

THE WEIRD SISTERS

by Eleanor Brown

AUTHOR Q&A

1. What inspired you to write this novel?

I got serious about writing a novel the year I turned 30. I said to myself, “Self, this is the year you either do it or give up the dream forever.” So, I wrote some really terrible novels in all kinds of genres that helped teach me a great deal about the craft, and finally I thought of a story I’d played around with years before, and that became *The Weird Sisters*.

The core of the story – three very different sisters and their belated coming-of-age – had been with me for a long time, but they were never quite the right sisters and it was never quite the right time. When I’d written absolutely everything I wasn’t meant to write, I finally sat down and let the Andreas sisters in.

2. The sisters in the novel are each named after one of Shakespeare’s famous heroines: Rosalind from *As You Like It*, Bianca from *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Cordelia from *King Lear*. Why did you choose these three Shakespearean characters in particular, to name the sisters after? How much do the personalities of Rose, Bean, and Cordy align with their Shakespearean counterparts?

Bianca and Cordelia’s names actually came first – Bianca is the beautiful second daughter in *The Taming of the Shrew*, so with what I knew about her character when I began, that was the natural choice. And Cordelia is the devoted youngest of three daughters in *King Lear*, so that was another obvious one. I struggled with Rosalind’s name for much longer, but I wanted her to be a little bit in love with the idea of being in love. I had a memory of seeing the Royal Shakespeare Company doing *As You Like It* in Stratford-upon-Avon. There is a scene where Rosalind – this bright, intelligent, opinionated woman – is running around the forest, plucking the love poems Orlando has written for her off the branches of trees, and they had staged it so beautifully, and I just thought, ‘Yes. That’s exactly what she’s like.’ And so she became Rose.

The sisters do bear some resemblance to Shakespeare’s characters, and that’s something each of them wrestles with in the novel. But I didn’t want their stories to be a retelling of the plays (Shakespeare’s done that already, and he’s rather good), so each sister ultimately follows her own path.

3. How did the title of the novel come about? What is its significance?

For a long time, the working title of the book was “Trinity.” I really wanted to focus on the importance of the number three, and religion was going to be a

bigger part of the novel. But when I created the father and the family began to take shape around the form of his devotion to Shakespeare, I knew I was going to need a different title. There's a portion of the book where the sisters explain that "weird" didn't mean to Shakespeare what it means to us – the three witches in *Macbeth* are really the three Fates. The Andreas sisters are quite tied to the idea of destiny, and part of the story is their learning to accept what their fates really are, rather than heading grimly down the path of what they think they ought to be.

4. The novel offers a vivid portrait of the conflicted relationship between sisters. As one of three sisters yourself, how much of the novel is based on your own sibling experience?

I don't know anyone who has a purely positive relationship with his or her family – I think it's impossible to be that close to anyone and not have moments where your family drives you absolutely crazy. And that's what the Andreas sisters have – they don't hate each other, and they share a wonderful family history that binds them whether they like it or not, but they've never bothered to discover what they love about each other. I think the core of what's difficult about having three siblings – someone always gets left out, the competition for family "roles" – is something I experienced, but the Andreas sisters are all their own.

5. If you were one of the three sisters – Rose, Bean, or Cordy – which would you be?

I already am all three of them! I think there's a little bit of each of the sisters in all of us – a little bit of longing for adventure or glamour, a little bit of wanting nothing but safety, a little bit of care-taking and a little bit of risk-taking. I definitely drew on those conflicting desires in myself when I was creating the Andreas sisters.

6. How do you explore the theory of birth order (the idea that sibling personalities are in part shaped by the order in which they were born) in the book? What interests you about this idea?

Birth order theory has always fascinated me – the idea that a large part of our personality comes from where we are in our family – only, first, middle, youngest – and the ways our families keep us in those roles even as we grow up. With many people I find it easy to tell where they fall in their family's birth order, no matter how old they are or what their relationship with that family is like. It's something we carry with us whether we like it or not.

With *The Weird Sisters*, I wondered what would happen if life forced us to step out of those prescribed roles: if you've always been the responsible one, how do you deal with being asked to take risks? If you've been cast as undependable, how could you prove that you are capable of more?

- 7. The novel is in part an homage to books and reading—the Andreas family is one of compulsive readers. Their love of literature is a large part of their familial bond. What role did books play in your own life growing up?**

My parents raised my two older sisters and me in a house full of books, where the most important life lesson we learned was never to go anywhere without taking something to read, and no dinner conversation is complete without the consultation of at least one reference book.

Reading was – and is – the center of my life. I was lucky to be raised by parents who considered reading the most important thing we could do. We took weekly trips to the library, filling canvas bags with books until they overflowed. I was allowed a half hour of television per week, and at the time I chafed at that, but now I'm incredibly grateful. I've always been a daydreamer, and books let my imagination run wild in the most delightful ways.

