

Freaked:

Riding the Train to Freedom with Author J. T. Dutton

Interviewer's Note: I am fascinated by authors and the stories that they tell. Not only do I want to read their work, I also want to know where the stories come from, so I sat down with J. T. Dutton and talked about the development of her first book.

Freaked is part journey novel, part young adult problem novel, and part historical fiction, even though many of us may shudder to think of 1993 as history. In this interview, Jen and I talked about how this book came to be, how she found herself in the world of young adult literature, and how this book is being received.

JM: *Let's tell the story of how this book developed from a creative writing assignment in graduate school to *Freaked*.*

J. T. Dutton: My first ideas for the story actually came before graduate school. I had finished college, I'd waited tables for a few years, and I was looking for a life purpose. I knew I liked to write, so I moved down to Connecticut and was taking classes at Columbia University. I was going in every day on a train. One afternoon, Jerry Garcia was playing at Madison Square Garden. I had an assignment in my creative writing class at Columbia on creating a voice, and so I was listening to the Deadheads talking on the train. I had had a project all worked out, but I threw it away and worked on this voice



because it was so distinct. When I handed it in to the class, people laughed. A few weeks later, somebody asked me if they could publish it in a student magazine, so a small bit of it got published right away.

I took it with me to graduate school in Alaska, where I used it to write a short story, and the same kind of thing happened—people enjoyed the voice. They also said that the story I had written was incomplete; they were looking for more details and more things to happen, so I expanded

the story into a novella. I prepared several short stories and the novella for my graduate school thesis defense and then thought, “What the heck, this is my last chance to write something big working with my mentors at the University of Alaska.” So I expanded the novella into a novel and used that by itself as my thesis for my M.F.A. Then I did nothing with it for ten years; it just sat in a drawer. Later, when my husband Jeff was in graduate school and looking for a job, job prospects were grim. He had two or three interviews, and after seven years of school, we were feeling pretty desperate, so I wanted to do some writing that would actually pay. I was looking for freelance opportunities when Jeff said, “You know, you really ought to do one more draft of that book and send that out, too. Chances are maybe someone will be interested in it.” As it turned out, someone was.

Loveletter to a Deadhead

Parent's Weekend loomed over Scotty Loveletter at the Stillwater Academy for Boys. It loomed in part because of his name, Loveletter, the alias his sexy mother had adopted to enhance her persona as a famous sex therapist and *Playboy* centerfold. It loomed because his prep school peers were all salivating, waiting for his mother to appear, and it loomed because it coincided with the Grateful Dead concert at the Freedom Coliseum—Scotty's version of the Holy Grail, the place to record the ultimate bootleg tape. But Scotty is seeking more than just the ultimate bootleg concert tape. He is seeking connections with his fellow human beings, even though that thought can be terrifying to him. He uses drugs to both create those connections and hide from them. Drugs give him status with his roommate, Todd. They are his membership card as a Deadhead, and yet they help separate him from the elements of his world that he does not want to deal with. He does not want to deal with his peers who fantasize about his mother. He does not want to deal with his roommate who treats him like a sidekick and keeps him hanging on because he supplies his drug habit. He does not want

to deal with his endless string of stepfathers. He does not want to deal with the cookie-cutter future of prep school boys: the expected career path of the attorney or the corporate CEO. On the way to the concert in Freedom, Todd abandons Scotty in a bathroom in Grand Central Station, and Scotty is left to fend for himself. Alone, without a ticket for the show or a plan for getting there, he makes his way to Freedom and revels in the Deadhead experience.

Critics have tried to create a parallel between *Freaked* and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, but Dutton did not set out to write *Catcher in the Rye* for the new millennium. She set out to capture the voice and the experience of a Deadhead. Scotty Loveletter has a mission; Holden Caulfield did not. *Freaked* is the story of the fulfillment of Scotty's mission, to travel to Freedom, New York, to record the ultimate Grateful Dead concert tape. Both stories share a sense of cynicism. Both main characters see through the veil of prep school privilege. Those who enjoyed *Catcher* will enjoy *Freaked*. So will readers who enjoyed John Greene's *Looking for Alaska*, Stephen Chbosky's *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, or Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story*.

JM: Tell me about some of the things that other people said along the way as this story has grown from eavesdropping on the train.

