

SHINE SHINE SHINE

by Lydia Netzer

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*A
Reading
Group Gold
Selection*



A Conversation with Lydia Netzer

*"I was trying
to wrestle an
octopus into
pantyhose."*

What inspired you to write *Shine Shine Shine*?

When I started the novel, I was a new mom and I was paying close attention to the transition that women go through when they become mothers. As new mothers, we look at ourselves in a changed light. Instead of individuals responsible only for our own quirks and bobbles, we're now responsible for raising another human, and hopefully not embarrassing or ruining them in the process. Because, you know, kids have been ruined by store-bought cookies and non-matching ballet flats. As I got into writing the character of Sunny, I thought it would be more interesting to create a character who had already gone through this transition into motherhood, and reinvented herself into this perfect, perfect wife and mother. Then the book could start with the moment it all came apart.

How did you manage to make one great story out of so many concepts?

The layers of the book fell into place over time... one thing led to another in a way that had its own logic. That's not to say that I didn't feel like I was trying to wrestle an octopus into pantyhose. I had awesome input from my amazing agent and my brilliant editor at St. Martin's, who assisted in getting several of the octopus's legs into sheers.

What does true love like Sunny and Maxon's look like in real life, and how can couples keep it alive?

To me, true love looks like true commitment. True love is burning the lifeboats. It's the totally unsafe feeling of leaving behind the possibility of retreating from your promise, and trusting the other person enough that you still feel safe. A lot of couples, even after marriage, are toying with the idea of leaving, or dealing in "what if" and contingencies and exit strategies.



When you disagree, or fail each other, or change, and you always have splitting up on the table, it makes a small problem into a huge one, and an argument that may have been limited in its inception can consume everything. Marrying someone, making that promise, you hand them a specific gun calibrated only for you. Ideally, they'll put that gun away and never touch it. Often, though, you see people take that gun out and wave it around. If your partner is committing a divorce-worthy offense like abusing you or cheating on you, don't threaten. Just go. Take the gun out, shoot them in the face with it, and leave. But if your partner is just irritating you, or disappointing you, or challenging you, "or else" should never feel like "or else I'll leave." That's just a weapon that should never be used as a threat.

Is Sunny's epiphany that she can accept her autistic son without "fixing" him a lesson society could stand to learn about children with special needs?

I don't have any lesson to teach, nor do I think there is one right way to parent. But as a weirdo who is married to a weirdo and parenting two weirdos, I am saddened by our modern need to make sure everyone fits in, and functions smoothly, and checks all the necessary boxes. Some amazing and brilliant people do not, and will never, fit in. This is not to say that weirdos should be encouraged to go full-on lunatic, and bark at heating vents and eat chalk. In raising Maxon, who as a child was "special" in an alarming way, Emma Butcher proactively trained him to be part of the world we live in, without stamping out all the things that made him "special" in a good way.

How did you come up with the idea to have Maxon express human interaction through mathematical equations, and who helped you formulate them?

I had this purely fanciful idea that some other person might interpret human interactions by applying

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“My hope for myself is that I can have the confidence to be who I am and a mother, too.”

mathematical principles, and that a math-brained child who was having trouble understanding social situations might be helped by teaching him to think of intuitive things in the language of math. However, I do not correctly speak the language of math, so I needed to bring in the experts: my husband, a computer coder, and my friend Andrea Kinnear, a mathematician and statistician. I came up with a list of statements or rules for human behavior that I thought would translate well into math. Here’s one we didn’t use in the book. My statement: “If you’ve already used a line in a conversation, you shouldn’t use the same line again in the same conversation.” I gave this idea to Andrea, and she came back with:

Statements contributed to a conversation are to be sampled without replacement. If the $A = \text{set of conversational statements} = \{a, b, c, d\}$ and b is sampled, the set of remaining statements = $\{a, c, d\}$

Some are drawings, some equations, some stated like theorems. All appear as if drawn by hand on a whiteboard, and the handwriting is my husband’s.

Tell us about motherhood in your life and your writing.

As a mother, I am full of doubt. I’ve navigated attachment parenting failures and violin lesson breakdowns and karate school meltdowns and epic playground tantrums. Pretty much every kind of doubt that can cross a mother’s mind has left tire tracks on mine. For me, Sunny’s mother, Emma, is confident, aggressive, and makes her choices without looking back. Sunny, on the other hand, has been so crippled by doubts and hesitation that she is denying her children their actual mother in favor of some Stepford simulation of what a mother should be. My hope for myself is that I can have the confidence to be who I am and a mother, too.

