

Healing From Generational Trauma Through Fiction: An Interview with Pamela Kripke



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Pamela Gwyn Kripke is an award-winning writer, journalist, and author based in Philadelphia. She holds an AB in English Literature from Brown University, along with a Master of Science from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. Her work has been published in numerous newspapers, magazines, and online news publications—including *The New York Times*, *The New*

York Post, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Elle*, *Seventeen*, *New York Magazine*, and *Newsweek*. Notably, in 2010, her series of essays for *The Huffington Post* was submitted for a Pulitzer Prize. Her most recent work, *At the Seams*, was published in May 2023 by Open Books. Her novel is based on a true story of a young girl who discovers a haunting family secret, leading her as an adult to investigate the incident to uncover the truth. The novel addresses the importance of recognizing generational trauma and uncovering how far people can go to protect those they love.

Itzel Sosa: I know you started as a journalist; how did you get into writing novels?

Pamela Kripke: I've always written, and journalism isn't exactly what it was in terms of being able to write for a lot of different publications. As a freelancer, I was able to write feature stories for different magazines, newspapers, and publications. I became a freelancer out of necessity. I really enjoyed being able to write for a lot of different publications at once—for a lot of different topics, and for a lot of different readers, who were interested in different things. It broadened my knowledge of how to cover different issues and topics, along with writing in a different way depending on who was reading. Early in my career, I wrote an op-ed piece for the *Chicago Tribune*, and it was published in the opinion page. I kind of got the bug at that point because I was covering something—but it was my opinion, my observation, and my take on a situation that wasn't someone else's. Since then, I've always written essays, and I've had hundreds of them published in a hundred different places. All along people have said to me, "You should write a novel! Your essays sound like fiction in a lot of ways." So I wrote a memoir back in 2018; I self-published. During the pandemic, I began writing short stories and submitted them to different literary publications. It started out with a kernel of truth, it seems everything I write has a kernel of truth to it, and I had success with what I submitted. Over the pandemic, I thought back to an essay that I wrote about a true story, a personal essay, and expanded that into a book. I fictionalized it because I didn't have all the facts. It started out as a memoir, but because it was about a situation that happened years ago in my family, there was no one really around to talk with, and insufficient documentation. I just made up the parts that I didn't have access to. So viola, fiction. Some of those short stories that I wrote, I put into a collection and added new stories that will be published in late March by the same publisher.

IS: Do you have a favorite type of journalistic style?

PK: Yes. I've written a lot of narrative non-fiction, character-driven stories of people, which also makes sense that you would go from that to fiction. Just covering breaking news, which I did for a bunch of different magazines, you're there to do a job; you're there to report on something—get the facts straight, make sure it's accurate, turn it around quickly. That was a good exercise, good skill. But feature stories let you take your time and meander a little bit, and go in a lot of different directions. Half the time, you don't really know how it's going to turn out, which is why I like writing features. I'd be assigned a story or pitched a story, and go report it. I would find out things that I hadn't expected, and then the whole angle would change. That's always fun; I like it when that happens.

IS: When reporting, you're reporting on a real life story. Did you have trouble when writing your novel getting fictional inspiration?

PK: Well, journalism really trains you to develop certain habits that keep you from making things up. Accuracy is number one, you become a good observer of everything. You're tied to the facts, that's your job. If you get a fact wrong, the reader will read it and won't trust you ever again if you got it wrong. I'm talking about the publications of merit and accuracy and what our job is. It was hard to relax about that, and with fiction, I would be writing something that happened in my family that I remember. There's this natural tendency to grasp onto the facts, but I remind myself

that I can make this part up, change this, or the protagonist can do something that I didn't do. Part of what I did is that the main character of the book was based on a little girl, which would've been me; I thought, "If I were a different kind of little girl, what would she do in that situation?" That situation was the same, but I had her react in a way that I didn't. Though I incorporated a lot of the details I had in my life into her life, her response to this incident was nothing like mine. I put her in the same house, same backyard, and she took ballet like I did. But this thing happened in our family and I had her really react strongly to it, when in reality, I didn't. Though it sat with me all these years, enough to write about it. But I had her really transfixed on it, she was anxious and began questioning her whole world, where I didn't do any of that.

IS: What inspired you to change her whole narrative compared to how you really reacted?

PK: Yes, well, the way I reacted wasn't terribly exciting. It wouldn't have as intriguing a character. Basically, her mom had an older brother who died in the hospital as an infant. I knew that happened with my mom, but it sat with me because I was a little girl when I learned about it, and it struck me, "Hm, why is mom telling me this?" But that was pretty much it. In the story, I had this girl basically go nuts when she found out about it. She is a very inquisitive and curious kid, like I was—but I kept it in check, and was in this family that suppressed things. In order to heighten that conflict, I had to have this really curious kid in this family that said, "No, no we're not gonna talk about it." While in my family we didn't talk about it, because it would upset my grandmother, so that was that.