JD: Whenever I told people I was writing this book, the Grateful Dead fans among them would always tell me a Grateful Dead story. The Grateful Dead were present enough in people's consciousness, at least in the 90s, that they immediately knew who the character was and the kind of experience he had. Now we're a little more distant and more of these things have to be explained. I suppose I kept writing it because it was sort of like a favorite party joke that people got. I kept writing it because it seemed like people kept enjoying it. It is interesting that now that the book is finished, there's a little more dubiousness about whether or not Scotty's story is really funny, but for a time I think people found it that way. There was humor in this. It was a slice of life that we knew.

JM: Let's talk about the Grateful Dead. You mentioned the distance, so if this is meant for an audience of teenage readers, how does that work?

JD: Now I have the chance to take the story to high schools where the kids say to me, "I had no idea who you were talking about in the first pages. I had to go to Wikipedia and look up Jerry Garcia." This just amazes me! It's kind of funny, but there are metaphors from music and experience that I think transcend time. Kids will always connect to music, so the book has that quality that makes them able to share in it. I think for me to try to write about a current band would not ring true, but I *could* write about a band that inspired me when I was an adolescent and try to transfer that feeling to a younger audience. Whether I succeeded or not, I hesitate to say, but that was the goal. The Grateful Dead are a piece of history that is just as interesting to remember as other pieces of history.

JM: *So do you see this as historical fiction?*

JD: I do. It is historical fiction now, it really is. When I was doing the revision 12 years after the original writing in the 90s, I had to look up what was current in 1993 because I had forgotten. I had to make decisions about what needed to be in there and what had to go, because certain parts no longer seemed as important. I also made the decision not to do a lot of early explanation about the Grateful Dead and their history, but to just let that be something the readers had to catch up with.

JM: *And why did that seem like the right decision?*

JD: I wanted to stay true to the narrative voice. Scotty wouldn't necessarily be stopping to explain. It doesn't matter if anybody knows more about the Grateful Dead from reading this book. I want them to know what a fan of the Grateful Dead was feeling, so it's more about being a fan than about the Grateful Dead. It just seemed that adding that material was a digression.

JM: *You have admitted that you were new to YA literature when you started this book, so let's talk about how this became YA and how you perceive this genre. If it wasn't intended to be written for a younger audience in the beginning, tell me how all that came to be.*

JD: I wasn't thinking about *Freaked* as YA in graduate school. If I was, I think I would have written a different book because I had very narrow perceptions of what YA was before I started writing it. Now that I have written it and it's in this genre, I realize there's a lot of room to maneuver for a writer. My stereotype of YA was always that sooner or later, the adult worldview would overwhelm the child worldview. I thought, we can have rebellion, we can have bad behavior, but ultimately, the main character has to learn the lessons that parents want them to learn.

What I didn't realize is that these books are becoming a little more privately owned by the teens who read them, and there is less of that sense of parental influence on the outcomes. When I originally wrote the book, the ending was even a

little darker; the character was a little less transformed. I think there is transformation at the end of *Freaked*, but there's a quality to it that's perhaps uncomfortable. He's transformed into a more active rather than passive rebel, but he's not conforming; he's still probably going to live outside the boundaries of what we consider good social behavior, just not as a follower. In becoming more active, he's also growing up, moving toward adulthood, albeit a more controversial form of adulthood.

JM: *Controversial by whose definition?*

JD: I don't know. My anxiety is about how the book is being viewed. I see *Freaked* as being slightly disapproved of in certain critical circles. There's this sense in the reviews that we can't really approve of this; it's not being rubber-stamped as a great book. Is that due to flawed writing? Or is it because it doesn't deliver the ending that people are looking for? I think I understand what people want from the book; they are looking for this unpleasant character who abuses drugs to become a little less unpleasant. But what they get is a character who stays true to himself, not to somebody we think he should become. This is the way I wanted to write it, and I have to stick to my guns on that.

