



# Drawing on My Past to Write

I always put a lot of myself into my writing. It's like I open up a vein to my soul and mix what pours out with the ink I write. It's what feels right to me—writing from deep places of myself, putting my truest emotions onto the page. I intentionally draw on my abuse and trauma experience when I write, putting fragments into every novel.

Part of that is just the way I am. I like honestly and emotional truths. I have trouble lying, don't like superficiality, and I hate secrets. Secrets remind me of the incest and the ritual abuse that I was forced to keep quiet about by my abusers (my parents belonged to cults). And part of it is just that writing has always been my safest, most comfortable way of “speaking” and reaching other people.

When I was being abused, my abusers told me repeatedly that they'd kill me if I talked. I saw them murder people; I knew they could kill me if they wanted to, so I was too terrified to speak or even think about what they did. They also repeatedly told me that no one would believe me if I talked, and they intentionally created some abuse scenarios to discredit me

or any other child who might talk (such as creating a mock spaceship and having some abusers dress up as aliens, using drugs to knock us kids out before bringing us into the mock spaceship to rape and torture us). Had I not seen through the layers of deceit and trickery, it's likely no one would have believed me if I had talked. Even without those layers, the torture was so extreme that some people would still want to deny it.

Because of the torture, threats, and mind control, I found talking to people frightening and hard, and I was very careful about what I actually said. I was shy, introverted, and scared, and my words, when I did speak, were always too quiet or too rushed to hear. But when I wrote (or created art), I felt I could say most anything I needed to because, in my mind, it wasn't actually “talking,” so I wasn't breaking their rules. When I wrote, I could access parts of myself that I shoved down the rest of the time, and I could tap into my deepest emotions and thoughts that I tried to hide even from myself. I knew enough to not write too openly about the torture, but I could say so much more through writing and

art than I could aloud. I could also dream, hope, and imagine a kinder life through my writing, just as I could through reading novels. Both reading and writing were a refuge for me, a way to escape some of the torture and abuse I was living through, and a way to try to make my world better.

I'm not so introverted or scared anymore—I've found safety and friends who love me for who I am—but I still prefer writing (email! Twitter!) to speaking aloud to a large group of people (though I love talking one-on-one with people). My characters usually have some of that shyness or ease with writing or art, too, such as Kendra (from *Scars*) using art to access her memories and emotions; Caitlyn (from *Hunted*) using blogging to try to create positive social change and help Normals see that Paras shouldn't be persecuted, and Sarah (from *Stained* [tentative title], forthcoming from Harcourt in 2013) writing comic book heroes to try to feel stronger and safer.

I know intense ongoing pain, fear, self-doubt, and being an outsider; I have lived those emotions and experiences most of my life, and I put those things into

my books while writing from an honest emotional place. I think that resonates with teens; they're living intense emotion now. I also talk about issues that not everyone talks about openly; I think that's important. I remember how very alone I felt, and how it made the emotional pain so much worse. We need to know that we're not the only one who's experienced something, especially when it's traumatic (such as abuse), not talked about (such as self-harm), or there's prejudice and hatred about it (such as being queer). And I intentionally put hope and healing into my books.

The characters in my books have a lot of my emotional truths and some of my experiences influencing them. In *Scars*, Kendra is a sexual abuse survivor, queer, and uses self-harm the way I did and for the reasons I did. She also uses art to heal and tell, and to explore her soul and her trauma, and she has a wonderful, supportive therapist just as I have. It's even my own scarred arm on the cover of *SCARS*; I am so grateful that my publisher used the photo. I think it adds to the realism, and helps teens know right away what the book is about—and it also, for me, made the book even more my own, even while remaining fiction.

In *Hunted*, Caitlyn has her life threatened, experiences torture, faces oppression, and decides to be who she really is even though it means increased danger to herself, just the way I did. Caitlyn is also

bombarded with other people's thoughts and emotions, and while I don't have telepathy like Caitlyn does, I am often hyper-aware of others' emotions. In *Stained*, Sarah is kidnapped, repeatedly raped, imprisoned, sometimes starved, experiences some mind control, and has her life threatened—again, like I've experienced. Like Sarah, I've often been extra sensitive to the way people treat me, especially when there's malice or ill feeling involved. And like Sarah, I tried to figure out what motivated my abuser and how I could be the least abused or tortured while I was held captive.

I only put very small amounts of my abuse and torture experience into each of my books. I may change that one day, but for now I think that the ongoing, repeated abuse and torture that I endured is so extreme that if I put it all in one book, it might overwhelm readers or make them stop reading—and I don't want that. I want to reach readers. So I put fragments of my abuse experience into each book, along with my emotional truths, compassion, and healing, and I keep the focus on specific issues.