IS: You mentioned you had been wanting to write this book for a while now, since you had initially said it was all in the past. What brought it about now?

PK: Yes, so that's an interesting thing that happens with books talking about generational loss. Emotions are trapped inside families and get passed along, unless the cycle is broken. No one knew the details about this baby who died, and as a grown-up, I wanted to find out. No one knew the baby's name, how old he was, or what happened to him at the hospital, but there were rumors. The rumors were tragic and scary. So, I wanted to see what I could do to find out. I tracked down the death certificate, and I found his name, and all the details and a description of what had happened on the death certificate was inconclusive. There was a rumor that he fell off the cart in the hospital. I got a lot of the details that my mom didn't know about, and then I thought, "Well, why am I thinking about this now?" It was also around the time I got a divorce and had two little kids at home. They went to their dad's house for the first time by themselves—it was about that time, though I didn't realize it, that I started thinking about my grandmother's baby. I went back and checked the dates. The dates when I started reporting the story, were about the time my kids started visiting their dad. There was something in me that was feeling this loss of my babies. That made me somehow think of my grandmother. Is it subliminal? Was it a coincidence? What was it that made me start thinking then? In the book, I have her to grow up being a reporter and track down the details. It kind of explains for her the relationships—why her parents were the way they were, and her mom and her grandparents. Only then she was able to properly mourn the baby.

IS: Was that your message throughout the book, the message of generational trauma? Of healing over time?

PK: Yes! She took it upon herself, being the third generation and the fourth being her child. She was the recipient of the grandmother's behavior and feelings, and then her mother's. Neither of them had grieved for the baby. The mother skipped the feelings, so she wanted to reconcile that for everybody.

IS: You said you're writing a second book—could you tell me a little bit if it's going to be a novel or short story collection?

PK: So, the book that's coming out in the spring is a story collection. There are twenty-one short fictional stories. They're all featuring women and girl protagonists. It will be called, *And Then You Apply Ice*, which implies that when you get hurt, you go to the freezer, you get a sack of ice, and you put it where it hurts. You figure out how to keep going, and take the next step to wherever you're going. It has to do with transgressions and different things that women, in particular, contend with during their daily lives. Big things, little things, and how they handle the transgressions that other people hoist on them. They are funny, they are quirky. I tried to create some odd situations, but they're very realistic.

IS: I've noticed there's a pattern in your protagonists of all being girls and women. Is there a reason for that?

PK: Yes, you know, you write what you know. It's a good thing to know about. Women provide a lot of depth, and they go through a lot. I've written a lot about motherhood and parenting in my nonfiction and my reporting life. I've written a lot about family issues and parenting; it's centered with the women. I have two daughters, so it feels natural.

IS: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers, both in journalism and creative writing?

PK: I guess there are layers of advice. In general, I would say to do it, rather than talk about doing it. Sometimes there's a fear of actually sitting down and doing. There's a hesitation, sort of like you're a painter, and you're afraid to put the first stroke on the canvas because you'll mess it up. I would say, it's okay to be messy, mess up whatever you want on the page, and get in the habit of doing it. Just know that you can save it for later, you can throw it out, you can change it, or it can be magnificent the first time out. I would say to do it and get in the practice of doing it. People always ask me "Well, your writing is so detailed, and there's a lot of specifics. How did you think about that detail?" I would tell writers to really look around them. Take a journal and write down things you see. They don't have to be connected to a story. It could be a curtain flying out of a window flapping, or it could be a dog with a funny limp. Overhear what other people are saying and write it down. Eavesdrop and snoop, when you go to someone's house, open up the drawers. I'm serious, just look at the details of things, because you can use them. I have a bunch of books filled with all kinds of things, things you just notice. Get in the habit of just noticing, because stories are about people and what they do and the setting they're in. You can use all that, and from that, you can expand and enhance. But really get in the habit of looking at the world around you. Your focus should be outward—listen to how people sound, watch their faces and their bodies, see how they do things. Look for what's not obvious, and look at their socks, their belts, and the next guy's shopping cart. Look where you're not supposed to look, and you'll get some good material.

You can learn more about Pamela Kripke, her career, and short stories here (<https://pamelagwynkripke.com/>). You can also purchase *At the Seams* here (<https://www.amazon.com/At-the-Seams-Pamela-Gwyn-Kripke/dp/1948598647>) and preorder *And Then You Apply Ice* here (<https://www.open-bks.com/library/moderns/and-then-you-apply-ice/order.html>).



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Itzel Sosa is a graduating senior earning her BA in English with a writing concentration and minor in Law as well as a certificate in creative writing and publishing. When she isn't at school or studying, she enjoys cozying up with a book and exploring Philadelphia. After graduation she plans on attending law school.

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