

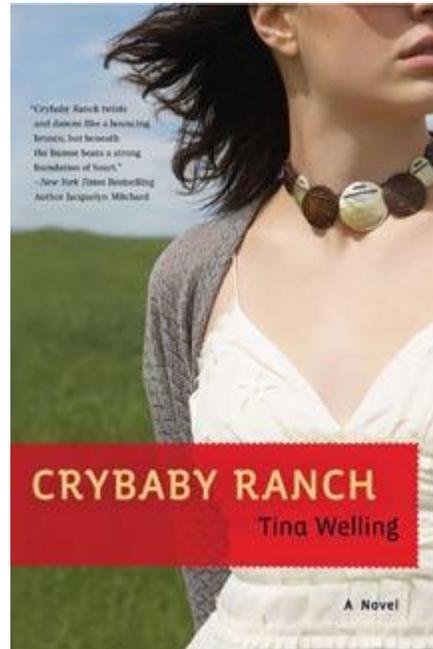
Conversation Guide

CRYBABY RANCH

By Tina Welling

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Q. Was there a particular image or idea that triggered the writing of Crybaby Ranch?

A. An image that supplied a lot of energy for writing this story occurred during an intense point in my mother's fatal illness. I witnessed my parents holding each other's hands and looking in into each other's eyes. My father said to my mother, "We are partners, aren't we?" Though lasting only a moment, I was seared with a profound awareness of what it means to commit to another person. They were nearing their 50th anniversary. I used this scene in the book to help Suzannah describe to Bo what kind of marriage she wanted.

The idea of life partners intrigues me. Though I have been married to the same man for decades now, I think of us as having five or six different marriages within the one. Partners don't always grow at similar rates or in compatible ways, so when there is a bond of deep love, this calls for adjustments instead of separation. But a relationship involves an exchange between two people and in some cases the exchange stops or only flows one way, as in the case of Suzannah and Erik at the novel's opening. I don't believe that every marriage should continue until parted by death, but I do believe that a committed partnership acts on many energetic levels, some very mysterious.

Q. Did you hope to send any messages through the story of Suzannah?

A. Perhaps a little confirmation for women in particular toward the idea of discovering their true selves, offer a couple signposts that I have discovered during my own process of what Jung calls "individuation." One signpost is to follow what you love, as Suzannah did in moving to Jackson Hole, getting a job at a bookstore, honoring her love of beadwork. A relationship with the natural world is very healing, as is learning to enjoy solitude. Yet perhaps the most

powerful and direct path is the creative one. Engaging creative energy is a sure way to awaken the unconscious and enliven ourselves. Suzannah's love for creating her beaded jewelry both aroused her evolution toward independence and supported her through the difficulties that journey provoked.

Q. Did you know the ending of Crybaby Ranch before arriving at that point in writing it?

A. No, but sometime early on I knew the final line: "It begins, it begins." I was so happy knowing that; it carried me through the years of writing with a bit of confidence that I would complete this project and create a story that measured up to the spiritual meaning those words held for me.

Q. So the whole story was not in mind before you began writing it?

A. No, not at all. I began the novel with a sense of magnetism between Suzannah and Bo, along with that image I mentioned earlier of my parents acknowledging their partnership. Then I just had some fun moving the story along, then I had some trouble moving the story along, back and forth - fun and trouble - until it began to come together. After that, it was rewrite after rewrite with spaces in between for clarity to make an appearance...if it was going to. This book spent a lot of time sitting about. Yet each time I picked it up again, I felt a strong energy for making it work. So I would engage in yet another rewrite.

Q. Love for the natural world plays a role in your novel. Suzannah found solace and pleasure in the outdoors. Do you?

A. Once I was a dependent, indecisive person who never strayed far from my husband and children or the places I was expected to be. Then slowly I began to wander farther and farther up the mountain canyons. First just short walks, then I packed my lunch and spent entire days on solo hikes into the Tetons. I was scared some of the time and exhilarated all the time. The love of the natural world became another relationship for me. And this relationship supported a whole new sense of who I was and who I could become. As it turned out I felt happy with my own company and I became confident that I could take care of myself.

Q. Is there a joining of biography with imagination in the novel?

A. Yes. And that's a good way to put it. It's a joining - a mating, a kind of love affair, even a sexuality - of actual life and the creative arts. Like real life

conception these two qualities - my experience and my imagination - bonded and produced (in a whole lot longer than nine months!) a novel. Some parts of the story concerning Suzannah and her mother Lizzie came from journal entries I made while caring for my own mother as she suffered from Alzheimer's Disease. But with time and dozens of rewrites, this biographical piece blended with fiction and became a universal story about any mother who suffers and any daughter who loves her mother. Suzannah is not me; Lizzie is not my mother. Yet, because of my experience, there is an emotional reality to this relationship in the book.

One of the things I love most about creative writing is how this blend works. It entertains me enormously to discover that I have created some character that I know nothing about at the moment, only to realize later that he or she has evolved from a past seedling. Even those crazy Aunts kind of emerged from this silly routine my sister Gayle and I drop into sometimes when we realize we have done something nutty. We might be out on her boat, hear something fall into the water and one of us will say in our particular dialogue voice, "Sister? Was that our house key you dropped in the water?" And the other will answer in the same tone, "Of course not, Sister, that was just your lunch."

But at the same time such disclosures are dangerous to make since people then tend to jump to the conclusion that a novel is entirely true, a thinly disguised memoir, which creates an immense disservice to any work of art. Fiction, like painting or dance, is an artist's interpretive vision of life: the choices available, the working out of cause and effect, the meaning, the interconnection of it all. People who have little experience of the power of creative energy often assume there isn't such a thing and their understanding of the process is limited.