Conversation courtesy of Jaclyn Fulwood and Shelf Awareness



An Original Essay by the Author

Dear Reader,

I'm delighted to have this opportunity to give you a little "behind the scenes" look at the construction of this novel. The book took ten years to write, and during those ten years there were changes in my life that affected the manuscript enormously. For example, in an early draft, Sunny's mother, Emma, spent the book perfectly healthy, dispensing wisdom and love from a brownstone in downtown Norfolk. Then in 2004, my own mother got sick and died. Like Sunny, I had to authorize her being taken off life support. I knew then that I had to incorporate the experience into my novel, both to honor her and to address my new understanding of what it was like to be a mother without your own mother. It took me five years to write the scene in the hospital, where Sunny "pulls the plug." When I finally did write it, it was in the dark, in the dining room, with the door shut, and I had my eyes shut, too, so that I couldn't even see the words on the screen. It's the hardest thing I've ever written, and this essay I wrote about my mother's death may help you understand why.

With all my love and thanks,



*Behind
the Novel*

“If My Mother Is Dying”

I am standing on the other side of thick hospital glass from my mother, and my mother is dying. I am four months pregnant with my second child and my first is standing beside me, holding my hand, unaware of what is going on. Inside her room in the ICU, machines are keeping my mother alive, but they are killing her also. A sore has formed under the breathing tube. Her hands are swollen and yellow. The doctor says, “She is shutting down.” They want me to pull the plug.

For months, we had been nursing her, my sister and I. Sometimes she was catatonic, terrifying us. Sometimes she was in pain. Sometimes she was almost all right, and wanted to go outside and listen to birds. We were all supposed to go to a beach house for a month; she wanted us to still go. At that point, we didn’t know she had cancer. “I might as well be miserable beside the ocean,” she said. The doctor said she had inflammation on her small intestine. They wanted her to stop eating nuts.

My mother wanted to walk on the beach, so we took her, slowly. When she got back to the house, she collapsed into a chair and we struggled to get her into bed. That night she called to us, and said, “Good-bye” to my sister. We called an ambulance. They opened her up and looked inside. The doctor said, “She is full of cancer.” Now, here we are with this hospital window between us. I am sick, tired, hopeless, and I want to lie down and die. I am sick from the pregnancy, and am on medication to control it. I have a three-year-old to care for who is barely verbal and prone to fits. I am all by myself. My mother is ninety-two.

Why is my mother so much older than I am? I am adopted. My mother is biologically my grandmother. My sister is biologically my aunt. There was another person, who gave birth to me. There was a father also. The circumstances surrounding my birth are murky.



My parents were married, and not without resources. They didn't want to be parents, so they decided to give me away. My understanding of the situation is limited, though it has been explained to me by many people. Some people say, "Their marriage was on the rocks." Some people say, "They were so committed to their political activism that they did not want the distraction." Or maybe, "They were just bad people, who don't like babies." Or "They only wanted a better life for you." Everyone has an interpretation. It is impossible for me to know the true history of what really happened. There are circumstances that surrounded my birth. That's all I know.

And I know that my adopted mother wanted me, claimed me, loved me, saved me. She saved me deeply and abidingly. She liked to say, "Whatever happens, I'm on your side." And through all my childhood turmoils and teenage angst, she never wavered in her judgment: Lydia is awesome. Lydia makes life great. In the mirror of her opinion, I saw in myself someone that was not trash, to be thrown away, that was not a worthless life, unwanted, unloved by the people who were supposed to be biologically programmed to preserve me. My mother, saint that she was, loved me totally. That is a history I know to be true because I felt it every day she was alive.

She stood, all five feet and one hundred pounds of her, between me and The Circumstances Surrounding My Birth. With the ferocity of her conviction, and all her love, she blocked it from me. I was a baby whose mother couldn't love it, whose father didn't want it, and she stood between me and that, a solid protection against reality. I can still hear her saying, "Oh, honey." And with her panacea of saltines and ruthlessly sharp cheddar cheese, tea with milk, her religion, her firm assertion I could do anything, she defined me for me, and I depended on that definition. Nothing was real

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until I told her about it. Nothing happened until she knew about it. My life flowed through the filter of her recognition, my identity beamed through the prism of her love.

