



**In the turbulent summer of 1968,
four high school friends make a pact
that will change their lives forever.**

ONCE, IN LOURDES

A Novel

By Sharon Solwitz

A Spiegel & Grau Hardcover, on sale 5/30/17

“After writing a spate of short stories, [Solwitz] returns to the longer form with a ravishing sense of place, electric eroticism, and a heightened, almost surreal, feel for how intense emotions alter our perception of the world, especially in youth. Solwitz’s surging, many-threaded, complexly insightful tale dramatizes not only personal crises, but also the violence of the infamous 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. **Timely and timeless.**”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“[An] honest and soul-baring novel about choice, fate, and the consequences of youthful idealism...A dark novel that knowingly depicts the confusion of being a teenager and the strong bonds of friendship that form at that young age.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Such a moving read.”

—Paul Harding, author of Pulitzer Prize-winning *Tinkers*

"An achievement of remarkable empathy—and gorgeous prose."

—Janet Burroway, author of *Raw Silk* and *Writing Fiction*

Sharon Solwitz’s newest novel is a poignant tale of teenage friendship set against the accelerating Vietnam War. Four high school friends from Lourdes, Michigan—loyal Kay, beautiful Vera, witty C.J., and steady Saint—make a pact: For the next two weeks, they will live for each other and for each day, after which they’ll commit suicide together. Over the course of these fourteen days, their lives will change beyond their expectations, and what they gain and lose will determine whether they enter adulthood or hold fast to their pledge. Set in the 1960s, this novel brilliantly captures both the sense of freedom and possibility that existed at that time as well as the confusion and violence that accompanied it. For readers of *The Girls* and *The Virgin Suicides*, **ONCE, IN LOURDES** is a haunting and moving novel about the power of teenage bonds that will transport you back to your own high school years.

"Solwitz has an ear **so attuned to teen-speech**, teen-humor and, finally and most convincingly, teen-angst that her novel **crackles with urgency . . . will make you think you're eavesdropping on what you're not supposed to hear.**"

–Rosellen Brown, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Before and After*



ONCE, IN LOURDES author **Sharon Solwitz** has one previous novel, *Bloody Mary*, and a collection of short stories, *Blood and Milk*, which won the *Carl Sandburg Literary Award* from *Friends of the Chicago Public Library* and the prize for adult fiction from the *Society of Midland Authors*, and was a finalist for the *National Jewish Book Award*. Several of her stories are featured in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology* and *Best American Short Stories*. Other honors for her individual stories, which have appeared in such magazines as *TriQuarterly*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Ploughshares*, include the *Pushcart Prize*, the *Katherine Anne Porter Prize*, the *Nelson Algren Literary Award*, and grants and fellowships from the *Illinois Arts Council*. Solwitz teaches fiction writing at *Purdue University* and lives in *Chicago* with her husband, the poet *Barry Silesky*. Read on for a

conversation with Sharon about the richly drawn characters in *ONCE, IN LOURDES*, the differences between teenagers in 1968 and today, and her upcoming adventures in writing and beyond.

ONCE, IN LOURDES stars a group of four best friends: **Kay, Saint, CJ, and Vera**. Each of them is an outsider in their small Michigan town, but each sticks out in a different way. How did you develop these distinct characters?

This was the first piece of fiction I ever wrote that didn't start with some disturbed aspect of myself. Eventually the characters took on ways of seeing that I recognized in myself or other people, but that took a while. The origin or germ was a single image that made me want to know more about it, of a small pretty blond girl with a deformed hand, standing on the edge of a cliff with three other kids her age, all planning to jump. On account of her hand, her one unlovely feature, the girl would be pissed off most of the time. Her voice was snarky. This was Vera, the ringleader of my group of four, slim, graceful, and ferocious in defense of her bad hand. Then Kay came to mind as a foil to Vera. Vera is tiny, slim, graceful, a ballerina; so Kay is heavy. Vera is bitter, angry, says mean things; Kay is ashamed of her weight, unsure of herself, will twist herself into knots to avoid conflict. The process was fairly mechanical at this point. The story or book or whatever it was going to be needed interpersonal drama, so the girls were opposites.

The boys were even more shadowy. I had once had a student named Prince, and the name shimmered. I could picture the kind of parents who name their son after a rock star. Then, character number 4 would be a foil for Prince. Prince looks like a prince, like a Greek God, but he's weighted down by name he bears; let him face off with brainy, Jewish CJ.