Each of my books focuses on a few isolated forms of abuse that are part of what happens in ritual abuse. Rape and incest are a big and ongoing part of ritual abuse, and that's some of what I focused on in *Scars*. But another big part of *Scars* is one of the ways I coped with the abuse—using self-harm. It was really important to me to help people “get it” about self-harm and the connection to trauma. There are so few people who talk openly about self-harm, and there are so many people who judge it and

who are misinformed or believe hurtful myths, such as that people who self-harm are doing it to get attention (there are far easier ways to get attention than doing something that hurts so much, that can cause permanent physical damage or can kill you, and that leaves permanent scars), that we like pain (we're trying to escape overwhelming pain and emotion, not cause it), or that we're trying to manipulate people (we're trying to escape our intense emotional pain and stop ourselves from feeling or remembering; the only one we're trying to control is ourselves). Many people who self-harm go to great lengths to hide their wounds and scars (I used to wear long sleeves and jeans even in the summer; I never went to the doctor even though I often needed stitches; and I always cut alone where no one could see), and many don't talk about it because there's so much prejudice and anger toward people who self-harm. One survivor I knew went to the hospital for stitches, and the doctor refused to give her any pain killers because he said she did it to herself. It's one thing to inflict pain on yourself to escape overwhelming emotional pain. It's something much more painful and scary to have someone else inflict pain on you.

I wrote *Scars* because I wanted people who'd had the same or similar experiences as me to know that they're not alone, and that things can and do get better. It's hard to be in intense emotional pain. It's even harder when you feel like you're the only one or when you know you'll be harshly judged for how you coped. I think it's easy for people to judge others when they



don't understand someone or something. But once they understand, compassion comes more quickly. I also really wanted to increase people's compassion for all three major issues that I addressed in *Scars*—self-harm, sexual abuse, and being queer.

I wanted to write about cults and some of what happens in



ritual abuse, and *Hunted* was my way of doing that. Ritual abuse is not widely talked about or recognized and usually continues

unstopped through generations. Many people don't want to hear about or believe the extreme torture and abuse that happens right within their own civilized countries. It is horrific to endure ritual abuse and the resulting deep emotional and psychological wounds; it makes it even harder when people don't want to believe what happened. But many people can't or don't want to hear the horrors, so I wrote *Hunted* not only as fiction, but as fantasy. I think people can hear more about something that is painful through fantasy than they can through fiction or nonfiction.

So while *Hunted* was for me a book about ritual abuse and cults and torture, and it's emotionally true, it is definitely a fantasy. But within the fantasy, I had a lot of room to show a bit of what cults can be like, including making the government and the renegade Paras similar to cults (though far less extreme and cruel). It gave me a voice in a way that I hope people can hear and learn from, even as

they're being entertained. It was also very important to me to show that you can resist and overcome oppression, as I and some other survivors have. I hope that I inspire some readers to stand up to the various forms of oppression that they see, and also to know that they can survive whatever it is that they are going through.

Another aspect of ritual abuse is abduction and repeated imprisonment, starvation, and informal mind control, and that's what *Stained* is about. There's a lot out there already about abduction and the conditioning that can occur, but much of it is sensationalist; I wanted to show it from a more real, emotional place, so I drew on my own experience. I also wanted to deal with body image, since so many girls and women (and now, increasingly, boys as well) struggle with negative body image. I wanted to show an emotionally strong girl go through the process of learning to accept and love her body. And I wanted to show that you can fight back against predators and protect yourself, both mentally and physically, and that sometimes, you just have to fight long enough and hard enough and you will be able to escape and get safe. That was true for me, though it took me many, many years.

Since I draw on so much of my trauma experience and intense emotion when I write or edit a book, it often doesn't feel healing or like a release. But I know that I'm dealing with the issues as I write and edit. I'm also rewriting my own personal history, giving myself and my characters "happy" endings—happy in a realistic way. I didn't have happy endings with the abuse and torture I endured

for most of my life, didn't have an escape and safety until only a few years ago, but I had it in my writing, and I have it now in my life.

