

Q&A

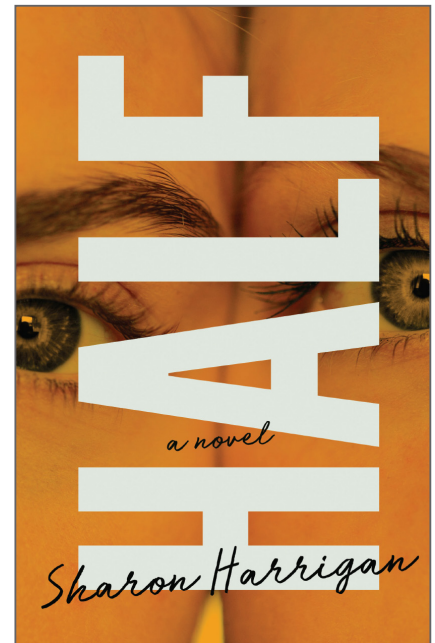
Author Sharon Harrigan, *HALF*, a Novel

"Gripping.... Harrigan's novel will leave you eagerly turning pages to discover what happens next."

—FOREWORD REVIEWS

Paula and Artis are 30-year-old identical twins who speak in one voice—until they can't anymore. Their father's sudden death threatens their uncanny bond. While growing up, they believed he possessed magical powers, but they also lived in fear of him. At his funeral, they retrace their early life—one year per chapter. Will they find their way back to each other, or finally discover the singularity of their true selves?

Written in spare, lyrical prose, *Half* is an achingly beautiful coming-of-age story, sprinkled with Greek mythology, magic realism, and murder mystery. In her thought-provoking debut novel, Sharon Harrigan gives voice to the complex relationships within families, showing how our fierce love for one another can also be the very thing that leads us to betrayal.



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Q What was the source of inspiration for this intriguing novel?

SHARON HARRIGAN. In 2013 I published a short story that won a couple awards (Cecilia Joyce Johnson Award from the Key West Literary Seminar and the Kinder Award from *Pleiades* magazine). Because of this enthusiastic response, I decided to “grow” the story into a novel. The beginning of the first chapter and the end of the last are the same in the novel as they were in the story. All I had to do was fill in the almost-300 pages in the middle. That sounds way easier than it was. I don't recommend this method!

The inspiration for the story—which is probably your real question—came from my own life. My brother and I were super close growing up. Siblings share so much—biology and environment. We were even closer than most because we had to help each other cope with our father's strange, abrupt death when we were seven and eight. At first the narrators were a girl and a boy a year and a half apart, like us. Then I decided to take the idea of platonic intimacy to its logical extreme, so I changed the narrators to identical twins.

“HALF is mesmerizing, a bright and inventive novel like no other. I was swept away, pulled into the conspiracy that is twindom, with its exquisite sweetness and cruelty. The mystery that propels this story forward artfully reflects the mystery of twindom itself.”

—**BONNIE JO CAMPBELL**, author, *Mothers Tell Your Daughters, Once Upon A River*, and *American Salvage* (National Book Award finalist)

Q There have been numerous studies about the mysterious relationships among identical twins, including how they speak, interact, and in some cases, their ability to read each others' minds. Did you draw upon this research to create this uncanny relationship between twin sisters Artis and Paula?

S.H. We've all heard about situations where twins, separated at birth, meet decades later and discover they have chosen, similar jobs, spouses, clothing styles, and so on. Before I

started writing about twins, I checked to see if these cases were real. They are. The mind reading, though, is a stretch. I don't really think people can read each other's minds. I'm using that device as a metaphor for closeness. Not all identical twins have remarkable similarities, but some do. Look at how many twins play basketball in the NBA, for example. Look at the rock duo Tegan and Sara. That said, I don't pretend that my narrators are representative. They are idiosyncratic and quirky, like the rest of us.

"Innovative and inventive, this novel does the impossible. It makes us believe two people can be so close they are virtually the same person. Harrigan's magic trick is so convincing that when the twins lose their bond, we feel ourselves being broken in half too."

—BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON, author, *Corpus Christi* and *Remember Me Like This*

Q One of the most difficult tasks for a writer is to effectively present a child's point of view, and yet you achieved this brilliantly by having your twin sister protagonists speak in one voice, with the first-person plural "we." What led you to this bold decision, and was it difficult to sustain until they break apart later on?

S.H. When I was five years old I promised myself two things: I would always remember what it felt like to be five years old. And five would always be my favorite number. I try hard to keep those promises. When we're children we have so little control over our lives. That can be terrifying. It's too easy to forget that. I want readers to remember.



