

Author Q & A with Stephanie Kegan

1. What initially sparked the idea for you to write *Golden State*?

It was more like several sparks that ignited into one. I've always been interested in sibling relationships, the impact of siblings on our lives, and stories about siblings who turn out dramatically different from each other. Over the years, I've also been struck by the agony of ordinary families thrust into the headlines by a son who's committed an awful crime. I'm sure I'm not the only one who's wondered what it might be like to be in their place. On another track: I was educated in the California public schools when they were considered the best in the nation and college tuition was nearly free. It pains me today that California kids don't have that kind of opportunity. These threads coalesced into the idea of a novel that would touch on the loss of the California dream through the shattered dreams of one California family—a family with a son who does something terrible.

2. The novel carries quite an emotional punch. How did the writing of it affect you?

At times, I found myself getting really upset over some of the material. It's painful to open yourself up to how fragile even the most seemingly secure life can be. The writing brought up my own fears of what I could lose in the blink of eye. I remember thinking: why am I sitting down every day and doing this to myself?

3. Your background is in journalism. What drew you to this field and what inspired you to transition from journalism to novels? Do you see these forms as fundamentally different, or were there similarities that surprised you?

When I started out, I wanted both to write and to make a living from writing. Not so easy. But journalism gave me a way to do that. It also taught me how to tell a story and how to listen to one. Aside from the obvious differences between journalism and fiction, I think good writing is good writing. As a reader, I want to be caught up in a story that challenges me in some way. I get that out of the best journalism as well as from fiction. I don't see these forms as fundamentally different. Nor do I think of myself as having transitioned from journalism to novels. I see myself as a writer who has the great good fortune at this point in her career to write novels.

4. What is your writing process like? Do you create a detailed outline, or do you let the characters and the plot determine the course of the narrative?

This book was really determined for me by the characters. When I started, I only knew two things. One was that the main character would be a wife and mother who discovers that the murderer in the news is her estranged brother. The other was the family had some connection to California history. My first task when I started writing was to figure out the brother's crime. It took me a while, but I finally hit upon a mail bomber. That decision sent the story in a certain direction. The same was true about the choices with the other characters. What the father did for a living, for example, and Natalie—and so on. I also discovered the characters—and by extension the novel—in the writing of scenes. For

example, I'd put two characters in a room and let them define themselves in interaction. Sometimes they went in a completely different direction than I'd planned.

5. Natalie and Sarah are very different, very complex individuals. Which sister do you relate the most with?

I suppose that Natalie is more like me. She leads a relatively conventional life. She's a wife and mother. I feel great empathy with her. She's pulled in so many directions, trying to balance the needs of her own family while she deals with the crisis in her original family. A part of her just wants to get out from under, but she understands that might never happen. As Bobby's sister, she also carries a heightened awareness that children can be lost. That said, there's a lot of me in Sara. I was the oldest child in my family and somewhat oblivious to the lives of my younger siblings. Like Sara, I just wanted to get out of the house and go places.

6. Bobby is responsible for terrible crimes, yet he is in some ways sympathetic, at least to Natalie. How did you handle the challenge of writing that character?

Certainly Bobby was the most difficult character in the novel for me to write. I was lucky in that I had some brilliant—and very kind—people in my extended family. So I had that experience to draw on in describing the impact of Bobby's intelligence on Natalie. From the start, I knew that Bobby was going to develop a grave mental illness—he's a paranoid schizophrenic. My challenge was to make his behavior consistent with that illness, but not so obvious that everyone could see it. Although his tactics are odious, I had to make his philosophy seem reasonable. The hardest scenes for me to write were the two of Bobby and Natalie meeting in the jail room. Bobby had to seem crazy and sane, unrepentant about his crimes and yet not fully aware of their implications. He had to be someone new to Natalie and yet familiar.

7. What kind of research did you do for the novel?

Obviously, I researched the Unabomber case and the issues surrounding his trial—chiefly the conflicts imposed on our justice system when the defendant is both a terrorist and insane. But I also researched other cases: Timothy McVeigh, who was the Oklahoma City Bomber; Zacarias Moussaoui, who pleaded guilty in federal court to conspiring to kill US citizens in the 9/11 attacks; the Fort Hood shooter and Army psychiatrist, Maj. Nidal Hassan; and John Phillip Walker Lindh, known as the American Taliban. *Shot in the Heart*, Mikal Gilmore's wrenching portrait of his family and his relationship with his brother Gary Gilmore, was a valuable resource. Of course, I researched how the federal court worked and issues surrounding the death penalty, including the drugs used in lethal injection. But *Golden State* is primarily a family story, so I did a lot reading on mental illness and how families can deny the illness in their midst. One book I found particularly helpful was *The Normal One*, by Jeanne Safer, Ph.D., which addresses the psychological impact of being the "normal" sibling of a damaged brother or sister. Since Natalie's family story was intertwined with the history of the California, I also had to get my state history right.

8. **As evidenced from the title, *Golden State* is intrinsically linked to its setting. What influenced your decision to tie Natalie's family history so closely to California's history?**

I was thinking of California both in the sense of an actual place and as a metaphor—as a container, if you will, for the American dream. In my research of these types of killers, I saw the same characteristics repeat themselves: rage, alienation, black-and-white thinking and desire for identity. My interest was how this person might develop in an ordinary family. I tied Bobby's family so closely to the California dream, because I wanted it to be clear that Bobby's violence in some ways was directed at them. Although Bobby is a domestic terrorist with a relatively coherent philosophy, his deepest rage is toward himself and his family. His violence gives him a way to escape facing his mental illness and the loss of the life he might have led. It gives him an identity and supplies him with what he needs to make sense of everything: outside enemies. *Golden State* is at base about family and the ways in which families mirror the culture they live in.

9. **In what ways did your family's experience in California and your own relationship with the state influence the novel?**

When my father was a teenager during the Depression, he and some buddies hopped a freight train from North Dakota one summer and rode the rails to Southern California. They slept in orchards, ate fruit from the trees, and swam in the ocean. As a kid, I loved listening to that story and hearing the wonder in his voice at what he described as seeing paradise for the first time. He had to return to his life in North Dakota, but his direction was set. We moved to California from the mid-west when I was four years old. My parents used the GI Bill to buy a "midcentury-modern" ranch-style house in a brand new subdivision in Southern California. My father told me I could go to any college I wanted so long as it was a California public university. I chose Berkeley, where kids really did arrive on Greyhound buses with practically no money in their pockets to attend one of the best universities in the country. I grew up under that dream, benefited from it, and I've seen it move further and further out of reach for ordinary families like mine. So that experience certainly influenced the novel.