

Swati Avasthi on Silence

Interview with L. Michelle Quraishi
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Silence can be a form of empowerment.

— Swati Avasthi

Swati Avasthi, author of young adult novels *Split* and *Chasing Shadows*, is the kind of teacher who never stops learning, the kind of writer who is constantly challenging herself. “If writing isn’t cathartic, then you’re doing it wrong,” she states emphatically at the beginning of our Zoom interview, radiant in an elegant woven pashmina. Early in our conversations about the alchemy of pain, Avasthi shared that she doesn’t subscribe to the idea that “telling” about painful or traumatic experiences is necessary to healing. Since this seemed to contradict most evidence-based trauma therapies currently in use as well as the very purpose of storytelling itself, I was eager to hear more about exactly what she meant by this. To explain, she referred to the memorable ideas of two former students. Mirian Busch once shared that when you’re silent, you contain all the power. And Brita Sandstrom clarifies that when you’re forced to give something up, that’s exploitation, but when you choose to give it up, that’s empowerment.

Avasthi’s novel *Split*, the story of sixteen-year-old Jace who’s just been kicked out of his parents’ home for challenging his abusive father, emerged from an earlier time in her life, when she still subscribed to the idea that telling was a necessary step on the path to healing. [*Spoiler Alert: Skip to page 3 if you haven’t yet read this phenomenal book!*] Written while majoring in criminal justice, this book explores the idea of how people learn or unlearn violence. One of Jace’s final acts in his hometown was brutally attacking his girlfriend in a rage, and much of the story centers on his own reckoning with the “blister in his brain” that this creates. The novel’s

mentor figure is Miriam, former social worker and girlfriend to his older brother Christian; her goal for most of the novel is to urge both brothers to come clean with their own stories, as indeed they are both able to do in the end. The sensitive Jace also serves as his own mentor throughout the novel, constantly examining and questioning his own motives and actions, always asking the question, “How can I be different from my father?”

A filter Jace applies to all interactions between people includes “The Rules of Fightology,” tragically developed after years of watching his father beat and humiliate his mother, his older brother, and himself. But his focus for most of the novel remains on the facts of his own actions, which he confronts without excuse. With the guidance of Miriam, his older brother, and a new potential girlfriend Dakota, Jace eventually finds himself able to tell the truth about what he’s done. What’s notable in this story is the person who “tells” is the perpetrator, not the victim. His former girlfriend, Lauren, exhibits a lot more conflict about telling what has been done to her. She first reaches out to Jace for explanation, hoping to remain connected to her abuser. He refuses this, and when asked if she should file a police report, he types back, “Do it” (111). But then Jace’s influential father convinces Lauren to rescind the accusation, telling her that “forgiveness is how you get to go on loving someone after they’ve done something you hate” (233), a position that Jace entirely refutes. The novel ends before Lauren has reached any kind of satisfying understanding of her abuse, even while Jace dissects and deplores the pattern for them both. Avasthi’s swift, stark and tender novel serves as an empowering map for those navigating abusive relationships and yearning to unlearn violence.

Avasthi’s second novel, *Chasing Shadows*, is partly based on real experiences, but she kept the work completely fictional by making sure that identity was “not part of the book, so that it can have resonance without implications.” She explained that she “never want[s] to appropriate

anybody else's pain or write anything autobiographical," in order to maintain distance between writing and life. So, what does she write about?

I start with questions or problems...that I can't figure out, and I give those problems to characters and let them work it out on the page. I create a safe distance for myself that allows me to explore and learn and grow and heal by writing and asking questions and seeing what would happen if. It helps me understand something that has been a puzzle.

When I pointed out that since we ourselves must write our characters' stories, it's really just us discovering the answers for ourselves, Avasti resisted this idea: "It may be an enabling fiction, but I don't feel like I'm doing all the work." We went on to discuss how fiction helps people live. Because of the way we dissolve into story, we're adding to our lived experience when we read or write. Avasti speculated that "The reason that we read is to live other lives. We're not immortal, and this is our way of being as reincarnated as we can within a lifetime."

Comparing works-in-progress in which both of our main characters wrestle with difficult truths, Avasthi and I agreed that the truth is critical for a character's empowerment and escape from abuse. "The truth is devastating," she said. "The act of empowerment is what you choose to do with that truth." We discussed how children in abusive situations often choose to remain silent to protect their abusers, "an indication of love and altruism" that deserves respect. For both of us, wrestling with our characters' trauma and creating pathways to healing for them has been worthy and challenging work. Responding to a process letter about thwarted drafts, Avasthi offered this gem, now posted on my computer: "The truth is, I wouldn't love writing if it were easy."

Works Cited

Avasthi, Swati. *Split*. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010.