I chose the "we" voice because it was the only way I could show how extreme their closeness was. And yes, it was hard to maintain, especially when they start coupling with others. But I enjoyed the puzzle of keeping the girls connected in mind and heart even when they are not in the same physical space.

Q You could have used a third-person narrator to reveal the twins' experience of growing up in a harsh, working-class family with an abusive father and submissive mother. But instead, you chose to present a series of vignettes narrated in their childish voices. How did you arrive at this strategy for storytelling?

The overall effect is both chilling and effective, for example: (From Part One, p. 11):

"He was a lion escaped from the zoo. He could hunt us down and eat us in our sleep. He roared and all his subjects scattered. He was king."

"We pretended we were in a crib and couldn't climb out. We made believe we were still at the hospital after being born and there was some hope another family might take us by mistake, the way the cashier sometimes gave Mom the wrong cigarettes at Lucky Seven."

(From Part One, p. 13): *"We spread our palms on our foreheads, over Mom's kiss so it seeped through our skin to those places—in our ribs or hips, ears or thighs—where Dad kicked us on the floor. Our pale skin would swell like purple gumdrops the next day and Mom would say, 'No short-shorts for you,' worried the neighbors wouldn't believe we fell off the bed or bumped into the furniture again."*

S.H. The vignettes were my way of channeling the distilled quality of poetry. The progression of time—a slice of each year of the narrators' lives—was inspired by Richard Linklater's film *Boyhood*. The first person plural point of view was inspired by Jeffrey Eugenides, Julie Otsuka, and Justin Torres. I tried to cut everything except what was searing and essential. A punch to the gut. A swallow of whiskey that burns that throat.

Q While reading your novel, I was struck by how your choice of names perfectly fit the personalities of your characters and some, of course, are derived from Greek or Roman mythology.

MOOSE was the nickname for the twins' abusive father, whose real name was Lou. Moose are solitary, rather than herd animals and they become aggressive when angered.

The twins' mother's name **HERA** is derived from **JUNO**, which in Roman mythology is the goddess of marriage and queen of the gods. **HERA** always put her husband before her daughters.

The twin sisters were named **ARTIS** (after the hunter Artemis) and **PAULA** (for Apollo, famous for playing the lute.) Paula became a professional singer, and Artis joined the Army.

What was your process for naming the characters in *Half*?

S.H. They have variations on the names of gods (Moose sounds like Zeus) for two reasons. Moose gives his girls names that will remind them of their fate, of what he intends them to be. Also, I want readers to entertain the possibility that these characters actually are mythical beings, at the same time that they're human. You can read the book two ways—on a mythical/magical level or on a realistic level.

Q Your use of place, objects, and weather provide a vivid verbal portrait of the twins' lives. A few that come to mind are: lightning, guns, whiskey, guitars, the woods, snow, shoes (virginal Mary Jane's and leopard skin stilettos), single stud diamond earrings (one in each girl's ear), No Trespassing signs, condoms covered with lip gloss, groundhogs, and more. Did these details show up in your first drafts, or did you keep adding them into your revisions?

S.H. As a poet, I always loved using objects. When I was 20, doing my semester abroad in Paris, I worked for the French poet **Anne-Marie Albiach**. She read my poems and said, "They're so American. There are so many *things* in them." Back then, I interpreted her words as criticism; now I'm proud of my objects.

"No ideas but in things," **William Carlos Williams** famously said. And one of my favorite **Frank O'Hara** poems begins, "Kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas! / You really are beautiful! Pearls, / harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins!"

In my drafts, I often have objects that appear only once. In my revisions, I try to figure out which objects are the most meaningful, emotionally, and I keep those and repeat them, with variation, throughout the book, to take advantage of the emotion they carry. **Nick Flynn** calls this technique "using cathectic objects," and **T.S. Elliot** calls it "the objective correlative."

Q The elegance, imagery, and emotional power of your writing in *Half* reminds me of the voices of some other respected authors—Jeanette Winterston (*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*), Christine Schutt (*Florida*), and Justin Torres (*We, the Animals*). Would you say these, or any other authors have inspired or influenced your work?

S.H. It's an honor to be compared to those writers. I admire them a lot. *We the Animals* is the book that probably most closely resembles *Half*. There are many differences, of course. His three brothers don't speak in the same voice, for one thing. But reading that book was a revelation. It combined the feeling of poetry and memoir and fiction (I'm not saying it was necessarily autobiographical, but it felt like it was). The combination of those three genres reflects the way I see the world, so I was excited to see somebody pull it off. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by **Ocean Vuong** has a similar melding of genres, and I've been excited to see that book get so much love.

Q You began your writing career as a poet, but then branched out into short stories, essays, and magazine articles. How did writing this novel differ from your experience of writing your first book, *Playing With Dynamite*, a memoir? Is it more satisfying for you to write fiction or nonfiction?

