

## **An Interview with Susan Welch, author of *A THREAD SO FINE***

**1. One of your main characters in the novel exiles herself from her family after having a baby out of wedlock. Has the stigma been removed from unwed mothers and illegitimate children today? How were they restricted by society's standards and expectations in earlier decades in the 20th century?**

I suppose for a certain subset of women, it has changed. After all, I was an 'unwed mother' when I first gave birth in 2000, as a 37 year old, white middle class woman living in progressive Seattle. Of course, no one but my own mother gave me grief for that. But I can imagine for many, particularly young women not only stigma remains, but a spectrum of economic hardships as well.

What I don't think has truly changed is this: it seems in practice, that women are still on the wrong side of a persistent social more – that babies should be raised in two parent households, and that society itself has little or no obligation to support economically single parents (male or female) so that keeping their babies is at least an option. Don't get me wrong – I am not at all against adoption, in fact, I'm quite grateful to it. It has been and continues to be an important option that requires a rigorous system. I'm certainly not opposed to two parent families – it is, in many ways, ideal. I just wonder whether we continue to miss an opportunity to not only seek language that fully erases the shame around young unwed mothers, but also to provide a practical framework for anyone who might want to keep their babies, to do so with dignity, non-judgment, and societal support.

**2. Upon the passing of the mother who raised you, your older brother revealed to you, at the age of 46, that you were adopted. What impact did that have on your life and the familial connections with both your adoptive and biological families? Were you angry or did you feel deceived by your adoptive family?**

It had almost zero impact on my outward life, since I had by that time sown most of my wild oats, was happily married with children and a fairly stable life. The news wasn't a diagnosis of a fatal disease, and it wasn't winning the Lotto, either. - It was this tectonic plate-shift that affected no one, it seemed, but me. Inwardly, and for weeks thereafter – my sense of self, was rocked to the core.

But I wouldn't say I was angry. To the contrary, at 46 as I first began to process it, I was pretty awestruck that my parents had such intentionality to sit around the kitchen table and consider adoption. After all, they already had a lovely little boy. But in fact, they both wanted a lot of kids, and my mother had been told, after her TB, that she'd likely never conceive. After a string of miscarriages, she began to think my brother was a lucky fluke. If anything, I regret that my brother, who was six when I showed up, had to keep a pretty big secret for a very long time. I don't think my parents understood how strange and probably unhealthy that choice was for him. But in all, no anger there, no need to feel deceived – just a lot of love for their devotion to all three of us.

**3. Tuberculosis was a deadly, dangerous disease in the U.S. during the first half of the 20th century. Patients were quickly isolated for months or years until the infection took its course. What has changed over these many decades in our understanding of TB and have we made progress against fear and alienation of the sick?**

I know that my mother, Betty, kept a little grudge her whole life for the relatives who were too frightened to ever visit her in while in quarantine. A naughty list she never quite released. On the flip side, I believe the experience gave her a deep empathy for physical suffering – she was a country-club mom who loved a good pool party, and a gossip session with neighbors...but when it came right down to it, anyone in her world, from grocer to manicurist – if you were suffering, she was at your side for as long as necessary.

As far as TB today – back in the 40's having TB might carry a stigma around how you contracted it...and of course, the stigma of being contagious, but most everyone knew someone who had it. Today, unfortunately, it has become another example of economic disenfranchisement – prisons, homelessness, poverty.

I don't know anyone with TB, do you? But worldwide, TB, most often latent, already infects a quarter of the world's population. About 10% of people will progress to having an active TB infection, as they become weakened through malnutrition, diabetes, HIV, or some other type of immune suppression. Doctors also forget that TB can lie dormant for decades and be rekindled by Prednisone, chemotherapy or new biologic immunotherapies for diseases like HIV.

So sadly, I'd say 'no, we've made little progress against fear and alienation of the sick on a societal level. We may think we've dispensed with the stigma, but perhaps we've just made them invisible. Although just like in 1946, there are many, many angels out there, from nurses to social workers, teachers and just ordinary people whose every day actions are inclusive and supportive of the sick – whether it be mental illness, infectious disease, or disability.

