

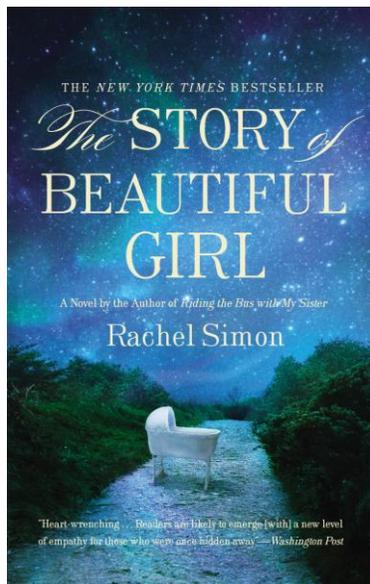
FICTION - INTERVIEW - The Road to Home: Rachel Simon's THE STORY OF BEAUTIFUL GIRL by Joy Stocke

In the early 1990s, I met Rachel Simon just after she published her first book, a collection of marvelous short stories, *Little Nightmares, Little Dreams*. Along with a group of writers in Philadelphia, I had co-founded and hosted a reading series and we asked her to share her work with us.

A few years later, our mutual friend John Timpane of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* sparked Simon to write about her developmentally disabled sister Beth, Beth's very full life, and their bus rides through the town where Beth lived. That story, which appeared in the *Inquirer Magazine*, grew into Simon's memoir, *Riding the Bus with my Sister*. I remember sitting in a long-gone pink club chair in my row house living room reading an early draft of the memoir and thinking, that Simon had written an important story; and then came a publishing contract and a launch party in a neighbor's garden where Simon and her sister Beth stood side by side, smiling.

In the years that followed, Rachel continued to write and teach Creative Writing at her alma mater, Bryn Mawr and in addition became a manager of three Barnes & Noble Bookstores. Slowly, Simon found the

acclaim she deserved. Rosie O'Donnell bought the rights to *Riding the Bus with my Sister* and produced a film of the same name starring Andie MacDowell in the role of Simon, and O'Donnell, herself, in the role of Beth. Simon published another memoir, *The House on Teacher's Lane*, and became a sought after speaker in the Developmental Disability community.



When Simon told me she was writing a new book (which is all she said as Simon keeps her projects private until she's written a finished draft) and that it was fiction, I eagerly awaited its arrival. Simon is a highly skilled writer and imaginative storyteller, so I knew her book would be a

page-turner. Little did I imagine the breadth and scope of her vision or how her book, *The Story of Beautiful Girl*, takes the reality not only of people with disabilities, but people like us with broken hearts and souls, and turns that reality into a nuanced tale of redemption.

On February 10, *The Story of Beautiful Girl* was released in paperback. Simon, about to embark on a book tour, took time to sit down and talk with me.



Author: Rachel Simon
Photo Credit: Carson Zullinger

WRR: How did you create the character of Martha? And how did you decide to make her 70? Our society has as many prejudices about old age as we do about disabilities; so I was interested in how Martha committed herself to raising Julia, the baby that literally lands on her doorstep. Is this story based on fact?

Rachel Simon: Martha's storyline has no basis in fact, though the character of Martha came from a few real-life influences.

The first was books. When I was growing up, the kind of book I most loved reading - and rereading - were fairytales, which are populated by archetypal characters. Two of the most prominent of these archetypes are the young heroine and the old lady, who is sometimes the nemesis and sometimes the ally. I didn't realize how much this background sculpted my thoughts until I wrote my first book, *Little Nightmares*, *Little Dreams*, a collection of short stories, in 1990. Story after story, when my thoughts

poured from my fictional pitcher onto the page, they always featured young women and old ladies. So when I began *The Story of Beautiful Girl*, it was just natural to me to start with an old lady.

The second influence that led to Martha was my professional life. I too was a teacher, though on the college rather than grammar school level. In 2007, the creative writing program where I'd taught for eleven years decided to restructure, and I lost my job. I was forty-eight, and fell into a state of grief. The very first day when I began writing this book and Martha emerged from my pen, it just felt right to make her a retired school teacher who was also in a state of grief. Even though she was grieving a lost child and a lost marriage, I still felt our roots were intertwined.

My personal life had some overlap with Martha's as well. Although I was happily married when she emerged as a character, I was, like her, a woman who'd never raised a child. In my case, I'd never even had one, and I'd just finished going through a period of grief about that. I didn't know, when I began the book, that she would receive a child and be willing to raise her, but I realize in retrospect that she allowed me to live the motherhood I'd never known.

