

An Interview with Diana Abu-Jaber

Why did you decide to switch genres and write a “thriller”?

It was an idea I'd been playing with for a long time. I love mainstream literary fiction and will always consider that my genre, but I've also had a lifelong fascination with other genres, like horror, science fiction, fantasy, and thrillers. I never completely outgrew my love of fairy tales, and it seems that wisps of magic often find their way into my work. Even in *Origin*, it seemed I couldn't resist my penchant for the magical, which works its way into the mystery of the main character's identity.

With *Origin* I wanted to try something completely different from my earlier books. I think writers need to keep challenging themselves in some way so that they don't end up writing the same story over and over. And I think it's just a natural progression for many writers—you get restless with certain subjects and themes and want to strike out for new territory.

But then there's the simple fact that I woke up one day feeling haunted by the idea of a woman who's so physically astute that she has an animal-like sense of smell, an ability to follow tracks and see in the dark. It seemed that the natural sort of occupation for someone like that would be police work, forensics; and so the thriller format was dictated by the character.

*In contrast to your other books, the prose in *Origin* is much more pared down. Why is that?*

I wanted to write a very cool, realistic, modern story, and I deliberately chose the starkness of a crime lab for the crispness of the setting. I feel that language, style, and form are always an extension of content, so the coolness of the story—its mood and atmosphere—called for a cleaner, crisper prose setting.

Why all the snow imagery?

The harsh Syracuse winter is part of that cool, sharp imagery. It's done in part to evoke a mood of alienation, of separation from the natural world, and as a lens for the industrial world's attack on the environment. I'm interested in the way hyperconsumption hurts the environment, how we're all implicated in issues like global warming, yet the media is much more fixated on whipping up sensational fears over terrorism.

Things in nature are out of whack in this book—it can't stop snowing—and Lena, who is so involved in her sensory body, finds that she can't use her powerful natural senses to help guide her in this unnaturally whited-out world.

Other than because of the harsh winters, why did you decide to set your new book in Syracuse?

I love Syracuse on so many levels: it's my hometown, eminently comfortable in all its familiarity—I feel I understand the city and know it intimately, even though it's been many years since I've lived there. But I also think that having distance is helpful in gaining some artistic perspective on a place. I'm able to see it with a slightly fresher eye and perhaps pick up on certain nuances that I wouldn't notice if I were actually living there.

I also wanted to use Syracuse as a setting for *Origin* specifically because it has what I think of as an edgy, almost film-noir quality. Yes, there's a famous university and hospital system and cool enclaves of art and music and cafés, but much of the downtown is run-down and half-deserted. It's a place of extremes—it's moody and shadowy and full of fascinating old architecture, which is wonderful for evoking atmosphere in a story. It gives me all sorts of dark alleyways and mysterious openings for the character to hide in and linger over, as well as a couple of chase scenes. As far as I'm concerned, Syracuse is a novelist's dreamland.

Your last two books had so much to do with food. Where did all the food go?

My books *Crescent* and *The Language of Baklava* were immersed in a sensual universe. In part, I cut out the theme of food simply because I didn't want to repeat myself. I'd spent over a decade writing food-oriented books; I was also doing a lot of food journalism, reviewing restaurants and cookbooks, testing recipes. Food will always be very much a part of my personal and professional life, but I wanted to take on something entirely new.

But again, this was also one of the dictates of the particular story. In *Origin*, everyone is suffering from the effects of a compromised earth. Our senses are compromised, and food is less a source of pleasure than a potential hazard.

Issues of identity and the past come up often in your books. Is this a conscious choice or a secret obsession?

Both, undoubtedly. I think the quest for and creation of personal identity is one of the most fascinating projects we're given to undertake during our lifetimes. My first books focused on exploring this question through cultural heritage because my father's immigrant culture was so much a part of my upbringing. But as I've grown older, I've come to feel more of an international American identity, and I wanted to investigate more of the places and people that formed my childhood in upstate New York. Lena, the protagonist of *Origin*, doesn't know who her biological parents are, so she's on the same sort of search for self that my other protagonists are; it's just that she doesn't have as much information as they do.