**4. Religion, particularly Catholicism, plays a big role in the lives of your characters. How does Catholicism and the practice of religion bring comfort to the devoted, even as it labels them as sinners?**

Catholicism plays a big role in the Malone family and it played a big role in my own. My father actually converted to Catholicism, though he swore it was not just to marry my mother! I was always aware of how different, perhaps more authentic, his faith was; having chosen it as an adult after the War.

Both Shannon and Eliza in the book evolve as Catholics. Because their father is a professor of English Literature at a Catholic University, discussion in the household abounds...and they grow up with a healthy respect for curiosity and intellectual exploration. As a result, as each faces challenges in approaching womanhood – especially after the traumas of 1946 – they use their fundamental Catholicism as a safety net of sorts, while stepping outside of its structure quite readily. One sister expands her sense of religion, and embraces the thinking of C.S. Lewis, which is a relationship with a more personal, less prescribed God. The other sister embraces the ritual of Mass as a proxy for the family she's cut off – but her distrust of the Catholic structure that failed her becomes deeply rooted.

**5. One of the characters in the book suffers a terrible, violent rape that changes the trajectory of her life. How has the #MeToo movement prevailed over the shame surrounding sexual assault?**

It's possible that if the Malone family hadn't already been on edge by Shannon's quarantine and the sudden and imminent possibility of her death, Eliza may have behaved differently. She makes her choice to bear the secret of her attack because of her prescribed role in the family as 'caretaker' to Shannon, and 'the strong, smart one, who always manages to succeed gracefully.' Unfortunately, she's not as strong as she thought.

I'd like to believe that in today's world, the same Eliza would seek help, if not from her family, from someone at school, a friend, a therapist. But I speak from a world of privilege that we have not at all been able to shake in the decades since 1946. Yes, #MeToo has provided language and a platform for more and more women of all ages to seek support, and to reclaim their power after abuse. And that is super important.

I have my own #MeToo moments that I have carried around for decades – and my emotions around them, thankfully, have changed, perhaps diminished with age and wisdom.

But, across all segments of society, we are nowhere even close to 'prevailing.' Look at Dahvie Vanity – an online pop star who sexually accosted 21 children over 12 years before a single victim felt compelled – and brave enough--to seek help. What about immigrant women, girls, (or men and boys!) who face sexual or physical abuse by their jailer, their employer, their neighbor, their spouse? #MeToo isn't truly for them. Not yet. We need to lock arms, keep the drum-beat insistent and growing.

**6. The soldiers returning home from WWII—the “Greatest Generation”—are generally portrayed with reverence. However, your novel reflects the long-term toll war and trauma exacted on them. How did military veterans of the time and society deal with PTSD compared to our current wounded warriors?**

I revered my dad, Bud Welch, who at 17 signed up for the Navy and sat in the belly of B-29s flying over Italy in 194XX. Growing up, we didn't hear much about his time in service. All I knew of it was what I secretly gathered from his scrapbook and the fact that he suffered terrible claustrophobia as a result of those small chambers. Can you imagine landing in one of those planes, watching the tarmac race up to your face at 150 miles per hour!?

In the story, I didn't want to paste a 21<sup>ST</sup> century issue on a midcentury war, after all, the term PTSD entered the DSM only in 1980; but upon research, it became clear that many service people suffered terrible consequences after WWI and WWII. The words were different – shell shocked, battle fatigue, irritable heart, but what about the long term condition? As for stigma, General Patton himself was known to brow-beat traumatized soldiers, and in WWI up to 65% of traumatized soldiers were sent back to the front.

Once again, then as now, it's about respectful language and creating safe harbor for people to express their suffering, and to then provide abundant support. I am no expert on PTSD, or on veteran services, but I, like many Americans, have been pretty horrified by the stories we hear about soldiers with post-duty brain trauma, PTSD, sexual assault, etc. and the shortcomings of our government to really get a grip on prioritizing their mental health care. But at least it seems the stigma of PTSD is beginning to fall away. It was important for me to find ways for at least

one character to express empathy for the attacker; to put his anguish and actions in context of the times. Especially as a local 'War Hero' he had no way, no vehicle to treat his bewildering symptoms, which is incredibly sad.