Finally, the character of Martha grew out of my friendships. I have a number of friends in their seventies and eighties, including one woman I've called my surrogate mother for the last twenty years. I also volunteer in an assisted living community, and have developed close bonds with many of those individuals as well. Indeed, sometimes I feel I have a lot more in common with that age

group than my contemporaries; not only do I have no children at home (or at all), but I also have no job, as I never did return to the work force after I stopped teaching.

At some point I realized that *The Story of Beautiful Girl* is the story of multiple people moving through grief who then move to other lives where they create a new place for themselves in the world.

WRR: Your sister Beth has a boyfriend Jessie who is black and who has a disability. What are the similarities and differences between Beth and Jesse, and the fictional Linnie and Homan?

Simon: Beth and Linnie are both non-practicing Jews. They both have an intellectual disability, though Beth is so talkative she's come to call herself Chatty Beth, while Linnie is essentially nonverbal as a result of selective mutism. Both of them draw a lot, though for different reasons; Beth draws fanciful designs on thank-you and birthday cards, whereas Linnie draws lifelike images that help her communicate her experiences and memories. When it comes to their personalities, they have little in common. Beth is assertive, boisterous, gregarious, clever, and always on the go. She has a tough hide and a gleeful sense of humor, and if you express bigoted opinions, she'll take you on. In some ways she's like Doreen in the book. Linnie is a more serious person who takes things deeply to heart, and when she's hurt she retreats into herself.

Beth's boyfriend Jesse and Homan are both African American and from the South, though Jesse has an intellectual disability

and is blind in one eye, and Homan, who does not have an intellectual disability, is deaf. They do have similarities in their background, such as having several siblings, a family that wasn't very supportive; and an older male relative who played a mentor, or big brother, role, and who was murdered. In Jesse's case, the relative died in a bar fight; in Homan's, it was a racial incident. Neither Jesse nor Homan can read. Both are somewhat philosophical and think about god, though Jesse does so in a more conventional way than Homan.

All that said, Jesse and Homan have very different personalities. Jesse is shy, athletic, and, lately, very involved in playing video games. Homan wants friends but has a communication barrier. He's very handy with fixing and ultimately inventing things. He's very clever about solving puzzles that others don't even notice.

WRR: Homan doesn't have an intellectual disability. Yet, he loves Linnie who is developmentally disabled. Would you speak to that?

Simon: Given the circumstances of their lives, it seemed quite reasonable that they would fall in love. Homan and Linnie were both stuck in an institution and had no contact with those they'd loved in the past. He learned to survive by being cooperative and responsible, and helping the staff and other residents. He didn't reveal his true feelings and did not express his thoughts. Linnie learned to survive by having friendships with Doreen and Kate. She also didn't reveal her true feelings and did not express her thoughts, at least not through words. They recognized that each had a

“smaller self” that they hid inside, and only with each other did they reveal that smaller self. To me, this is part of what love is: when you feel safe enough to show your vulnerability and the other person feels safe enough to show you theirs. The fact that she had a developmental disability and Homan did not wasn’t relevant. Besides, he was drawn to her for the respect she showed her friend Tonette, at Tonette’s burial, and then, when they began their relationship, he saw that she gave him respect, too, assuming that his signs made sense, and trying to understand them.

In my life, I’ve come to think in terms of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous line, but with an addition: May we one day come to live in a nation where we will not be judged by the color of our skin or the differences in our abilities but by the content of our character. Homan realized Linnie had a beautiful character, Linnie realized Homan did, too. And from there love bloomed.

WRR: And can you speak about portraying love that sustains two people who don’t see each other for more than 30 years?

Simon: Again, this touches on fairytales and my own life, as well as Greek mythology. In some of my favorite fairytales, like *The Twelve Ravens* and *The Six Swans*, the young heroine gets separated from her beloved brothers, and only at the last minute, as she’s about to be put to death, do they reunite. I love *The Odyssey* for the same reason (as well as many others); it is a story about a man who longs to get home to his beloved wife, even though he must

confront formidable obstacles and persevere for many years. The concept of reuniting is one of the most compelling plot lines in literature—even if, in many stories, it remains unfulfilled.

Reuniting is also a major theme in my own life, as readers of my last two books, *Riding The Bus With My Sister* and *The House On Teacher’s Lane* (both memoirs), already know. When I was a teenager, after my parents had been divorced for several years, my mother impulsively married a man she’d just met in a bar and disappeared. Six years later, when I was an adult, I tracked her down, met with her, and made a decision to forgive her. I also had a reunion with my now-husband. We lived together without marrying for thirteen years, then broke up when I was in my mid-thirties. I was single for another six years, and then he came back into my life. Both of us had changed and we were able to reunite in a new relationship—and get married.

