

Q&A Gwendolyn Womack



From the start, Gwendolyn Womack's *The Memory Painter* (LJ 2/1/15) grabs the reader with images of half-remembered lives, confused and frightened characters struggling to stay sane, and portents of danger. Artist Bryan Pierce and neuroscientist Linz Jacobs discover the truth of reincarnation and identify the powerful group that created a volatile and lucrative drug to take people back into their past lives—a drug that's worth killing for. The author's background in script writing and painting, along with her travels in Russia and Japan, inform this complex page-turner that weaves history, science, and romance into an unforgettable novel.

What do you say when people ask for a summary of *The Memory Painter*?

I usually try to distill it into one quick line, and I say it's a supernatural historical thriller about a group of neuroscientists who unlock the secret to reincarnation. Every other attempt turns into a long-winded explanation!

How did you get the idea for the story?

The idea literally struck me as I was walking down the hallway of my apartment. I stopped and stood there for at least two minutes thinking, "What if neuroscientists really unlocked the secret to reincarnation accidentally with a drug?" By the end of the day I had the present-day lifetime and the 1980s lifetimes sketched out, along with a rough outline of their interconnecting narratives and the first line of the story, "The paintings hung in the dark like ghosts," which has never changed.

There's more to this book than the intricate story line. Can you talk a little bit about the underlying message?

I wouldn't say message so much as I was exploring the ideas of the interconnectedness of us all, culturally and spiritually, and that perhaps the human mind has untapped abilities we've yet to discover. I've always been fascinated with that particular "what if."

In the book's acknowledgements, you allude to "so many years ago when I first started writing this story." What was your process?

The idea for the story came to me 15 years ago. I originally wrote it as a screenplay and the plot focused entirely on the current day characters, the 1980

lifetime, and one other historical life. The script was circulated to film studios in 2001, but it didn't sell. So ultimately I had to move onto writing something else. I was very heartbroken at the time because I believed so much in the story. Over the years, I began to think that I would try to write it as a novel. In early 2010, I was finally ready to sit down and try. That's when I researched and encountered all of the lifetimes and ancient Egypt. It felt like finding the other 90 percent of an iceberg that I hadn't realized was buried. [The novel] took three years to write. The historical figures came to me one at a time, and I would stop writing to discover and research each life as I went along. It was extremely fun to wade through history to locate them. It felt like unearthing puzzle pieces, and I loved the whole challenge.

Do you have a writing routine?

I don't. I'm all over the place! I pretty much write anywhere, all the time. Out of necessity I've become pretty good at tuning out my surroundings. (Like right now I'm editing during my son's very loud karate class!) I even take pages to the gym and work with a clipboard and red pen while I'm on the stationary bike—basically anything to squeeze in more time. I do long stretches on my computer at home, and then I carry several legal pads around with me to write down ideas, lines, or scenes when I'm away from my desk. When I'm revising I only like to work on paper and print out the manuscript to edit with a red pen. I have about 40 red pens in my house, although I can never seem to find one!

his job after the family's tragedy. Torran Island's isolation promises to give the Moorcrofts a chance to heal, and a new school for Kirstie is expected to help her adjust to the

terrible loss of her sibling. However, things don't go as planned, and Sara is deeply disturbed by Kirstie's claims that she is actually her dead twin, Lydia, and the thought that

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What other kinds of writing have you done that have influenced authoring this novel?

I first started writing poetry when I was a kid, and I wrote poems for years. I still like to write a poem sometimes to try to capture the essence of an idea in the fewest words possible. In college, I began writing theater plays and fell in love with seeing actors bring lines to life. Then I went to graduate school for directing theater and film, where I wrote short plays and films. After graduating, I started writing feature screenplays, which really demanded that I tell a story with a tight structure. I think all of those different experiences created the springboard for me to finally start writing novels.

Do you have advice for new authors?

Writing a novel is like running a marathon—you have to keep going when you think you're going to expire. So don't give up on your story! Your job is to nurture and protect it. You can become disheartened by the rejections you'll receive along the way. Just believe in the story and keep working on it and remember that writing is rewriting. It's like adjusting binoculars—keep reading your work, look at everything from as many angles as possible, embrace revisions, and try to hone the story till it shows the sharpest focus possible.—Jennifer Baker, formerly with Seattle P.L.

perhaps she has misidentified her surviving daughter. Struggling with her concern for her daughter, her isolation and increasing doubts about her husband, Sara is tortured

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