The greatest healing for me comes once the book is published and is reaching people. It comes once I am being heard—the opposite of what my abusers said would happen. They told me that no one would ever listen to me, no one would ever believe me, and that I would never be a success. Even though I knew not to believe their lies, when lies are repeated often enough and with torture to make them go in deeper, they stick. Getting my books published and having them reach people proved those lies wrong for me. I still get reader letters every week from people telling me that *Scars* helped them stop cutting or want to stop; talk to someone for the first time about self-harm or their own abuse or being queer; or feel understood for the first time in their lives. I also hear from readers who haven't had any of the experiences I wrote about but who now have greater compassion for those that do. Those letters are wonderful to receive, and healing. *Hunted* has only just been released, but I'm hoping it will reach people, too.

I always tried to escape the abuse, to protect other kids being abused, to heal, and to break silence, and it's so important to me to keep doing that—to have a positive effect on the world. That's part of every book I write. But I also try to make sure that my books are entertaining reads—that they grip the reader and don't let go. I want my books to reach people and move them, and to do that they need to be great stories written as powerfully and as well as I can.

I put a lot of goodness, sense of justice, and desire for things to get better in all my characters. I care a lot about those things; they're part of who I am and the way I see the world, so they're naturally in my main characters—the characters most like me. It's so important to me to try to increase compassion, awareness, and healing, and writing is my way of doing that. Even as a young child being tortured, I remember looking into the cult people's faces twisted with hate and vowing that I would never be like them in any way. I always fought them emotionally and mentally, even if I couldn't always fight them physically, and I managed to keep them from completely breaking my spirit or destroying my own goodness and soul. To me, life doesn't mean much if you're not putting good out there, if you're not loving people and being loved by them—and my characters have some of that same sense, and a determination to make things better. I love reading about hero characters; they're inspiring, and they give me hope that the world can and will keep getting better, kinder—and I think they do that for other people, too.

I am emotionally strong. I managed to stay alive, even as I saw some other kids die during the torture and mind control. And I was able to keep my true self intact, tucked away from the cult, and to strive always for healing, for safety, and trying to protect others, even though it often meant increased torture for me. My characters all have that, too—great emotional strength, tenacity, and a goodness in them, even as they are vulnerable. They are traits I like and value.

I lived most of my life in terror

and fear. The torture I experienced, the murder I witnessed left me in a permanent state of too much adrenaline, so much so that I used to literally shake inside, and, like many abuse and trauma survivors, I was hyper-alert, startling at loud noises and touch. I think some of that fear and high tension runs through my books—it's what I know, and it's also what I am drawn to in my own writing and in many of the books I read. For years in my critique group, I heard people tell me that there was too much tension in my writing, and that I needed to put in breathing space and moments of calm or happiness. It took me a long time to learn how to do that because I didn't know that in my own life. But I wanted readers to be able to stay with my story and not turn away—so that's one of the things I do when I edit. I go back and make sure there is breathing room and moments of happiness or calm to balance out the tension and pain and fear. It comes easier now that I've had more of it in my life.

I never learned how to be superficial or how to do the social chit chat stuff—or not well, anyway. The largest part of my life was torture, and in between were the periods where I had to act “normal,” only I couldn't act normal enough. My pain and the effects of the trauma always showed through—and they do for my characters, too, in different ways. In *Hunted*, Caitlyn can't hide how powerful a telepath she is or the way that Normals' thoughts bombard her, even though showing this can cost her her freedom or even her life. In *Scars*, Kendra can't stop painting her trauma and surfacing memories, even though her abuser has threatened to kill her if she

reveals who he is, and her pain and the effects of sexual abuse show even though she tries to hide it. In *Stained*, Sarah can't stop being hyper-aware of and hyper-sensitive to other people's stares, comments, and reactions to her port wine stain, and she is constantly braced for further reactions. After her abduction and escape, she struggles with the effects of the trauma.

The characters in all my books are also strongly emotional—tuned in to their own emotions and those of the people around them. Again, I'm drawing on my own way of coping in the world. I've always been very sensitive, and I tried to be extra aware of what my abusers were feeling, how they were reacting, and their body language, so I could figure out what they would do next and possibly escape or lessen some of the torture. Because of this, in my first drafts of novels I naturally focus a lot on my characters' emotions and what they sense from other people—so much so that I often leave out other senses. I always have to go back in later drafts and add in the rest of the senses, especially visual, as well as more details to give a greater sense of the place and the people. I do multiple drafts of my work—rewriting, editing, and polishing each manuscript until it reaches a publishable level, and is as powerful as I can make it.

I love writing books, and I am so grateful that I can make a living writing them (even if tightly)! Sometimes I can hardly believe, after all these years of trauma and pain, that I finally have happiness and am doing what I love and what it feels like I am here to do—write, and reach people through my writing. I am starting to live my dream, and it feels wonderful.