Can love endure for thirty years when the lovers are apart? Perhaps I’m a romantic, but I say yes.

WRR: I was taken with the character of Kate, who is flawed and at the same time provided true love and support to Linnie becoming a touchstone for Linnie during her years at the institution.

Simon: Initially when Kate appeared in the story, I didn’t think she would be much more than someone in Linnie’s life. But I quickly realized she would be the lynchpin. She would have to make a moral decision: Should she do what she thought she should

do, or should she serve Linnie, and do what Linnie wanted?

From knowing my sister's aides, and meeting many professional caregivers (also known as Direct Support Professionals) when I gave talks for *Riding The Bus With My Sister*, I was aware that everyone in those roles faces ethical decisions all the time. They might not be this dire, but in the end the professional still has to decide: Do I do what I want, or do I—to the extent possible—serve the individual?

The character of Kate wasn't only informed by the aides I've known personally and met on the road, she also grew out of a number of interviews I did some years ago, when I went to central Pennsylvania and spoke with Direct Support Professionals who work in group homes. I wasn't sure why I wanted to interview them, since I was far from writing this book. I think I just recognized that they were unrecognized, uncelebrated, and terribly important to the lives of people like my sister. And when I began developing Kate, I realized I wanted to honor them.

After I'd finished *The Story of Beautiful Girl*, the Executive Director of the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals read a galley. He got in touch and said, "Did you know that our organization has a code of ethics, with nine ethical statements – and that the character of Kate follows every one? We would like to use this for training." I hadn't known this, of course, but it was thrilling to hear.

Kate was also important in terms of the storytelling. There are certain scenes near the end of the book that I couldn't tell from

Linnie or Homan's point of view, yet which required a character who knew them both very well. Kate was that person.

WRR: After writing your book, *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, you traveled across the U.S. and Canada and met many people with disabilities. I am curious about Linnie's talent as an artist. It's quite profound and I'm imagining you met people like her.

Simon: I actually didn't meet anyone quite like Linnie, but I met many people who expressed themselves artistically. I also met many people who were nonverbal and communicated in alternate ways. I think a lot of able-bodied people live insulated lives and don't realize that just because someone doesn't speak, it doesn't mean he can't or doesn't communicate. Everyone communicates in one way or another. Similarly, I've seen many able-bodied people underestimate individuals like Linnie and Homan, assuming they don't have much of an inner life, let alone intense feelings of loss, longing, and love—or, for that matter, a creative drive.

A few years ago, I met some adults with autism who don't speak, but who communicate through keyboards. Impressed by the sophistication of their thought and their sense of humor, I asked if they wanted to take a creative writing class with me. For the next few years we met in someone's living room. They brought short stories and essays, and we worked on writing process and craft, the same as I used to do in my college classes. Their writing was powerful, sometimes lyrical, and quite moving. I loved working with them, and the fact that they

communicated in alternate ways became utterly unimportant. They had the same depth of spirit and the same breath of emotions as everyone else.

I'm not exactly sure where Lynn's artistic skill came from. But it's highly likely that it was influenced by those talented students, and my anger at the world for underestimating them.

WRR: Homan's name has two allusions for me: "Home Man" and Homer, as in the Odyssey. Homan stays in numerous places on his own odyssey across the country. Do any of those places have counterparts with the classic story?

Simon: The storyline of Homan does indeed have many parallels with and references to the Odyssey. I realized pretty early on in the first draft that Homan's story would roughly follow the Odyssey, even if it did so out of sequence. Both Homan and Odysseus are away from home for decades, both are trying to get home but are thwarted, both are in love with the woman who waits for them at home. In fact, I drew upon the Odyssey rather extensively as I worked out the plot.

Here are some of the major plot points that come from the Odyssey:

- Homan induces forgetting as a result of a drug, ala the Lotus Eaters.
- Homan's friendship with Sam lures Homan away from his return home like the Sirens.
- Homan tends to the pigs when he's with the Silvers (though he isn't turned into one).
- Homan discovers a cave in the hut and hides there, just as Odysseus and his men hide in a cave from the Cyclops Polyphemus. The bed Homan sleeps on there is the same bed Polyphemus has in his cave. When Homan is set upon at the end of the chapter, the light blinds him, just as Odysseus blinds Polyphemus.
- Of course, Homan's separated from the person he loves and can't get back to her for decades.
- Lynn has suitors, but isn't interested in any of them.