S.H. My MFA is in fiction, so I like to say I am an accidental memoirist. The story about my search for the answers about father's mysterious death started as a blog post and snowballed into a book. It was a story I needed to tell. It sounds gimmicky when writers say that—but, believe me, I would not have risked hurting people's feelings and opening old wounds if I could have helped it. The whole time I was writing I had bad dreams and a sick stomach. So it's a relief to return to fiction. Not just because no one can complain about the way I portray them, but because readers and critics tend to treat fiction with more respect. People don't call it "therapeutic." They call it art.

Q When did you know you wanted to be a writer and who was the first person to encourage you?

S.H. When I was fourteen, on the weekends my brother and I started taking the bus together to the Detroit Institute of Arts. He later became an art history professor, so those early outings changed the course of his life. The same is true for me. The museum offered poetry classes on Saturday mornings, so we applied and—surprisingly, since we were just kids—they let us in. **George Tysh** was the director of that program, and I credit him for making me believe I could be a writer. I was an early bloomer—publishing poems in national journals while still in high school and giving a reading at the museum at age eighteen. But then I became a young mother/sole breadwinner and later a single mother working full time, and I put my writing on hold for many years. As a middle-aged woman with only my second book of prose, I'm now a late bloomer, too.



Sharon and her brother Louis

Q You currently teach Creative Writing at Writer House in Charlottesville, VA. How does teaching inform your writing and how does writing inform your teaching?

S.H. I love teaching because there's immediate gratification. I can share some simple techniques, and then I can see the real difference that information makes in my students' work—and even in their lives. The payoff for my own writing is way more delayed.

Q Tell us about your writing day. Do you have any rituals or routines?

S.H. There's the ideal (the thing I tell my students to do) and then there's the reality. I get most of my best ideas when I'm walking, so my ideal is: First, in the morning I take my dog

for a long walk and come up with lots of brilliant ideas while she is sniffing the grass. Second, I come home and transcribe everything from my head, and that jump-starts my writing session.

Yesterday I managed the first part. Then I sat down on a park bench and tried to text myself all the plot points in my head, but my dog found a chicken bone and it took me forever to extract it from her mouth, and after that my hands were so gross I didn't want to touch my phone. The day continued to throw obstacles my way until, en route to the supermarket, I realized I was going to forget everything from the morning walk unless I wrote it all down. So I stopped in the parking lot and took out a notebook. I didn't leave my car until I'd transferred everything from my head to the page.



Sharon with writer friend
Leigh Camacho Rourks
in Key West

Q What's the best piece of advice you've ever received about your writing?

S.H. It's hard to pick just one. **From Jack Driscoll:** Love your characters. Let them screw up and make trouble, but be a compassionate god. **From Benjamin Percy:** Get into the scene as late as you can. Get out of it as soon as you can. Also: No dialogue without action. **From Brett Anthony Johnston:** Give your character a tangible desire. Don't say, for instance, that he wants to be a good actor. Say that he wants to win an Academy Award. **From Pam Houston:** Be specific. Don't say you had to finish all the food on your plate. Tell us what was on the plate. **From Mary Karr:** Physical details (what she calls "the carnal") are always better than abstractions. **From Nick Flynn:** Never name an emotion. **From Joan Didion:** To learn about voice and style, copy the work of a writer you admire in longhand. I could go on, but I'm afraid I've already tried to squeeze a whole MFA into one paragraph. Just kidding. Kind of.

Q What are you working on now?

S.H. A braided essay called "Speech Therapy," an essay about what it's like for a memoirist to become a character in someone else's memoir, and an essay about the physical manifestation of empathy ("what happens to you, happens to me"). Also a novel called "Bird Boy," about a young man with OCD who rescues an owl and then the owl rescues him. It has a dash of romantic comedy, a dose of mystery, and maybe (or maybe not) a sprinkling of magic. This list makes me sound so productive. Not true! Most of these are still ideas swirling around in my head while I walk my dog.

Q Anything you'd like to add?

S.H. As I write this, we are all in some level of forced isolation. It's tough. Being a writer means we have to spend a lot of time alone. That's tough too. My advice to other writers—the way I combatted this problem—is to pick a writing buddy, another writer you text or e-mail on a regular basis to check that you're getting the work done and that you don't feel so alone. The fabulous **Leigh Camacho Rourks** (author of *Moon Trees and Other Orphans*) has been my writing buddy since we graduated from our MFA together. If there's one thing I learned from writing about these two entwined sisters, it's how much we are all in this together, how much we don't want to "go it alone."



Sharon with her daughter, Ella