



An Interview With Susan Pashman, Author of *Upper West Side Story*

Q. Why did you write this book?

A. I had two conversations with parents; both of them very earnestly concerned with raising their children to be race blind. One was my own brother who had a son in junior high school. He told me that he was so excited because four black children were going to be entering his son's all-white class. It was a special program to introduce the white kids to black children so they could get a firsthand idea of black children; it would, in my brother's words, "expose" his son to other kinds of kids.

I went home from that conversation enraged at the idea that the black children were being used, as I saw it, to educate my brother's son. I had asked him how he and his son would feel if his son was "used" in the same way to educate black children. I thought kids were being used as objects in these experiments to give their parents a sense of moral superiority that I found obnoxious.

So that night, I found myself wondering how many things could go wrong in the scenarios my brother—and this other friend of mine—were setting up with their kids. Immediately, I envisioned what is the inciting incident in this book. One of the children getting severely injured and how the parents, both black and white, would react.

Q. When you write, do your characters come to you fully formed or do they unfold and develop along with the story?

A. Characters always develop lives of their own as you put them in one situation after another. For me, though, it is important to start with an idea and the easiest way to do that is to model each of my characters, even the very minor ones on people I know. This is not always the nicest thing to do to friends. But in this book, the characters who are based on friends are very nice people in the book so I don't have a worry about that.

So I start out with people I can visualize, and I have some idea how they sound when they speak. After a while, the characters take on their own lives as I get to know them and move them through the book's plot.



Q. One of the main characters in your book is a black woman. In fact, several of your main characters are black. As a white writer, did you find writing these characters a particular challenge?

A. The challenge was not to rely on stereotypes. The black people in my book are both young teenagers and their parents. I raised my own children in Brooklyn where they attended integrated schools and I had personal experiences with both kids and parents who are black, so it was not very difficult to do this.

What I always rely on my imagination for is the inner person, the feelings my characters have. Everyone's emotions run pretty much the same way. So I just imagine myself in the place of the person I'm writing and I know the way that person will feel. For Viola, the black mother who is central to the plot, I was not imagining any particular person I ever knew, but I was sure of how she must feel in each of the circumstances the plot placed her in.

Q. Do you think unconscious racism is as big an issue now as when you began writing?

A. Well, this is the place to mention that this book was written and revised many times over a period of fourteen years. Unconscious racism was not even a phrase when I began writing this. We all knew that we harbored a certain bias against others; what we didn't know or what we denied, was what many studies reveal now, that we all have preferences that influence our actions and that we tend to trust people who most resemble ourselves more than we trust others who do not. What the police shootings all over our nation now have shown us is that the people we most respect often harbor the worst racist bias, and that when people who have been taught to BEHAVE properly are under duress, their deeper feelings are revealed in their actions.

Q. When did you first start writing?

A. I began this book in 1999, before nine-eleven and, significantly, before Obama became the first black president. I was out of the country on election night and, having cast my vote for him before I left, I was watching tensely as the results came in. In that glorious moment when he and his family stepped out on the platform in Chicago to accept the victory, I was deliriously happy as so many others were. But lurking in the back of my mind was a terrible worry that the book I had almost finished—in its first draft—would become irrelevant because I thought this would be the beginning of a new post-racial society. Of course, it's



terribly sad that that did not happen. But it places my book at the center of the national conversation right now.

Q. Did your background in law help with the research for your story?

A. There's a lot of legal knowledge that went into the twists and turns of this book, but most of that are common enough knowledge. What really surprised me was how much I learned from an internship I did while I was in law school. I interned at the New York City Council President's office. There, I picked up—by osmosis, I think—so much about the tone of New York's City Hall, the mayor, the city politics. And, as you know, that figured quite a lot in the plot of this story.

Q. To what extent does this book reflect your years as a philosophy professor?

A. I have taught philosophy for so long and in so many contexts that a philosophical viewpoint has got to be part of my DNA by now. The fact that unanswerable questions intrigue me and never let go of me is probably evident in this book. But on a more concrete level, it was not so much the subject I taught but the academic atmosphere that I have come to know so well that worked its way into the book. The main character, the other, is a professor of women's studies and women's history and the academic politics of the school she teaches at figure in the story and in her marriage.

Q. This book took fourteen years from start to finish. What happened along the way?

A. In chronological order? I designed and built a house. I planted the landscape for the house. I decided to study landscape design and enrolled in a five-year program at Harvard so I spent a lot of time learning to draw designs and name trees and shrubs in Latin. Then I decided to write a Master's thesis at a design school in London because I had contracted Lyme disease trying to do landscaping on Long Island and opted for writing about landscape instead. Once that essay was finished, I realized that I was really doing philosophy, which is not surprising, so I applied to SUNY Stony Brook to be admitted as an advanced doctoral student based on work I had done forty years earlier at Columbia and, to my amazement, they took me in. So I spent another year writing a doctoral dissertation. Now during this same period of time, I met and married a second husband after thirty years of being a single mother. That took a lot of adjustment. In between times I was writing and re-writing, sending the book out and getting criticism that I put to use in the next re-write. So, I hope that explains the fourteen years it took to put this book before the public.



Q. You've described this as a book about "urban parenting." Do you think that is different from parenting outside of cities?

A. I'm actually very disturbed by parenting patterns in both cities and suburbs. I have always been concerned about raising kids in the suburbs and, in fact, sold a lovely suburban Victorian to move my kids back into the city when I saw how dependent suburban kids are on their parents, how slowly they develop a sense of independence compared with city kids. Suburban kids need to be driven everywhere in cars by their parents. I think it must be humiliating to be driven to a school prom by your folks.

Q. You raised your own two children, two sons, as a single urban parent in Brooklyn. Do you think urban parenting has changed in recent years? We hear so much about helicopter parents these days.

A. I now see so many urban parents hovering—helicoptering—over their kids and I have the same problem with what's going on in cities as I used to have with suburban parenting. I am dismayed that parents send their kids to school with cell phones so they can always stay in touch. I am horrified that they send kids away to summer camp with phones so they can text message their kids every day. The whole point of camp is for a child to grow up and find himself and to discover his own private self.

My kids took the subway in NYC from the time they were in third grade. My younger son used to travel to Greenwich Village and break-dance under Washington Square arch while he was still in elementary school. Of course things happened. One day, on the way to school, some kids stopped him and stole his sneakers right off his feet so he continued on to school in his socks. He had a kid come up behind him in McDonald's and take the money I'd given him for dinner. He learned a lot about people and the world from those experiences.

There are a number of adventures my kids had in the city that are woven into the book. Things they did that were dangerous and that I did not know about at the time that might have given me a severe headache had I known. But they developed a sense of privacy and a sense of how to care for themselves and I think that is the most important part of growing up.

Susan E. Pashman
P.O. Box 2530
Sag Harbor, NY 11963
631-725-9818
susanpashman@yahoo.com
www.SusanPashman.com



Q. This book raises a lot of tough questions about race. Do you think it provides answers as well?

A. Well, you see, this is where the philosopher in me comes to the fore.

I am better at raising questions than I am at answering them. In writing a novel like this one, the important thing is to be true to reality. The characters, their situations, their feelings have to ring true. Once a reader sees these characters as who they are and understands that their problems are real problems, the conversation can begin about how to solve such problems.

These are huge social issues, probably the most difficult issues confronting our country at this time. I would be foolish to pretend to have the solutions. But if this book raises consciousness of these problems and gets people talking about what they think will solve them, then the book has done enough.

I see this as a great book for book clubs because it opens the discussion at so many vital points. That's where I hope it will go and where it will take its readers.