In many ways, Lena's situation mirrors my own sense of ambiguity and perplexity about identity, not only cultural but spiritual, creative, personal—all the intricate ways we try to become who we are. In *Origin*, I really wanted to look more closely at the question of how people create a sense of self, rather than at the specific cultures or areas that "self"

might arise from. I think of this search as uniquely American on so many levels—it really doesn't matter all that much, in the end, where we came from compared to where we're going, where we end up, the "home" that we're trying to find or to make.

Is that search a story that's universal to men and women, or does it have particular significance for women?

I do think that the journey to completion has special significance for women. We're often raised to focus on caring for others, pleasing friends and families instead of tending to our own personal growth. It's that age-old struggle to push out of a place of social subjugation.

By the same token, I do think that both men and women alike have to embark on journeys of personal discovery and becoming. There are always going to be lots of people out there who believe they know the answers and are more than happy to tell us what to do with our lives. Certainly, Lena is surrounded by such "helpful" advisors in *Origin*—most of whom turn out to be very unhappy or half-mad! She actually tries to take "human being lessons" because she's so confused about her path in life. The trick for Lena, for anyone, is learning to stay brave and intrepid, to not back down from challenges or from taking imaginative risks. And that's one of the traits I really value in Lena—the willingness to risk being different or looking foolish in order to get what she wants—whether it's solving a mystery or finding her own true purpose in life.

How did you research the crime-scene forensics and fingerprinting techniques that play such an important part in this book?

I had to do a lot of research because, for me, this field was the Great Unknown. I don't read mysteries or crime fiction, my mind doesn't work in a particularly linear fashion, and, when I began writing the novel, I wasn't at all sure I could do it. I tried to be very casual about the whole project because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to grasp enough of the subject matter to write about it with any authority. I was so paranoid about getting things right, I probably overdid my research a little. For the three years it took me to write the book, I never stopped researching. I talked with several different police officers and detectives about their experiences, the stresses of the job, their complaints and thoughts, and I tried to get a sense of the day-to-day texture of the work.

I also flew up to Syracuse to tour the crime lab and interview the lab director as well as the director of fingerprinting. They spent hours going over the nuts and bolts of the profession with me. My office filled up with forensic casebooks and manuals on DNA fingerprinting; I even bought a little fingerprinting kit so I could try it out for myself.

Where did Lena Dawson come from?

Almost all my protagonists originate from some aspect of my own personality or fantasies and then tend to spin into their own characters as the story develops. In Lena's

case, it had long been one of my oldest and most cherished childhood dreams to have been raised in the wild by animals.

I often share my characters' daydreams and obsessions, and I use their stories as a way of "trying out" other lives and occupations—taking peeks down the road not taken.

Is there going to be a sequel to Origin?

Very hard to say! I felt haunted by Lena even after finishing the book, which doesn't usually happen for me. But writing *Origin* was a bit like running a marathon—I'm going to need some time to catch my breath before I can think about starting a new one!

Special thanks to Desire Hendricks, whose complete interview with Abu-Jaber is available [here](#).

Diana Abu-Jaber on the Origins of Her Storytelling

I grew up inside the shape of my father's stories. A Jordanian immigrant, Dad regaled us with tales about himself, his country, and his family that both entertained us and instructed us about the place he'd come from and the way he saw the world. These stories exerted a powerful influence on my imagination in terms of what I chose to write about, the style of my language, and the form my own stories took.

People often ask me about my American mother and whether she also told stories. Actually, my mother is not a native storyteller in the way my father is, but it may be that she has taught me something even more valuable, which is how to listen to stories. She made a space in our home for my father to invent himself, and her attentiveness and focus showed me that sometimes being quiet can be just as transformative as speaking.