Still, for a while, the group of friends didn't gel for me. Their voices wouldn't particularize; they were snarky or not-snarky. And why the suicide pact? Yes, Vera was surly and alienated and charismatic, and the group was close-knit, but why would they do what she wanted, this crazy, ineradicable thing? And why would she want to kill herself rather than bomb buildings? On account of the bluff where these kids met, the projected jump was required.

The project started in the mid-nineties. My characters interacted with each other and the world for 300 pages, but it wasn't working, it wasn't convincing. Then, ten or fifteen years later, after finishing a few other things, I changed the time period from the generalized Present (which kept becoming Past as time, well, *passed* and kept passing) to 1968, and then, Eureka! There's a place in your imagination that opens sometimes with the right combination of effort and luck. Or, maybe because that time period was mine when I was a kid, the characters' family histories started to clarify for me. CJ wasn't only Jewish, he was the son of a Holocaust survivor, a man whose need to prevail in his new country makes him impel CJ toward the same goal, even if he has to use his subtle brand of shame. Lines of cause and effect crystallize: CJ, loving his father but rejecting shame, will hurt himself to hurt his father. Then of course Prince in 1968 needed a new name, and Saint emerged, in part as the locus of my own interest in Zen Buddhism. And if Saint was to be a Buddhist at age seventeen, well, maybe he had an anger problem? Opposites, opposition: the source of drama in fiction, inside a

character and between characters. Kay, who loves everything that seems good and beautiful, loves Saint, and so does CJ, who hides the fact that he is gay from his cherished friends, as his father hides even from his wife what happened to him at Auschwitz. Thus, my logical, mechanical writer-questions about character motivations begin, at last, to advance the plot: Why Vera decided to commit suicide that specific day in August, 1968. Why the other three elected to follow her. Why they gave themselves two preparatory weeks. Eureka, Eureka.

Though the novel shifts perspective, Kay narrates much of the book in the first person. Why did you choose Kay as your narrator? Do you identify most with her?

At the beginning of my conception of Kay I probably identified with her least, but as the book became subtler and richer I can maybe say “Kay, *c’est moi*.” We have in common her weight problem. At the beginning of junior high school I was somewhat overweight and felt enormous, ungainly. From a reader I turned into a social wannabe who read diet books and counted calories daily on a sheet of notebook paper and weighed herself at the same time each week. Then there’s her artwork. In every class I ever took, and in many social situations, I would sketch. Her insecurity I own as well. Our one difference is her generosity and capacity for love; this I only admire. I know people as good-hearted as she is.

As for why I chose her as narrator? She’s a natural empath, the character most drawn to look back on the events, to try to make sense of them, and the one most capable of entering the other characters’ minds.

In the shadow of the story’s events are the protests at the notoriously violent 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. What do you remember about those events as you lived through them, and how did that inspire how you wrote about them from your characters’ point of view?

My first husband and I had just graduated from college and had moved to Chicago to teach in public school. We were involved with the protests and riots like the couple that Kay and CJ meet in Grant Park. Like them we were quasi-political. Like them, instead of protesting, we went to see a preview of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend* at the Three Penny Cinema, and then felt guilty about it, and went down to the park in search of adventure, camaraderie, and tear gas.

Kay’s fantastic illustrations are sprinkled throughout the book. Who drew these? How do they help us to understand Kay and how she feels about her friends?

I drew them, at first with a mouse on the computer page. Actually I expected RH to hire a “real artist,” but the topic never came up. I first made Kay artistic to give her more substance, an arena of competence to ameliorate or balance her acute insecurity. But as the characters developed, the drawings with their shaky lines became Kay’s attempts to render her friends’ beauty and anguish. The last one I drew shows Vera performing “The Dying Swan.” Grace and despair. It’s my attempt to render Kay and Vera, artist and subject.

Each of the four best friends has such an unhappy relationship with their parents. Do you think teenagers today are as misunderstood as it seems they were during the great cultural shifts of the sixties?