JM: *What about the role of adults in YA? My students and I talk about how the author has to get the adults out of the way in some construct to allow the teen to be the decision maker, to have the central role in the story.*

JD: Yes, we write about kids who are metaphorically orphaned, emotionally or through some sort of separation. It's easier to have characters take action if they are orphaned in some way. The evolution is that the child is outgrowing the adult, so in order to give themselves permission to do that, I think they do have to think of the adult as "lesser." This is a tough problem for a writer because the parents *aren't* really lesser. If the author concedes to pressure and makes the parents flatter, that author also risks making the story less real. In Scotty's case, his parents are removed physically. As a result, he doesn't necessarily need to diminish them, so neither do I, the writer, but that's the trope that we

see: the parents are somehow less important to the purpose of things. They are likely to be the ones that give the bad advice or offer the cliché—"Well, just be yourself," and the kid thinks "whatever."

JM: *Let's talk about truth. Other YA authors, such as Crutcher, Ritter, or Lipsyte, talk about their work and they talk about telling kids the truth. What is the truth in *Freaked*?*

JD: The truth is there are millions of teenage boys out there who like to smoke pot. They may get that they'll mess up their lives if they do drugs, and that it will be dangerous and it will be bad, but they do it anyway, and they find it funny. If they were to tell you their stories, those stories would sound adolescent like this and be full of the bravado of teens doing things that make their parents cringe. If drugs didn't have a side that was attractive, people wouldn't take them. Associated with that is this Grateful Dead culture of camaraderie and crazy confusion. There is an attractiveness to it that was alluring to me as an adolescent. Ultimately, we hope that people grow up and choose not to make doing drugs a full-time endeavor in their lives. But there is an adolescent fantasy with this kind of being lost that's very real, and to pretend it doesn't exist or it shouldn't exist or terrible things always happen when you encounter it is simply dishonest. It's more honest to say that drugs are out there, you're going to come into contact with them, you'll probably experiment with them at some point, but ultimately it's not a way of life. It isn't the journey, it's a piece of the journey. Eventually, you're going to have to say you want more out of your life than what's happening here.

JM: *You mentioned the word "bravado." I would never use that word to characterize Scotty.*

JD: He brags. He talks about being lesser than other people, but on the other hand, he tells you his glorious stories of how messed up he's been and how much trouble he's been in. There's a little bit of excessive self-pity in Scotty that's almost a form of showing off. Does that make sense?

JM: *I think so. That leads to my next question: where*

is the reckoning between the guy who says things like ". . . but my real addiction was to my fellow human beings. I couldn't stop giving a damn about what they thought of me" (Dutton, 2009, p. 39) and using the word "bravado" to describe him?

JD: He is a contradiction. That is part of who he is. He wants to connect. He wants to be part of the "in" crowd. He wants to be popular, but he also wants not to care. This is part of his boarding school culture; the less you care, the better you are. For a teenage boy in this environment, the less connected he is and the less he feels he needs other people, the better he fits in. His roommate Todd is sort of the perfect prep school boy. He's cool to the point of dead. He is numb and unfeeling. Scotty sees the desire to care as a flaw. He is striving not to care, and the easiest way not to care is to get more and more and more into the drugs, which helps him drift away from his emotions. It's easier for him when he doesn't care, but he *does* care. There's that piece of him that draws him back, and ultimately, one is going to win over the other.

JM: *Which one wins?*

JD: I can't answer that. That's the u-turn, the sequel. I think of fiction as a question, and here that question is, which is going to win out? But it's the question that's important, not the answer, so to answer the question is to un-tell the story in a way.

JM: *John H. Ritter said, "We expect novelists to tell us something we don't know or we haven't thought all the way through" (Sherbert, 2007, p. 14). What does *Freaked* tell us that we didn't know or we haven't thought all the way through?*

JD: The novels that I really liked when I was in my 20s were Jack Kerouac's and Ken Kesey's, written in the late 50s and 60s. There's an act of rebellion in their books, a challenging of social mores. I'd like to hope *Freaked* challenges something about how we envision teens and helps readers embrace the issue of the darker side of their confusion. That's the ideal, that's the goal. Did I achieve it? My own humility prevents me from knowing that, but that is what I wished for—that there would be

a cultural challenge in the issue of people saying this is not a good life for teens. I think maybe we are robbing teens of the time and space to live in confusion. We're making too many decisions for them and no, we don't want them to make all horrible decisions, but this character is going on a journey a lot of kids don't get to go on. He's suffering and deciding for himself, and I think more people should get the chance to do the same thing. I think mistakes are the road to adulthood.

