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Hearing Voices

by [Jill_Dearman](#)



This week Rachel Stolzman, author of *The Sign for Drowning*, shares her thoughts on the writing process and the long and winding road to publication. Listen up, readers ...

JD: Could you tell us a little of the back story of *The Sign for Drowning*?

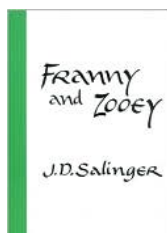
RS: The novel began as a short story which was basically the novel's prologue as it stands now. During my MFA, I returned to the story, having become curious again about what might have happened to the characters after the tragic drowning that occurs in the prologue. The journey of publication was a long and arduous process. The book was passed over by numerous agents for being "sad and quiet", so I wound up putting aside for years. It was the subject matter and the themes that drew me back to it. I wanted to see a novel about deaf culture, about loss and adoption come to light. I re-wrote the novel in 2005, won second place in the Faulkner competition, got the agent and found the publisher.

JD: What kind of effect did learning sign language have on you as a writer?

RS: It had a profound impact on this project. It was my love of ASL and my exposure to deaf people and deaf culture that led me to make the creative choice to have Anna, as an eight-year old grieving sister, develop the fantasy that she could communicate with her dead sister through sign language. The more I learned about the controversies of deaf education and the historical challenges deaf people have faced in this country and elsewhere, and their resilience, the more important it became to me to have a real and multi-faceted portrayal of the deaf community in the novel.

JD: What authors have had the greatest impact on you as a writer?

RS: The writers I love most are not the writers that I write most similarly to. Growing up, I read the novels I found in our house, what I call the Jewish canon: Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Isaac Bashevis Singer and others too, John Updike, JD Salinger, Toni Morrison, Joan Didion, James Baldwin. I still read and enjoy those writers. Poetic prose writers have had more influence on my own writing though, like Jeanette Winterson, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Allen Ginsburg, Antoine de Saint Exupery and many more.



JD: You do a lot of work for people with HIV/AIDS, and have for a long time; how do you balance work as an advocate with your work as a writer?

RS: Yes, I've worked in the HIV field for over fifteen years, as I understand you have as well. I currently work with adolescent HIV prevention programs all over New York City. For me, work and writing are not that balanced because I have much less time for writing than I do for my actual job. But I write every week, and I'm very invested in my public

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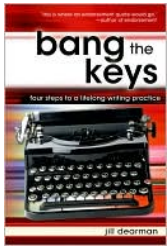
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health work as well, so they both get done.

JD: I no longer work in the field, but it was some of the most meaningful work I've ever done. For you, what's your writing practice like and what's the biggest writing obstacle would you say?

RS: I write every Saturday and Sunday and frequently on a third day each week too, usually for half days. A big part of my writing life is also my writing group- we are seven fiction writers who meet monthly and workshop each other's writing. I've been in this group for about six years and they're invaluable. Time is often identified as the big obstacle. Mathematically speaking, my second novel (which I'm on a second draft of) would happen twice as quickly if I wrote twice as many hours. Having more skill would be welcome too- then first draft writing could be the final word!

JD: Ha! Thanks so much, Rachel. For more on Rachel, please check out her website, <http://www.rachelstolzman.com/>. And for more literary talk, please stop by mine: <http://www.bangthekeys.com> and / or check out my new book:



And before we say goodbye, here is a question: how easy/hard is it for you to balance your writing and your day job?

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by [CityWendy](#) on 01-27-2010 05:24 PM

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I really enjoyed this debut novel by Stolzman. Yes, it's "quiet," as some early agents called it, but it's a quiet roar that builds to a pay-off that's far more touching and inspiring than it is "sad." Stolzman's poetic prose is every bit as beautiful as those authors she credits as major influences.

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by [BigTime40](#) on 01-28-2010 12:45 PM

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I love 'The Sign for Drowning'. The story begins with a haunting experience that resonates through the rest of the book. Stolzman captures the delicate, intense pain that we all carry in our hearts.

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by [erinrobin](#) on 01-31-2010 01:28 PM

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I loved reading "The Sign For Drowning." I found it to be sensitive, poetic, real and different. A very talented new voice is coming on the scene, I can't wait to read her next book. I was delighted that my friends who read the book were extremely touched and wanted to relate their own stories to Rachel.

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