

**SPOILER ALERT! DON'T READ
BEFORE FINISHING THE BOOK!**

Reporting Lives - **AUTHOR Q & A**

Your main character, Sara Simone, is a Chicago journalist and you're a former journalist from Chicago yourself. Is she you?

She's very much a fictional character, as evidenced by the facts that she's tall, single and has long, dark hair. I'm barely 5' 2", married with three kids and have a gray pixie cut. I'd also like to think that I'm not quite as socially inept as she is; I do have friends! That said, though, of course, we do have a lot in common. She's probably kind of an alternate version of myself. My first reporting trip to Africa, in 2004, was an incredibly important experience in my life and I've often thought about the different paths I might have pursued after it. Though I didn't do all the things she did, I certainly thought about them.

As a reporter, did you do the same work Sara does, getting interviews with grieving widows and bereft parents and such?

Sometimes. It certainly wasn't my regular beat, the way it is hers, but, when a big tragedy happened, most everyone in the newsroom was expected to pitch in. I was a good person to send knocking on doors to get people to talk because I looked relatively harmless. I did do a ton of interviews, with celebrities and others, and found I had a certain talent for them: my tolerance for silence is about a half-second longer than most people's. I'd remain quiet and people would just keep talking. I heard all kinds of secrets and confessions.

What was the most interesting interview you ever did?

It's impossible to narrow it down to just one! Madeleine Albright was funny, charming and absolutely fascinating. She had incredible stories to tell, like about hosting Yasser Arafat at her backyard pool. I loved having the opportunity to sit down with her. Chris Zorich, the former Chicago Bears player, was another one. Years before there was all this research about head injuries in football, he talked about the unbelievable toll the sport had taken on his body and how he would never allow his own son to play the game the way he had.

In general, though, some of my favorite conversations were the ones with writers I admire: Joan Didion, Maxine Hong Kingston, Calvin Trillin, Candace Bushnell, Sara Paretsky, Mary Karr, Elizabeth Berg, T.C. Boyle. Without exception, they were candid and engaging and amazingly supportive and helpful when the subject of my own writing ambitions came up in conversation.

Did they help you with this book?

Elizabeth Berg invited me to join a writers' group she hosted and that group reviewed some of the early chapters, which was terrifically helpful. The biggest boost for this project, though, came from a conversation with the television writer Stephen J. Cannell (creator of a number of shows including *The Rockford Files*, *The A-Team*, and *21 Jump Street*). It was his idea that Sara could redeem herself professionally, after walking away from the story in Africa, by uncovering corruption at home in Chicago. The plot came together in my mind after we talked.

In the book, Sara points out that, even though she's spent time in some of the poorer and rougher areas of Chicago, she is totally overwhelmed by Nairobi's slums. Was this your experience travelling there, too?

The first time I visited Mathare, like Sara, I was pretty devastated by what I saw there. I really couldn't even process it all. But, during the years when I was travelling to Kenya regularly and researching this book, I had the opportunity to return to the Mathare and Kibera several times and to get to know people there. It's hard for us, as Americans, to understand this, because the physical conditions there look so awful and the people there are so poor, but the truth is that human beings, especially kids, are profoundly resilient. There was plenty of optimism, playfulness and joy to be found in the slums, once I got past my pre-conceptions about how pitiful and tragic life must be there.

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Sara doesn't seem to have a lot of good ways to deal with all the stress and tragedy in her life, but running does seem to be an important coping mechanism for her. Are you a runner, too?

I am, though, unlike Sara, I've come to it fairly late in life. I find taking a run to be an excellent way to (literally) get away from all of life's competing demands for a little while. And, because it's healthy, I don't feel guilty about using it as "me" time. I think it also makes me more energized and productive. Usually, I don't try to think about anything in particular while I'm running, but, if there's something in my work that I'm struggling with, I often find that it's clearer to me after I've come back from a run. Plus, I just really like the feeling of accomplishment I get from it. Training for 10k and 15k races is just the sort of project that a Type A person like me needs. I am tempted to go for a marathon, but the time required for training is a little daunting. Weekends with my family are pretty sacred to me.

At the TV station in the book, the male reporters seem to get the better, more serious assignments. Sara feels stuck in the human interest stories. Was that your experience of working in a newsroom, too?

My own experience, like Sara's, wasn't one of outright discrimination. Sara's boss is woman. And when I was working in the Sun-Times newsroom, there certainly were women doing great, serious work and getting amazing, challenging assignments. A striking number of those women were single and/or childless and, in many places, that's still the case. In some cases, of course, women "opt out" of the most intense, deadline-driven positions, but, too often, they're counseled or pushed out of them because their bosses just perceive that it would be impossible to balance that work with motherhood. And it's true, of course, that it is a really difficult balance. That's due in no small part to the lack of support for women who do try. In my own career, I was hired in to the paper because I had a certain kind of perspective. The editor who hired me envisioned me as a Carrie Bradshaw-type. The truth was that my life was never anything close to that

– she was a fictional character, after all – and, as time went on, writing about pop culture and dating trends became harder and harder for me to do. But when I pressed for other work or wrote about other topics, I was told over and over that it wasn't what readers wanted from me or it wasn't my strong suit and I should stick to what I did best. I do regret not toughing it out and fighting for a chance to cover politics or legal issues in a more serious way. I do feel like I let "our side" down by not standing my ground. I guess that's why I had Sara wrestle with some of that, too. Writing fiction is very therapeutic that way.

Do you consider the ending of the book to be a happy one?

I'm not sure I consider it to be an ending at all. Sara's found a powerful sense of mission, to be sure. But it's unclear what she'll really do with it. Still, she's come an incredibly long way from being someone who is almost robotically careerist to being someone who passionately commits to something far beyond her own selfish ambition. That, to me, is a very happy thing.

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