There are also references in the text itself:

- I have the phrase "Dawn rose" twice in connection with Homan, which isn't quite "the rosy fingers of dawn," but it's close.
- When Homan sits in his yellow chair, "It felt as if the chair were a boat, rocking him from all around."
- When Homan makes the contraption that takes leaves off gutters, he talks about it opening like a captain's telescope.
- Homan's dream, when he sees all the people he's lost and they ask him what life is like, has some overlaps with Odysseus's trip to the underworld.
- Lynn doesn't recognize Homan at first, but he does realize it's her.

I thought I was being awfully obvious, but it turns out that almost no one has picked up on these references. This is in spite of Homan's name, which, yes, alludes to Homer.

Though to be fair, the name is a tribute to a friend in her eighties (one of the people I mentioned earlier). She lives along a rural road a few miles from my father's house. I

happened to be house sitting for him when I was in the middle of the first Homan chapter and was trying to figure out Homan's birth name. I wanted something that would refer to the Odyssey, but of course I couldn't be blatant and use Odysseus. What could I use? Nothing was coming, and, in frustration, I went for a walk and ended up at my friend's house. She was outside, and we fell into our usual, easy conversation. And after an hour or so, I suddenly realized her last name was Homan. I thought – Ah! Homan. Homer. Human. Home. Homing Pigeon. Plus I could honor her. I went back to my father's house, put the name into my handwritten draft, and boom, it fit. And that was that.

WRR: Would you talk about Linnie's relationship with Hannah? I thought often of you and Beth when I read those passages.

Simon: Linnie and Hannah do indeed have a lot in common with Beth and me. I'm the older sibling, the way Hannah is. I liked playing with Beth when we were little, while at the same time I recognized the importance of being responsible for her. Unlike these sisters, Beth and I weren't kept physically apart for many years. But we did drift apart emotionally until the experience I wrote about in *Riding The Bus With My Sister*. Now, I'm the family member who has a strong, ongoing, and close relationship with Beth. My parents aren't at all like Linnie and Hannah's parents, and my other siblings are not at all like the twin brothers. But I am the one who's involved on a regular, and often daily, basis.

I'm also involved with two national sibling organizations, The Sibling Support Project

and the Sibling Leadership Network, for the brothers and sisters of people with special needs. Over the years, as I've become friends with the siblings in these two wonderful groups, I've come to see that there are many similarities among us. It was these similarities that I wanted to show in Hannah. Even though her life is quite unlike mine, it reflects the struggles, concerns, and efforts of many of the siblings I've come to know.

WRR: Your family chose not to put Beth in an institution. Why not? And how was she schooled?

Simon: It just so happens that my family had a very personal experience with institutionalization. When my father was born, in the Great Depression, his father was unemployed and his mother was very ill. Through my father's early childhood, my grandfather couldn't find work, and my grandmother was bedridden. My grandmother died when my father was six. My grandfather, still out of work, was poor, grieving, and unable to cope with having two little children (my father and his older brother). So he did what some people did in that era when they were in dire straits: he put his children in an orphanage. Thus, my father and his brother grew up in an institution, where they slept in large rooms with other children, ate in large dining halls, and had to pick beans in the fields to help the orphanage support itself. My father hated it.

After Beth was born, when we were children, he had a line that he used to say almost every day. "When you live in an institution," he'd say, "you know at the

bottom of your heart that you are not really loved. So no child of mine will live in an institution.” This sentiment made total sense to me as a child and it makes total sense to me now.

As a result, Beth was raised at home, and we all believed, very strongly, that she should never be hidden from the world, or have fewer opportunities than any of us. So when it was time for her to go to school, my parents brought her to the local public school. Luckily for us, we lived in a state that had special ed in the 1960s, which wasn’t universally true. But the school officials wanted to put my sister in the classes for the children who weren’t expected to be able to handle reading and writing. My parents fought for her to get into the higher level classes, and they won the fight. She did learn to read and write, and her life has been much better as a result.

Beth remained in public school until she was seventeen. At that point the family problems, and her reaction to them, got too acute. My father pulled her out of school and started taking her to work with him. That was the end of her formal education—but not the end of her learning. From what I can tell, she learns every day, just like the rest of us do.

WRR: You’ve written about your Beth's hysterectomy. Is the character of Julia a gift to Beth?

Simon: I should clarify this. When Beth became involved with Jesse, the family talked with her about the consequences of sexual activity. We also discussed birth control options. After going through each

option and finding that none really worked for her, Beth, on her own, came to the decision to get her tubes tied. I brought her to the doctor when she went through that process, which I wrote about in *Riding The Bus With My Sister*. Although the movie made it seem as if she changed her mind, the truth is that she signed the forms of her own accord and went through the experience with no reservations.