I have two younger sisters, and we grew up in little snowbound houses in Syracuse, New York; and then spent some time living among courtyards and trellised jasmine and extended family in Amman, Jordan; and then we all moved back to Syracuse again. My father could not make up his mind about which country we should live in. In America, he constantly reminded us that we were good Arab girls; we weren't allowed to go out to parties or school dances. But then he encouraged us to study single-mindedly, to compete as intensely as any boy, and to always make our own way in the world.

My father's brothers are doctors and scholars and politicians. And it was determined that I would receive my undergraduate degree from SUNY–Oswego because one of my uncles taught there and could keep an eye on me while I lived in a dormitory. When I finally struck out on my own to do my graduate work, then, I instinctively sought out mentors—the next best thing to uncles, in my mind—going for my M.A. at the University of Windsor to study with Joyce Carol Oates, and then my Ph.D. from SUNY–Binghamton to work with John Gardner.

In school, I started writing stories that I think shared a certain kinship with my father's stories in that they gave me a way to imagine myself in the world. After graduate school, I taught creative writing, film studies, and contemporary literature at a number of different universities, including the University of Nebraska, the University of Michigan, UCLA, and the University of Oregon. All of these places had something new to teach me about being an American. I moved around for work, but I think I also like to move. While there's a certain rootlessness and solitude to nomadism, I suppose that I am, as my father asserts, fundamentally a Bedouin. I am driven to exploration and conversation despite my best efforts to quietly sit in one place. I would just as happily host a dinner party as give a reading, and my chronically social nature frequently disrupts anything like a real work ethic.

Even in my work, I am restless—while I'm prone to writing novels, I am also crazy about writing restaurant and film reviews, interviewing politicians and profiling county fairs, and fantasizing about writing the Great Arab-American Screenplay. My new idea is to live beside the ocean with my husband and my nervous little Italian greyhound, and to work outside under an umbrella with a pitcher of lemonade and a plate of cookies. Once again, I will attempt to settle down and write for hours and hours at a time, the way I am told one must. But I suppose that I will end up, as usual, inviting friends or family over so I don't eat all the cookies myself. We will sit outside together, contemplating our origins and destinations, and begin telling each other stories again.

About the Author

Diana Abu-Jaber was born in Syracuse, New York, to an American mother and a Jordanian father. When she was seven, her family moved to Jordan for two years, and she has lived between the U.S. and Jordan ever since. Life was a constant juggling act, acting Arab at home but American in the street. The struggle to make sense of this sort of hybrid life, or “in-betweenness,” permeates Abu-Jaber's fiction.

Her first novel, *Arabian Jazz*—considered by many to be the first mainstream Arab-American novel—won the 1994 Oregon Book award and prompted Jean Grant of the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs to say, “Abu-Jaber's novel will probably do more to convince readers to abandon what media analyst Jack Shaheen calls America's ‘abhorrence of the Arab’ than any number of speeches or publicity gambits.”

Her second novel, *Crescent*, is set in contemporary Los Angeles and focuses on a multicultural love story between an Iraqi exile and an Iraqi-American chef. A multidimensional love story infused with the flavors and aromas of Middle Eastern food, it won the PEN Center USA's Literary Award for Fiction and the American Book Award, and has been published in eight countries to date.

Again using cuisine as the fulcrum of her narrative, her next book—the culinary memoir *The Language of Baklava*—chronicles her own experiences growing up in a food-obsessed Arab-American family during the 1970s and '80s, and each chapter is developed around one of her father's traditional Middle Eastern recipes.

Origin, Abu-Jaber's latest novel, has been hailed as both a breakthrough for her in terms of style and subject matter, and a natural next step in her continuing exploration of identity and belonging.

Abu-Jaber received her M.A. from the University of Windsor, where she studied with Joyce Carol Oates, and later attended SUNY–Binghamton for her Ph.D. She has taught creative writing, film studies, and contemporary literature at a number of universities, including the University of Nebraska, the University of Michigan, the University of Oregon, UCLA, Portland State University, and the University of Miami.

Her stories, editorials, and book, film, and food reviews have appeared in literary publications as well as in the popular press, including Ploughshares, the North American Review, the Kenyon Review, Story, Good Housekeeping, Ms., Salon, Gourmet, the New York Times, The Nation, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times. She is frequently featured on National Public Radio and recently wrote and produced an hour-long personal documentary for NPR entitled The Language of Peace.