Then she got cancer, and now she is dying. Or, rather, she got cancer and became so sick that now I have to kill her.

I am nauseated. I am sweating. I can't become hysterical because I am pregnant, and my child will lose his mind if I start acting weird. I tell the doctor that it is time. I sign papers. There is a stillness. I consider taking my children away, the one inside me and the one outside me. I will drive back to the beach house, pretend it is not happening. I will never return to South Carolina. I will pretend that my mother is still alive here, holding up her end of the salvation, loving me still. Nurses come. As it turns out, there is no actual plug to literally pull. Machines are switched off, tubes are removed, and that is all that happens. For a while, she still lives. After two days, she is gone.

She was alive, and existing, and standing in the chasm between me and all that, and then I made the decision to take her off the machines that were keeping her alive, and now she has died. She will not hear any more news of my life, she will not say any more encouraging things, and she will not protect me anymore. She didn't even get to say good-bye. Our last real conversation was me talking about the Iraq War and her pretending to care.

Everyone says I did the right thing. That she was old and in pain. That it was a mercy. Everyone agrees on this history. Nobody says I am a murderer, that I killed my mother, that I did something unspeakably horrible. But it was my hand on the pen that signed the paperwork, my doing. My responsibility. And to say I feel guilty addresses only the small selfless part.



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In reality the thing that might have kept her alive was not my guilt but my terror, because a world without my mother in it was a world without fences between me and the wilderness. She died. And I was a castle without walls.

Looking back, I try to re-create the history, and I ask myself again, “Why did I do this?” After she came off life support, she kept on living, for days. We had to wait for her to die, and do nothing. With intervention, with surgery, she might have recovered a bit. Not permanently—life is fatal after all—but temporarily. Enough to see my daughter born, enough to talk to me one more time. So why did I kill her? Was it selfish? She had been grotesquely sick for months. Did I just want it to be done? Was it honorable? Was I just motivated by love and mercy? What made me do this?

It has been eight years since my mother died. Cancer killed her. I know that. I know too that what I did was not wrong. In my still grieving mind, there are many voices telling versions of what happened. Some say, “You kept her alive for two weeks in agony because you were afraid.” Some say, “You killed her as soon as it was decent, because you couldn’t go through the sickness anymore.” Some say, “You’re a good daughter. She loved you. You loved her. It’s simple.”

Ultimately, as I have learned, there is no truth in history. Not in the history surrounding my birth, and not in that small bit of history that happened between my mother and me and a doctor in an intensive care unit in South Carolina. There is only the feeling that remains. Purely subjective, absolutely unprovable, it is real. Her love. My sadness. Our separation. My ability to face the wilderness without a fence. The insides of my castle, exposed. And as it turns out, the marauding hordes have not advanced. The wild beasts have not invaded. It’s almost as if, after all, the wall is still there, protecting me, and I feel it, working still.



Recommended Reading

From Maxon's Bookshelf:

***I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov**

This collection contains the short story “Runaround,” in which the fictional Three Laws of Robotics are first defined. Asimov pioneered the idea that robots could have safety measures coded into their software logic, and then wrote a lot of stories and books about how the robots subverted or misinterpreted those rules in order to be dangerous anyway. As a child I was ravenous for Asimov and read all his robot books—internalizing the idea that humans like robots are hardwired to obey certain principles, principles we find ways to defy all the time.

***Gödel, Escher, Bach* by Douglas Hofstadter**

A seven-hundred-page treatise that attempts to unify math, music, and art around an idea of a “strange loop” through Escher’s illusions, Bach’s canons, and mathematician Kurt Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, *GEB* is a cult classic. It’s been called “the secret nerd Bible,” and as it was published in the late ’70s (and won the Pulitzer Prize), it had a profound impact on A.I. programming philosophy in that emerging field. Maxon would most definitely have read it, perhaps even solved the infamous Mu Puzzle.

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus

by Mary Shelley

Shelley wrote this book in 1818, and everyone knows the story: man tries to create life, man loses control of his creation, madness ensues. I’m fascinated by the idea suggested by the alternate title—that Frankenstein delivered a dangerous gift, like fire, that could change the course of humanity: animating the inanimate. Maybe the monster was the first modern robot? Maxon wouldn’t have read much fiction, and I don’t think he would have identified



at all with Victor Frankenstein, as his approach to robotics was far less emotional and more utilitarian. However, he would certainly have been aware of this seminal work of science fiction.