Years later, the doctor discovered that she had uterine fibroids. They worsened over time, so finally the doctor suggested a hysterectomy. Beth said yes, and I helped her through that process, too. I wrote about this in *The House On Teacher’s Lane*. Unfortunately, some readers thought I was referring to the earlier surgery, but they happened more than twelve years apart.

To get to your question about Julia. No, Julia isn’t a gift to Beth. Beth is pretty content not to have children, and in any event, Linnie isn’t at all like Beth. I think of Julia as a gift to Linnie, Homan, and Martha. I realize they’re fictional characters, but they feel as real to me as anyone, and Julia belongs to them.

WRR: One of my favorite books is your collection of short stories, *Little Nightmares, Little Dreams*. You were very young when you wrote those stories. How has writing changed and remained the same for you?

Simon: This is a huge question! So by necessity this is only a partial answer.

My writing process is much as it was then: I write the first draft by hand and type it up on

a computer, where I do all the remaining revisions. When I first put my pen down on a page to start something new, I usually have little sense of the story except for the most general idea and, if I'm lucky, a first line. Then the story unfolds as I write, almost always in the same sequence in which the final version appears. When I was younger and was writing short stories, I would try to write a story at one sitting. With *The Story of Beautiful Girl*, I tried to write ten pages a day, which usually amounted to a third to a half of a chapter.

When I was younger, I enjoyed writing from the points of view of characters quite unlike myself. I also liked strong, well-defined characters, and stories with clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Clearly, this is all still the same. In addition, years ago, a friend pointed out that most of my stories had strong, central images. I suppose that's true too, though not because I consciously try to make it so.

What has changed is the material I write about and my level of ambition. I used to focus more on theme than subject matter, with the theme generally being about intimacy. Now I'm more interested in the subject matter of social justice, especially as it involves people with disabilities. As for my ambition, I'm now much more interested in whole novels than short stories, and I'm particularly interested in multiple points of view, deep emotions, and a great passage of time.

This isn't to say that I won't ever write short stories again. I can easily imagine returning to that form at some point.

WRR: Would you talk about revision and craft? In an era where anyone who wishes can publish a book, great writing takes time. What is your process?

Simon: I think I just covered some of the basics. I will add that once I begin my revisions, I spend years on them. In fact, all six of my books have taken four years, from first word to publication. I think it's important to revise over and over until all my doubts recede, and that takes a lot of time.

One thing I started to do several years ago was leave others out of the process. When I was younger, I would show my first drafts to multiple readers, getting their input awfully early in the story's life. As time went on, I came to feel that no one could see how much further a story could be developed as well as I could. In addition, no one could help me with my revisions, because I would inevitably hit on a solution that no one outside my own mind could possibly have access to. Now, I write in total isolation, and don't even talk about what I'm doing for the first few years I'm in a book. I rely on myself to get it to the highest level I possibly can before I bother showing it to anyone. This way I don't waste anyone's time. I think I also bring my characters more to life, because I want them fully ready to be seen before I introduce them to others.

WRR: And last but not least, would you talk about lighthouses and home?

Simon: I see lighthouses as symbols that operate on many levels. They are a place of safety, a beacon that brings people home, a guiding light, and an image that has some

spiritual overtones, i.e., the light that remains even in the darkest of times. My stepfather also tells me they have a magnetic quality; everyone who comes near a lighthouse simply must look its way, and usually feels they must go toward it. He tells me that lighthouses draw people together.

But I have to admit that lighthouses also resonate on a very personal level for me, which I wrote about in my last book, “The House On Teacher’s Lane.” As I mentioned earlier, when I was a teenager, my mother impulsively married a very bad man, abandoned the family, and disappeared for many years. I tracked her down when I was an adult and re-established a relationship. By then she’d married again, this time to the wonderful, loving stepfather I mentioned in the last paragraph. As it turned out, my mother and my stepfather developed an interest in visiting lighthouses, and for years at a time, they would go on lighthouse tours for their vacations rather than come see my siblings and me. Absurd as it sounds, I came to feel as if I was actually in a kind of competition with lighthouses. I finally came to terms with this right after my mother was diagnosed with senile dementia, and I wanted to move on from these feelings. I went to visit a lighthouse on my own, and came to feel sense of peace about her that had eluded me until then. So the lighthouses in *The Story of Beautiful Girl* work on symbolic levels that are relevant to the purpose of the story. But they are also there because of my own inner storms