

Speech delivered to the West Island Women's League at the West Island Women's Centre on International Women's Day, 2012 (Pointe-Claire, Quebec)

Thank you so much for inviting me to be a guest speaker for your annual women's day luncheon. I consider it quite an honour. Like most women, I wear many hats in my life: mother, sister, daughter, wife, teacher, writer, friend, and within each role I am fully aware that being a woman informs each and every one of my actions and thoughts and decisions in a variety of ways. For the next few minutes I am going to wear my writer's hat and talk to you about how women have been instrumental in my development and successes as a writer.

The first two women I will talk about are my grandmothers. Two different countries, two different languages, yet both became single mothers at a time when being a single mother was very hard, not that it's easy today, but back then there were very few if any social safety nets for assistance. My Canadian grandmother worked long hours and so her children, my mother and uncle, were "latchkey kids" at a time when such children were not the norm. Therefore, they were blamed for everything bad that happened on the street. Broken windows – it had to be the latchkey kids; split milk, damn those latchkey siblings; freezing rain, well you know who to blame. But my grandmother had no choice. So she held her head high and defended her kids as best she could. The thing that kept her sane: reading. Her love of books was immense and intense. She had a passion for Charles Dickens and could equate just about any situation in her world, or mine, back to a Dickensian moment. Her old copies of *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*, her two favourites, were yellowed and dog-eared and much much loved. She adored the Bloomsbury group, especially Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey and Edith Sitwell – the more eccentric the better – and she talked about their lives as though they were intimate friends. This love of books she passed onto her daughter, my mom, and hence later to me. Since love of books is the primary ingredient of any writer, as flour is to baking, I must give credit where credit's due.

My German grandmother was not a reader, as far as I know, but she also raised 3 children mostly alone because her husband, much against his will, had to participate in WWII. Since he had lost an arm in the first world war, his job was bureaucratic, and involved delivering aid to war widows across a vast territory; therefore he was, ironically, away from home a lot. From my Oma, whom I only met roughly 6 times in my life, I learned the importance of strength, perseverance, and sheer pig-headedness, qualities any serious writer must have, especially when those rejection letters start to pile up and you don't know if you can continue.

My own mom, I have to say, married ridiculously young, in a way that would give those of us with daughters conniptions: at 17. She had two children by the time she was 19, including me. Her influence has, of course, been vast in my life, not only from the perspective of her enormous kindness and generosity, but from the perspective of the importance of following one's dreams. Her life has not been an unhappy one, but it has been one of wondering what she might have accomplished had she not given up so much at such a young age. As a mother myself, I have tried to stress to my daughter the importance of honouring one's talents, of seeing them through to the bitter end, as best as one can, no matter what those talents are. That philosophy has come to me through my own mother's experience.

Finally, writing mentors, including teachers, are an indispensable factor for any writer. As a teen, I craved the company of strong women, women whose lives were full of colour: women whose lives didn't only revolve around marriage and motherhood, but who lived and breathed poetry and art, as well as the stimulating company of other women. Women are not encouraged by popular culture to seek female friendship. We learn early on that women are supposed to oppose one another, to turn green with envy at one another's accomplishments, and to be forever wanting what others have. That is not what I saw in the strong group of women writers and teachers who took me to poetry readings and writing conferences. I saw support and encouragement and sheer enjoyment. I'll never forget one such mentor who would knit as she listened to others read, as though she was purling their words into her work, or hooking their imagery with the tip of her crochet needle.

Female friendship has been one of the most important things in my life, and in particular in my life as a writer. In fact, the happiest women I know are women with strong female friendships. When women come together, we cry and we laugh and we connect in ways that I don't think many men can fully understand. Therefore, the bond between girls has been a big theme in many of my young adult novels: there is Kat, the heroine of my first novel, *Klepto*, who longs for the days when she and her sister would have contests to see who could pull out the longest French fry, or braid each other's hair on the front porch. She knows her world will be off kilter until she regains that connection that has been lost.

There is Sandra, the heroine of my second book, *Split*, whose mother has vanished into thin air. Sandra thinks a boyfriend is the key to filling the hole her mother has left, but he isn't. It's only through connecting with her mother's old best friend and learning about her mom's life as a youngster that Sandra begins to understand why her mom left. The hole that's left behind when any female bond is broken can't be filled by a guy. I'm not saying men are not important in our lives, but they cannot take the place of women. Sandra learns this, as does Jackie, my protagonist in *Tattoo Heaven*. Her parents have separated and she is lost, caught between her mom and dad's new worlds, trying to feel the spark that her boyfriend, Andy, keeps offering her. It is only when she forges a new friendship with Theresa, a girl who is battling leukemia, that Jackie begins to feel whole again. The bond that they share centers on a tattoo, something colourful and symbolic, that lifts both girls up and connects them in life-changing ways.

In my new book, *Yellow Mini*, three girls take centre stage: Annabelle, who is determined to be an activist and raise awareness about sweatshop fashion; Mary, whose passion is playing classical piano, and Stacey, who draws her status from being the girlfriend of the owner of the yellow mini. In the end, it is Stacey who is most lost of the three. She has dumped her two friends for a guy who loves her mini skirts, but then why does she feel so empty inside? Annabelle has a boyfriend too, but she never gives up the protest signs and pamphlets she loves making for him. And nothing or no one, not even Brad Pitt, could ever get Mary to give up her love for Chopin, nothing.

When working on my books, I am very aware of the message I am giving about what it means to be female. I don't mean to suggest I start with the message – that is a sure fire way to destroy any artistic creation – but I am aware of the responsibility of creating female characters that show girls different ways of being a girl, ways that are different from the girls they see in pop

culture. Girls learn at a young age that all that matters is how pretty and sexy they are. The sexualization of girls is beginning at alarmingly younger and younger ages, with lines of thongs and padded bras now available for 4 year olds! If girls grow up watching music videos, their sense of what it is means to be female is skewed by a never ending parade of degrading imagery. They learn that they exist only as girating eye candy for guys; other girls exist only as more eye candy, all there for the pleasure of men.

As a writer, I feel a responsibility to show girls another reality of girlhood. I want them to see that a girl is defined by what she does, by what her passions are and what her ideas are, not just by how she looks and how sexy she is to men. I also want to offer them a broader definition of beauty than the definition offered up by Hollywood and a ubiquitous celebrity culture. I want them to see that beauty can, in fact, be strange, as I suggest in the title of my fourth book, *Strange Beauty*. Here, Penelope learns the real story of the Queen of Sheba, on old lady she and her friends have always teased because she looks so weird and different. The intricate Easter eggs that the Roma woman painted for no one but herself help Penelope see that the Queen of Sheba is indeed beautiful, albeit in a non-traditional way.

In fact, it was only in preparing my talk today that I have become so aware of how each of my books has, at its core, a central symbol of beauty that in some way defies the shallow definition of beauty that popular and more commercial culture presents. I think this is so important for young women and girls to realize that there are many ways to be beautiful. When we hear the statistics on eating disorders and even the high rates of plastic surgery among young women, there is no doubt that we need to do whatever we can to help young women love themselves, as they are.

Today I wish to thank all the amazing and beautiful women who helped bring me to my craft and whose influence I never for a minute, not as a teacher, mother, or writer, take for granted.

Happy International women's day to you all!