- 8. The father in the novel is a renowned Shakespearean professor, and Shakespearean verse is woven throughout the book. How did this element of the book come about? Is the Bard a personal passion of yours?**

The beginning of this book came about when I was in graduate school, getting my Master's degree, and some of my professors were encouraging me to go for a Ph.D. And my immediate and visceral reaction was – I don't want to know that much about any one thing. But people who *do* want to know that much about one subject fascinate me, and I wondered what it would be like to be in a family with someone who was so completely obsessed with a single topic.

I'm not a Shakespearean scholar, though I did take a wonderful course on Shakespeare in graduate school with a professor in whose memory the father is named – James Andreas. I've read and seen a number of the plays, but definitely not all. I did an enormous amount of research while writing the book, but a lot of that fell by the wayside as I wrote, because what I realized is that when you live in a world so focused on one thing, it becomes part of the landscape. The verse the family quotes to each other is absolutely stripped of any context or meaning; they've long ago had all the deep thoughts about Shakespeare that they're going to have. But the sheer volume of Shakespeare's work, as well as his continuing prominence, made him the natural choice.

- 9. The novel is written in first person plural, narrated from the collective perspective of the three sisters. How did you make this stylistic choice? What is its effect?**

Like any writer, I have done a lot of playing around with different styles and voices, and I noticed that while there were people doing first and third, and even, rarely, second-person narration, almost no one did first person plural. When I mentioned I was working on something in this voice, a professor and friend of

mine mentioned Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily", and I immediately went and read it. It's a tricky voice, and I had to devise a lot of rules for how to use it – how to make it readable and noticeable without its being disruptive.

I chose it because this is a story about family, and one of the ideas I wanted to raise is that we carry our families of origin with us always. They helped form the way in which we see the world, for better or worse, and no matter how we may feel about them now, they are part of us. Even though Rose and Bean and Cordy are not close, they cannot separate themselves from their common history.

10. In the novel, the sisters have reached a crisis point in their lives, where they have to reassess who they are and what their lives have become. How do the sisters struggle with the idea of adulthood? What does it mean to be an adult?

Each of the sisters has a strong idea about what it means to be an adult, and each of them is at least partially wrong. Each sister's figuring out how to be an adult is a major theme of the novel, and it was something I continue to wrestle with. Most days my friends and I still don't feel like grown-ups, even though we have mortgages or kids or careers or retirement savings or wrinkles, and many of us have all of the above. I wrote the book partly as an effort to figure out what it means to be an adult, and I have to say I'm still not sure. Maybe what I came out with was the idea that it's more important to build a life that's meaningful to you than to worry about when, precisely, you get to call yourself a responsible adult, and whether your version of adulthood is as good as everyone else's.

11. In the novel, the Andreas sisters have come home in part because their mother has been diagnosed with breast cancer. Did this element of the novel arise out of your personal experience?

Absolutely. My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was a teenager (she's just celebrated her 20th anniversary as a survivor). I remember her battle in flashes – seeing her scar when she stepped out of the shower, the darkness and stillness of her bedroom in the days following her chemo treatments, the way one of our cats loved to sleep laid out along the side of her body where she no longer had a breast. I've been trying to write out what that meant to me and to my family ever since.

12. What was your process of writing this book? How long did it take you?

The seed of it started years before I ever actually produced *The Weird Sisters* as it is now. I had a number of fits and starts on a story of three sisters, but when I finally got serious about it, it took me about a year to write the first draft. Writing for me starts slowly, and then I hit a point where I just fall in love with the characters and absolutely cannot stay away from them, to the point that when I'm

not actually writing, I'm wondering what they're up to or what they're going to do next.

13. When did you decide to become a writer? Was it something you always aspired to?

I can't remember a time when I wasn't writing, and I always knew, despite many people's cautions that I should do something more reliable with my time, that I'd end up as a writer of some sort.

But mostly writing is just an excuse to daydream and read, my two very favorite activities.

14. What writers have inspired or influenced your work?

Like the Andreas sisters, I will read anything that lands front of me: shampoo bottles, grocery store flyers, short stories, magazine articles, but novels are my favorite form of storytelling. Jodi Picoult's work taught me how to manage multiple narrators, and to write not just what I know, but what I am willing to research. Maeve Binchy's writing taught me how multiple storylines can weave together and support each other, and the importance of writing loveable characters, even if they're not nice people. If I can ever produce one sentence half as beautiful as what Alice Hoffman and Pat Conroy write on their grocery lists, I'd die happy – they are two of the most lyrical prose writers I've encountered.

I'm a big fan of Steve Almond's writing, and a class I took with him crystallized some really important things about writing, lessons I took back to revisions of *The Weird Sisters* and the next novel I'm working on. I'm tremendously grateful to him for that.

15. What do you plan to write next?

I'm working on a novel about love and weddings and marriage and divorce, and what happens when they all intersect.