Abu-Jaber, her husband, Scott, and their nervous Italian greyhound, Yogi, make their home in Miami, Florida, and Portland, Oregon.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the twin plots of Origin do you find more appealing—the “whodunit,” or the “who-am-I” of Lena’s own self-discovery? How are they related? How are the two kinds of exploration similar, or different, in real life and in fiction?
2. Which of the two men pursuing Lena did you want her to end up with—Charlie or Keller? Why? How would you describe the differences between these two men? Who is the better protector for Lena, and does she really need to be protected?
3. What about the apes? What did that aspect of the story bring to this novel? Did you find it believable? Overall, was it a drawback or an enrichment of the story? How do you think it resonates thematically?
4. What other kinds of “myths” might people have about their own origins? Do we all embroider upon or mythologize our childhoods to some extent?
5. Gender, ethnic origin, religious identification, dysfunctional families, where you’re from, what you do for a living—these are a few ways of talking about identity that are popular in our culture today. How do they each play out in Origin? In your own personal identity story? Which has most shaped your life?
6. Do you believe in intuition? Is Lena’s intuition a mystical ability, or something genetic, or related to her upbringing, or simply a highly developed form of science based on knowledge and observation?

7. Why is Lena so isolated? Is her own explanation different from yours? Do people generally see her differently from how she sees herself? Is she “arrogant,” overly sensitive to others’ opinions, or both?
8. How much is this story shaped by being set in Syracuse, and in the cold and snow? Could Origin take place anywhere—or is it defined by the place in which this story is “born”?
9. In this age of identity theft, what is the truest or most reliable proof of your identity? Your fingerprint, your social security number, your life story? If the last, what if you have a key aspect of your life story wrong—are you still who you think you are?

Author's Picks: Getting the Right Mix

In writing Origin, I searched high and low for models to help me understand how one might go about combining a “literary” depth of characters and setting with the suspense of a “genre” mystery or thriller. Eventually, I found several novels that seemed to work for me as basic guides to achieving this balance. Among those books, these were some of the most exciting to work with:

1. Kate Atkinson’s Case Histories was especially helpful, as she really had the mystery writer’s sense of authority and powerful plotline as well as a deeply literary insight into characters. I loved how her protagonist, and indeed many of the characters, had a beguiling world-weariness that defied simplistic formula personalities.
2. I’d read Smilla’s Sense of Snow by Peter Hoeg years ago when it was first published, so my memory of the plotline is murky. It wasn’t until an Origin reader asked me if I’d been influenced by Smilla that I realized that it probably was at least a subconscious piece of my inspiration. I remembered feeling intrigued and haunted by the novel’s use of snow, cold, and ice, its beauty and menace.
3. I was captivated by the way Donna’s Tartt’s The Secret History built a suspenseful mystery story within complex layers of setting, voice, and characterization. This was a fine model of a book that managed to have both a dramatic, page-turning plot as well as a sophisticated prose style and flavor.
4. Jeffrey Eugenides’s Middlesex was helpful to me as a model of the sort of novel that is immersed in its milieu; in which the details of an actual city—its tenor, details, and history—become an important, evocative feature of the plot itself, just as writers like James Joyce, Eudora Welty, and Willa Cather wrote about their own “native places.”

I consulted many books on fingerprinting technique and forensics, but some of the technical guides that were most useful to me were:

1. Crime Scene: The Ultimate Guide to Forensic Sciences by Richard Platt
2. The Casebook of Forensic Detection by Colin Evans
3. DNA Fingerprinting by Ron Fride
4. The Forensic Casebook by N. E. Genge

5. Crime Lab by John Houde

Special mention should go to the Discovery Fingerprinting Kit, a junior forensics lab that includes rubber stamps, fingerprinting powder, and cards, and is recommended for ages eight and up as well as for—in my humble opinion—novice writers of thrillers!