JM: *Let's talk a little bit more about the craft of writing. I went to the 2008 Youngstown State University English Festival, and there were a number of featured authors that year. As I watched them interact with their audiences, it struck me that they were approaching the students not as readers, but as fellow writers. It fascinates me that a writer doesn't think about readers as readers, but as potential writers reading their work as a model for craft. Where are you in this scheme between reader and writer?*

JD: I read as a writer. I think there is a difference between how I read and how my husband Jeff, who is a literary critic, reads. He reads like a reader. He gets tropes and symbolism. I attack craft—what the author is doing, how he or she is creating this sense of tension, what details are included. So I might suggest that the authors talk to people like writers because they read like writers. Perhaps when they are talking to readers, they are assuming that those readers read like they do themselves, but maybe that's flattening it out too much.

JM: *Let's talk some more about Scotty as a character. What do you see as Scotty's redeeming qualities or positive attributes? What is his saving grace?*

JD: I actually think he's very creative. I know I am probably the only person in the world who loves him, but I do love him. I love him so! I think he's funny. He's got a really original world view. He's not buying it, so he's got a cynicism about the status quo that I share. He's going to follow his own path, he's going to follow his own dreams, and he has moments of compassion. They're not very deep or very long, but they exist, and they exist despite his best efforts to suppress them. So I think the

“deeper down Scotty” is going to be a very interesting adult someday. He's smart, I would say that, too, a smart young man.

JM: *Tell me about writing his voice. I must admit that my frustration with reading the book is that sometimes, by the time I get to the end of a sentence, I have lost where he started, and I have to go back to the beginning and read it over again. Part of that is his character. He's figuring it out as we read along, and sometimes he's figuring it out in the middle of the sentence. Talk to me about his voice and where that comes from.*

JD: Oh that's me, I'm sure that's me. My father has read *Freaked* a few times, different drafts, and every time he says it's still very bumpy. A little bit of the jumping around was an attempt on my part to create a voice that is believably under the influence. In my second book, I found my sentences were much shorter because my character was a much more practical person. She doesn't ramble, she doesn't describe, she doesn't whip off into metaphor because she doesn't have the overlay of the drug culture to extend her, and I missed the free-floating words when I moved away from it. It seemed less beautiful to suddenly have this ordered mind to work with. On the other hand, I got a little more clarity out of it.

JM: *Last big topic . . . in anticipation of this being in schools and classrooms, it's going to be challenged. People are not going to like their kids reading this book.*

JD: I'm already getting a little of that here and there.

JM: *What are your thoughts on that? What would you say to teachers? What would you say to parents or librarians?*

JD: Get over it. In my own teaching experience, I get a little nervous when we have to deal with controversial material. I don't want parents saying, “I don't approve of this, I don't like this.” Even at the college level, it makes me uncomfortable that someone would disapprove of what I present. A student once asked me, “Is this a glorification of

drugs?” I think that’s a very viable question, and I feel very defensive when I have to answer it, but I did put the subject matter out there to be wrestled with. I think that the point of reading anything is to be challenged—that quote by Ritter is a valid one. We read to be challenged.

I definitely intended *Freaked* to be a challenge, to be controversial. I knew telling the story of a wealthy, upper middle class teenage boy in 1993 who does drugs would freak some people out. There are all these books out there about African American or Hispanic boys living in the city doing drugs and being tough. But a very wealthy, very privileged boy who is completely amoral is an idea fewer people want to grapple with. Why? Why are we only writing about certain people in our culture or in a certain social class as immoral? I am saying, look here, the biggest druggies I’ve met in my life had trust funds, and that was a surprise to me when I discovered it. I don’t think we should go on pretending that it’s otherwise. So maybe there’s this sense of “let’s get real here” and let’s get real in the classroom, too. Kids are not as unsophisticated as we think; they are talking about sex and drugs and they are thinking about sex and drugs. When we pretend temptation doesn’t exist, when we choose not to share as much of the truth of this world as we can, we are not only being naïve, we are asking kids to be less fully rounded, less-informed adults.

Editors’ note: Look for J. T. Dutton’s second book, *Stranded*, coming in summer 2010. Someone in the small town of Heaven, Iowa, is keeping a terrible secret. In a cornfield on the edge of town, a farmer discovers an abandoned newborn wrapped in a sweatshirt. Fifteen-year-old Kelly Louise Sorenson must decide whether to tell the police all she knows, or protect her family from the scandal that will surely follow.

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