From Sunny's Bookshelf:

***Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn**

This is the story of a carnival freak show and its owners, who have bred their own freaks by taking drugs and exposing themselves to radiation. Their children, their fans, the strange tails and flippers they all have—what a family. I read this book in college, and it sounded like a permission slip to write something outside the norm, beyond realism. I think it would have had a warm place in Sunny's heart, as she would identify with these outsider characters, especially the girl with the secret tail.

***One Hundred Demons* by Lynda J. Barry**

A collection of comics published in Salon's "Mothers Who Think" section, this illustrated memoir is part comic book, part art book, a genius take on childhood, mothering, and love. Lynda Barry is a literary star—a woman who rips the wig off traditional narratives and paves her own path through story.

***Observatory Mansions* by Edward Carey**

I read few contemporary novels while I was writing *Shine Shine Shine*, but this was one of them. Carey's minimalist prose was like a sharp knife on my own style. I believe Sunny would have loved the protagonist in this novel, the strange Francis Orme, whose job was being a living statue. He owns and maintains an apartment complex full of the most unusual characters—each with their secret shames and longings.

*Keep on
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. Is Emma a good mother?
2. What might Sunny's life have been like if she had never gotten pregnant, and therefore never felt the need to put on the wig?
3. Was Sunny culpable for Paul Mann's death?
4. Do you agree with Rache that everyone has their baldness, or do you think those perfect housewives actually exist?
5. Perhaps Maxon was better off without his dad, but do you think Sunny was negatively affected by growing up without a father?
6. If you wrote a letter to your child, to be read only after your death, what would it say?
7. The book suggests that raising any child is like programming a robot, with scripted replies, ritual behaviors, and reinforced responses. Do you agree?
8. Emma did not want Sunny to marry Maxon. Why? And was she right?
9. Do you think that Sunny seriously considered Les Weathers as a replacement for Maxon, if he should die?
10. Where would you prefer to live: the perfect house in a respectable neighborhood in a historic city, or a strange farmhouse in the wilds of an eccentric rural county?
11. What changes have you made to fit in to a new role you've taken on, whether it's parenthood, a new job, or a marriage?
12. Do you think that motherhood fundamentally

changes a woman, or do you think it's possible to hold on to the person you were before kids?

13. Why did Emma bring Sunny back to America?
14. How is Maxon flawed as a husband? How is he a good spouse?
15. Could there be someone better for Maxon than Sunny?
16. In her worry that marrying Maxon would ruin Sunny, should Emma have wondered if marrying Sunny would be the best thing for him?
17. Is it Maxon's fault that Bubber is the way he is?
18. Did Sunny make the right decision in taking Bubber out of his special school and off his medications?
19. How does a woman's relationship with her mother change when she becomes a mother herself?
20. Sunny felt she had to let her mother's ship fall past the horizon before her own could set sail. Can a woman truly become "the mother" while her own mother is alive?
21. Although Sunny's mother, Emma, was the epitome of acceptance, and encouraged her to go without a wig while she was growing up, why do you think Sunny started wearing them?
22. Why did Emma turn her husband in to the communists when they lived in Burma, and was this revelation necessary for the plot and coherence of the book?
23. In pages 291–93 of the book, during Sunny's labor with Bubber, she at first thinks she overhears her mother and Maxon having a conver-



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sation about Maxon going to the Moon, but later Sunny thinks she must have made up the conversation. Do you think this conversation did occur? Why or why not? If you think it did occur, what do you think motivated Sunny's mother to make the suggestion to Maxon that he complete his mission to the Moon?

24. How is Sunny's decision to abandon her wig after her car accident related to her decision to take Bubber off of his medication?

About the Author



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I'm Lydia Netzer. I was born in Detroit and raised by two public school teachers. We lived in Michigan during the school year, and at an old farm in the hills of western Pennsylvania during school vacations. My world revolved around horses, music, and books. I went to college and grad school in the Midwest, met my husband and got married in Chicago, and then moved to Norfolk when we decided to have kids. We have two: a boy and a girl. I homeschool them and taxi them to orchestra rehearsal, the karate dojo, the pony farm, and many music lessons. At our homeschool co-op, I teach literature and choir, and I love to travel, knit, play my electric guitar, and, of course, read.

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