Back then, the culture, as it evolved, was a clear divide between the generations. For the middle and upper classes, and even some of the working class, children grew up in the safety and financial ease that their Depression-era parents only dreamed of. Since most young people are self-involved, at least in countries where they have the luxury of being so, they undervalued the money their parents had worked so hard for—even saw it as oppressive. *You make money—so what? Job creators, shee-it!* We had grown up secure (and maybe bored), while American soldiers and the Vietnamese were killing each other, and black people were still being lynched. Crucial things, we felt, had been hidden from us. *Open your eyes, we wanted to say. Help us fix things!*

I’d like to think the divide stemmed from our empathy and idealism, but in fact that very idealism, our ability to empathize with the underprivileged, came from privilege, from the fact that so many of us went to college without incurring debt, and graduated without having to move back in with our parents or burgle neighbors’ houses because we couldn’t find jobs. We were free to wonder if the system was teaching us anything worth learning, and also to ponder the question, Who am I?

I'm not sure, though, that my four misunderstood children typify the Sixties family. They are perhaps heightened or exaggerated examples. In fact, my own parents' objections to my countercultural questing were milder. I remember my father muttering, *sixteen thousand dollars*, what he'd paid for my four years of college, after which I disappointed him by joining a commune, then going to India. On the other hand, when I returned from India I got my mother to try meditation. I remember us in a motel room, side by side on motel pillows on the floor with our legs crossed, facing a wall. My mother, always open to new things, even considered smoking what was called pot then, until she asked my father about it and he looked it up in our home encyclopedia.

And these days? Really, what do I know? But I'll take a stab at an answer. Teenagers are invariably misunderstood. If their parents try to get inside their minds, they will change their minds, do anything rather than be known, because being known means being kept within bounds, and the goal of adolescents, at least in the First World, is to transcend bounds.

On the other hand, unless you're a saint or a genius, the pursuit of the grand and impossible requires safety and leisure. With rising inequality and lessened opportunity, many middle class kids who, upon graduating college, would have gone out to change the world their parents built are on the parent dole now, room and board, healthcare till twenty-six (thank God!). So the cultural gap has narrowed. But a problem remains. If, as I have argued, teenagers forever need to differentiate from their parents, to light out for the territories, so to speak, the fact that there are few remaining territories, not to mention resources to get there, results less in conflict than in depression. SSRIs are used to mask the thwarted need, which may be the subject of a new novel about teens and their parents.

Even after the group decides to commit suicide together, they share a lot of joy. Why is it so freeing for them to think of these final two weeks of summer as their last?

Here is my understanding. Death is primal terror, whether or not you consciously think about it. So, if you can get to the point where you fully accept your death as unavoidable, there is nothing to hold firm against, and nothing to strive for. I write here as an atheist. A belief in heaven and hell changes the accounting. But if you don't believe in ultimate reward and punishment, choosing to die puts you in full control of your life. Your actions have no consequences, for you at least. So you can do anything. A problem arises when you think about the people you leave behind, but for my group of four, that concern comes later, and not for all of them.

What do you most want readers to come away with from ONCE, IN LOURDES?

More than the idealism of the Sixties, I cherish my remembrance of the camaraderie, the pure joy of knowing and loving people outside of my family. I remember looking out the window of my college dorm and thinking that anything could happen in my life, that nothing was impossible. I wanted to put Kay, despite the catastrophe, on the edge of that apprehension, just before it arrives.

You're a professor at Purdue University. What writing advice do you give most often?

- Give the reader a character to root for.
- Make things worse for that character before they get better, or better before they get worse.
- Be brave and humble, open to insights and to other people's opinions.
- On the other hand, after consideration, feel free to reject anything for whatever reason.

How does teaching affect *your* writing?

I teach both grads and undergrads. The best writing from either group is a thrill, and gives me sentence rhythms and angles of vision that I hadn't come across before. Most student writing, though, is a mixed bagful, of glimmers and simple errors, insights and filler—a challenge for a serious teacher. At best, I try to find the source of life and energy in student work, what might launch a real and affecting story, and this is a habit of mind I cultivate in my writing self as well.

You've also led an adventurous life off the page: traveling the world, earning an MFA in printmaking in addition to your writing credentials. You've lived on a commune in upstate New York, an ashram in India, and a kibbutz in Israel. You also once rode a horse through Afghanistan. What do you think your next adventure will be?

I did the travel sort of adventuring when I was young, so I don't contemplate it with the usual hunger. Right now my next projected adventure is my next book, something that I hope will be stronger, more daring, more comprehensive than what I've done so far, on the edge of my current powers.

After that, I might go into medical research. My parents are in their nineties, so I have some time.

You can find Sharon Solwitz at her website, www.sharonsolwitz.com, and on Facebook at Facebook.com/Sharon.Solwitz. To book an interview with the author or to request another review copy of ONCE, IN LOURDES, please contact:

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