

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

COMMITTED: A Memoir of Madness in the Family

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1. Your current memoir COMMITTED is the sequel to your 2015 memoir THE S WORD. Both include harrowing accounts of growing up with and becoming caregiver to loved ones diagnosed with schizophrenia. How were you able to relive such heartbreaking and often frightening moments from your past and write about them?
 - Revisiting past haunts is never easy. What I've come to learn in my own life, and in what I've helped others who have a story to tell come to realize is that you can't fully move on unless you put the past behind you. The turning point for me in my own unraveling of what came before was when my therapist asked: *"Paolina, how long are you going to keep wishing for a better past? Because it's never going to happen."* It's true, and yet, how many of us – whether we consciously know it – haven't confronted our histories and are allowing events and old beliefs to negatively influence our present, even keeping us stuck from moving forward? This phase of writing does require support from a coach who has been there done that. The writing technique I use and coach others to use is one where you learn to approach your most painful past moments in phases, effectively tapping into the "heat" of memories, while distancing yourself – your ego and your emotions – so that you are able to tell the story you want to in the way you want it told – and without losing yourself in the process.
2. You tackle some topics about mental illness in COMMITTED that expose your own challenges with staying sane while surrounded with madness. How did you get comfortable with sharing such intimate details about your life and about the lives of those in your family?
 - A favorite quote of mine comes from the author of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* - D.H. Lawrence's: *"This is the very worst wickedness: That we refuse to acknowledge the passionate evil that is in us. This makes us secret and rotten."* Exposing whatever it is that we're feeling or thinking in safe ways and without doing harm to others isn't the problem. When we try to hide or shame ourselves into silence, THAT is when we start to suffocate and either implode or lash out. Truly getting 100% comfortable with anything in life that really matters is, in my opinion, always going to be a challenge. But getting uncomfortable is, indeed, where the magic happens. And with the intention that I had – to have my story help others who may be finding themselves in similar situations of madness – being of service in a bigger way became my purpose and well worth any feelings of discomfort with sharing.
3. In COMMITTED, you use the actual letters from your family members as well as others to tell your story. Snippets from love letters between your parents and delusional rants on post-it notes from your younger sister: This style – the epistolary memoir – is somewhat unique and, as you pointed out in your memoir, felt at times almost as if we were eavesdropping on private conversations. What made you decide that this very intimate sharing was the way

in which you wanted to invite the reader in your world of madness?



- Honestly, it wasn't a conscious "oooh...I'm going to make this an epistolary memoir"; I had never even heard of that term until after *COMMITTED* made its way to my publisher. For me, when pouring through my journals and all the files with letters that I had kept, it was more like those letters and post-its and their authors were wanting me to share their stories using their exact words and means of communication. To actually see the note from my little sister following her first psychotic break with her handwritten scribbles threatening, "*You better do as I say, or you and your family will pay,*" is so much more powerful than me typing out those words or paraphrasing. The actual writings allow readers to really experience what I did in the way I did, and the story unfolded all on its own because of them.

4. You've said that it took you 10 years to write your first memoir *THE S WORD*, and less than 3 years to write *COMMITTED*. Would you share why such a difference in timeframes and how publishing your first book may have changed your process of writing?

- In writing *THE S WORD*, it took a great deal more time because while I had been a writer my whole life, telling other people's stories, I had no knowledge of what I would encounter in the telling of my own story. The first several years starting out on that book, I wrote scenes and memories and tip-toed into workshops to get feedback from other writers. I needed the time it took to even figure out the frame of my first memoir and what I would or wouldn't include. As a mentor of mine once said: "Memoir is the story from a life, not of a life." With so much that had happened to me and to my family during my childhood as a result of my mother's diagnosis with paranoid schizophrenia, I needed to get clarity on the spine of my story, and be able to let go of things that, while important to me, didn't best serve me and the story I was telling. From the time the first book came out in 2015 to the writing of its sequel *COMMITTED*, I had been ghostwriting the personal stories of others, employing the techniques and short-cuts of my own writing to theirs when working on their memoirs. I further embraced the power that comes for yourself and for the world in being brave enough to tell your story. And, having been through the experience of having my first memoir published, I knew what to expect (including social trolls), and it wasn't so scary or insurmountable any longer. My purpose also became clearer and stronger, and that helped to expedite the work.

5. In addition to your two memoirs – *THE S WORD* (2015) and *COMMITTED: A Memoir of Madness in the Family* that publishes May 2021 -- you've also written a holiday fiction novel *MIRACLE ON MALL DRIVE* that published November 2020 and a children's picture book for adults called *SERIOUSLY! ARE WE THERE YET?!* that published in October 2020. Do each of these books stand on their own, or, despite them being in such different genres, are you trying to build a body of work with connections between each?