**7. One of the main female characters in the book embarks on a career in academia, achieving great success despite it being a male dominated profession. How has your experience building an international career in the brewing industry given you insight about the struggle women have faced for decades in the workplace?**

I graduated high school in 1980, when women were at least beginning to receive signals that we could pursue any interest we chose. In my circles, it came down to the messaging within one's own family. My father, a successful business man, never made any distinction whatsoever about his belief in my capacity to succeed. While they had a traditional male-dominant household and marriage, my parents were both incredibly confident of my abilities and my potential. Even with a head-start of supportive parents, equal pay has been a struggle from the beginning. As a young international sales and marketing executive, I had a boss once who was affronted by my request for a raise saying that I already earned more than his secretary. It has been an uphill battle.

**8. Frances Perkins, the first woman appointed to the U.S. Cabinet during FDR's presidency, plays a small but pivotal role in the novel. Why did you choose to incorporate this real life historical figure into your novel?**

So, to add to the question above, I and my female peers owe a huge debt of gratitude to the work of women from previous generations – and specifically to women such as Frances Perkins. She was a central figure to the New Deal legislation, including minimum wage laws, social security, unemployment compensation, child labor laws just to name a few. She and her female peers tolerated so many inequalities – and spent their lives pushing and pushing for much needed change around workplace fairness. Discovering Frances Perkins was this cool serendipity – I came upon her while looking for a character name, I think. She quickly took on the role of representing Eliza's yet-to-be-realized potential as a flawed and damaged character – the person Eliza wanted to become, but couldn't until she'd faced her demons. And she represented the best of the American spirit before, during and after WWII.

**9. Why do you think your adoptive mother never told you that you were adopted? Do you think adopted children have the right to know the truth about their origins?**

We moved away from St. Paul, Minnesota where cousins, aunts and uncles abounded, when I was four – and there seems to have been a tribal pact, heavily enforced by my mother until her dying day, to never breathe a word of my origin. My parents had another birth child, my sister, two years after I came, and I think they also felt, wisely so, that whatever stigma there might be, would be magnified with non-adopted siblings. I don't know whether adopted children have the right to know the truth about their origins – I think it's reasonable that adoptive parents have the right to manage that as they choose until a child becomes an adult. But I do think that as adults, we do absolutely have that right – and perhaps that eventual disclosure is something adoptive parents need to consider as part of their decision about when and how to make the child aware of

her adoption. In other words, it shouldn't be 'if' we tell her, but 'when.' Common wisdom today is for open adoption, which seems to work – and stigma around adoption seems to have all but disappeared. I was pretty angry with Catholic Charities as I began my search for my birth mother, because their policy, at least in Minnesota, was to control and cut off that information. From my new-found perspective, that seemed unfair and hurtful.

**10. The first days of your life were spent in the St. Paul Catholic Infants Home, nicknamed “Watermelon Hill,” for the unfortunate children of unwed mothers. What role did the Catholic Church play in the adoption process of so called “illegitimate children” during the post-war boom in the conservative Midwest?**

Watermelon Hill, the Catholic Infant Home was both for newborns and for unwed mothers in the last months of their pregnancies. I prescribe to the notion that post WWII, the country was damaged but optimistic, soldiers were home and affluence was on the rise. There was a movement afoot to get married, start families and pursue the American Dream. At the same time, the Catholic Church – and perhaps other religions, too (I really don't know) – remained rigid in its expectations around pre-marital purity, and the sin of pre-marital sex. Of course, the fruit of this sin was unavoidably obvious – a pregnant woman is tough to hide. The dogmatic certainty that these shameful young women would be incapable of caring for their babies, and that they must be cut off from each other through adoption, was made expedient by the many, many willing couples – all upstanding, respectable Catholics. An aspect of this that is most disturbing is that in many or most cases, the woman bore the burden of shame and of life-altering consequences – on top of the physiological challenges of child-birth.