to perform for folks in a coffee shop.

Berkeley in the sixties is such a landmark. You would almost have to have lived there to include the level of detail you did. Could you comment on the sense of place in your novel?

Well, I did live there. And many of the things I remembered had a present-tense quality for me long after the fact. I think the place—Northern California is overwhelming on a sensory level—was part of what made it so memorable. I was also very young, the age at which the world is imprinting itself on us. And of course the strange, open, and violent energy of those years.

If your novel were to make an impact, what would you have it be?

Because of television and the omnipresence of popular music, the 1960s was the first decade in which mass media shaped personal memory from the get-go. One of my purposes in writing

Playground Zero was to untangle some of that, for myself and for others. I had always found my experiences in Berkeley during those years hard to communicate to other people. People are very aware of the mass-media images—and they think they're real! Well, they *are* real, in a sense, but they're not personal. I wanted to take readers beneath the media's golden gate, so to speak, into the grainy, novelistic detail.

When this manuscript was finished, did you find that you preferred writing fiction over nonfiction?

Yes. I enjoy the tools of fiction—character, narrative, imagery, sound. Of course, nonfiction can make use of these tools—and the nonfiction writers I enjoy are masters of them—but I found academic writing somewhat confining in terms of style and expression. For me, it was a valuable way of exploring other realities. Ultimately, though, I wanted to look at things closer to home.

Do you have a favorite bookstore or library in Brooklyn?

There are several excellent independent bookstores in Brooklyn. I go to the Community Bookstore and Greenlight Bookstore most often, partly because I enjoy their reading series. The Center for Fiction is also a great resource.

What's your favorite thing to do in Mendocino?

That's easy—hiking in the redwood canyons. Running, actually. It's a primal, almost pre-human experience. My partner draws in the canyons. And I've done some writing in those forests, mostly jotting down ideas for scenes I was working on. There's the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens, as well—a fantastic place.