- Each of my books definitely can stand on their own, while at the same time each is connected to the other. The two memoirs – *THE S WORD* and *COMMITTED* – obviously are linked with the mental illness, dysfunctional family, and caregiving aspects. But even the Christmas novel has fictional characters throughout that struggle with mental health, keeping secrets, dysfunctional families, and a lot of the same. And the children's book for adults directly speaks to we grownups who get to a certain point in life and wonder about the "shoulda, coulda, wouldas" – so, again, tackling identity issues and emotional wellness but in a Dr. Seuss kind of way. I think that whatever it is that I'm called to write and in whatever genre or format, I have an underlying theme of trials to triumphs or – as is the name of my coaching business – Madness to Magic. I

can't help but weave in this truth of life that things happen – we do the best we can in the present when they happen -- and we can choose to learn from them and use them moving forward to



take us to the next level or not (in which case, we remain stuck). If I had to point to something, I'd say that is the connection between each of the books.

6. Fear of judgment, questions of identity, and consequences that are attached to someone falling apart or even admitting that everything is NOT “okay” are still very real in our society. As you point out in the book club discussion questions you included in the back of COMMITTED, the stigma surrounding mental illness still causes people to keep secrets and suffer in silence. In COMMITTED, you struggle with what’s “normal” and worry that the insanity rooted in your family tree will end up claiming you. How important to you has it been to shine a light on mental health issues and what do you hope this latest book helps to accomplish to that end?
- There’s a coffee shop in Chicago where I grew up called “A Sip of Hope” that is such a great place where “it’s okay to not be okay” and on an even bigger scale, there’s Oprah and Harry, the Duke of Sussex, working on their mental health documentary series for Apple, and other major organizations like beauty brand Philosophy that donates a portion of product sales as part of their the Hope & Grace initiative to support mental health programs – all of that underscores how much more compassionate and empathetic and open we’ve become with our mental health struggles. That said, we still have more to do. I believe that sharing our stories is one way for us to contribute and to help heal not only ourselves but the world. If my stories help even one person to know they’re not alone, or provide encouragement to someone suffering in silence to seek out help then I feel that in some small way, I’ve made the most of what has been given to me and used them for the greater good.
7. What advice might you have for aspiring writers, especially those who feel called to tell their stories but who may be hesitant to open up old wounds and who are concerned with their family and friends’ reactions? ● My advice is pretty simple. Tell Your Story. It matters. Get it out of your head and heart and onto the page. No one has to see it, if that’s what you ultimately decide. But if you don’t write it, who will know your story, all you’ve overcome, and the lessons you’ve learned that may help someone else...? I think we too often focus on all the reasons we shouldn’t do something: It’s too painful; I don’t have time; I’m not a writer; I can’t remember it all; My family will be angry; etc., etc., etc. The reality is that that all may be true. Just as the reality may also be the very opposite: Writing your story may bring closure and healing; Time is passing whether you write or not, so why not choose to use whatever time you have to write whatever little bit you can?; Maybe you’ll learn that you can learn to write; Memory can be prompted to recall events; Your family may end up thanking you for telling the story that has been holding them back, too...? At the end of the day, don’t worry about what may or may not come down the road. All you have is this moment, so write for yourself and see what unfolds.
8. You’ve written in all of your books about some “other world” encounters -- for example, when the messages on license plates show up, including the “LUV DAD” that appears at the very moment when you’re grieving your papà and asking for a sign that he’s still with you. How do you manage your spiritual connections in the writing of your books? How might they be similar to or differ from what writers consider the muse showing up?
- That creative muse – that inspiration to write – shows up when we are open to her visits. The same holds true

when it comes to spiritual connections. I think that too often we spend so much time like gerbils on wheels, constantly moving and doing and being productive – I know I do. What I’ve come to realize, however, is that when I get still and quiet and when I ask for help or guidance and am open to receiving it,



the magic shows up. I think we all are able to channel our muses or messages from God or the Universe or whatever it is that we believe is “out there” – we just have to surrender to the possibilities, let go of our need to control, and just BE (or as my 17-year old foster kid might say “CHILL”).

9. How many unpublished and half-finished books do you have?

- WAY more than the number I have published. Just part of my list includes the following:
 - The Wolf in the Window – a children’s book for kids with a parent diagnosed with mental illness.
 - I’m with Crazy: A Love Story – a YA book about my little sister and our relationship.
 - Blueberry Hill Cottage: Finding My Way Home – a magical realism true story of how I manifested the home within which I live.
 - Pasta with Papà: A Cookbook of Sicilian Recipes with a Side of Old-World Wisdom – my parents were both excellent cooks, so this collection of their unpublished family secrets is told alongside how they raised us – using Sicilian proverbs as a foundation for our lessons.

And I could go on and on. In addition to books, I also have screenplays (some that have won awards) and stories in other formats. I’ve been writing for decades, and without a doubt, I was born a storyteller.

10. If you could tell your younger writing self anything, what would it be?

- I sure would have A LOT to say, but would she listen? LOL! I guess I’d tell my younger writing self: Hey, you don’t have to be perfect. You don’t have to know it all or do it all. You don’t have to fear the madness; rather, embrace it, invite it to share whatever it has to tell you. Listen to the whispers, trust your heart more than your mind, and know that you are the magic, no matter what circumstances surround you. Tap into your super powers. WRITE. And don’t get distracted by shiny things. You have lots of stories to tell. Use the gift that God gave you and tell them.