Q. What is the most difficult part for you about writing a novel? What is the most pleasant?

A. In my experience writing a novel is a long, long process that takes me years to complete and during that time I don't know if I am writing something that connects me to real life in a deeply intimate way or detaches me from real life in a way that threatens my mental health. Or at least that is how it has felt in the past. With the publication of *Crybaby Ranch* my confidence in how I work has increased and I may find this mystery solved or at least more comfortable. I fall in love with the process, the characters, the story and even myself because of the enlivening force of creative energy. But then I wonder if I'm in some

dream world in which no one but me finds value. In that case, those growing stacks of papers on my desk and those tiny notes that litter my car, kitchen, and business, like confetti, only attest to a kind of insanity. Then again it may be a novel and those papers are proof that it's evolving toward completion. It may be that all novelists flirt with schizophrenia, though I suspect that this is something that self-heals with experience. I remember the first novel I wrote (which resides in my bottom desk drawer) was such an intense process that I feared I was going to meet my characters on the street. Now I succeed more often in seeing my work as my work, rather than my life. Perhaps it is necessary in the beginning of all passions - whether a relationship, a skill, an art or an idea - for us to briefly loosen our boundaries and merge with it in order to fully experience it. Honeymoons aren't necessarily just applicable to marriages.

All of the above could also apply to what is pleasant about writing a novel. My life feels dense and textured with the fullness of experience. Writing for me brings the unconscious into the conscious. So I can enjoy discovering the first sage buttercup of springtime on the mountain behind my house, then when I return home, enjoy the discovery in another way through writing about it. Often that second experience lifts from my awareness other qualities of the experience that I wasn't conscious of at the time. And, too, it pins down the fullness of the event for me: my fingers touching the glossy petals, the aroma of wet earth as the snow melts into it, my eyes squinting in the sunlight, my pup Zoe nosing the blossom. These flowers are only the size of a dime and are a wondrous surprise in the patchy snow. Writing for me enlarges my life and deepens it as well. Reading also accomplishes this for me, so I am very grateful to be involved in the whole exchange of writing and reading.

Q. Would you describe your workplace and writing schedule?

A. My workplace is a small log cabin, an old one, moved in from the Elk Refuge outside of Jackson Hole and attached to my home. Just one room with an ancient woodstove (there is also electric heat), windows on three sides, lots of bookshelves. One wall supports a long rustic-looking counter the previous owner put in, which I use for crafts on one end and for manuscript-sorting on the other. My desk sits facing all the windows and the stove and in a corner I've placed a wicker settee to read and knit and beneath one window I've created a small area for meditation. I feel lucky and grateful every time I walk into this cabin.

My schedule is a mere theory, a rumor I pass among my friends, a vague

intention, a wispy wish. In my imagination I write in the mornings, hike or ski in the afternoons. But in reality I don't actually get out of my pajamas till lunchtime, and though I've been writing, who can take anything seriously that is done wearing pajamas? Then there is my resort shop, which I work at half the week, morning and afternoon (though not in my pajamas). I close the shop for two months after ski season and another two months after the summer season, during those times I can give myself over completely to my phantom writing schedule.

All in all, like most writers who also hold day jobs, I often feel a bit schizophrenic (there's that word again) trying to juggle two callings - my business and my passion. And two worlds - one of reality and one of imagination.

Actually, I love my life. The time I spend in my shop dealing with visitors from around the world balances perfectly with the time I spend in solitude writing. And I especially love the ledger work where there is no doubt about where to place the decimal points, whereas in my writing life I can spend an hour deciding about punctuation in a single sentence.

Q. How did you arrive at this point in your writing career?

A. Much like a new driver learning a stick shift: starts and stops, starts and stops, jolting down the long road. Since I have envied those writers who begin their careers as toddlers I have racked my brain to come up with a story from my childhood that shows without a doubt that I was always meant to be a writer. This is the best I could find: when I was seven years old I had a favorite spot behind the sofa and laying on my stomach I would write and read. I remember announcing to my parents after crawling out of that place one day that I was going to grow up and write stories.

That was the end of that for a couple decades, until I announced to my husband sitting on the front side of the sofa - as a grown-up should - that I would like to write. But we had little children and though I promised myself every time I put them down for a nap that I would use that time to write, invariably I would nap myself. This went on until the boys entered school, then I got a position at the local radio station to write commercials. From there I began writing poetry, but every poem - just like a radio commercial - could be read in 30 seconds...flat.

But that was my beginning. I fell in love with how I felt when I wrote

something - a good commercial, a poem, an essay. Crybaby Ranch is my first published novel; before this I have published essays in national magazines and several anthologies, lead writing workshops for the Jackson Hole Writers Conference and other organizations. I have always loved reading novels, so it was only a matter of time before I tried to write one. I have two training novels that will never be published. Yet they taught me things I needed to know about the craft of writing and the management of creative energy.

Q. And your next project?

A. Another novel. I am hooked on the process of developing characters that meet life-challenges, fail and succeed, and along the way teach me things I need to know. I am especially entranced by relationships. My next novel is about a marriage, a good marriage. Nevertheless, the wife arrives at the need to take a sabbatical from the marriage. I want to address some universal dreams women have about mating for life and how those dreams so often oppose reality. I was raised on the Cinderella story as are many women in our culture and such fairy tales set us up for some disappointment. And yet marriage and partnering is still something many of us yearn to have in our life. I like to write about problems I don't know the solutions to, so that instead of that old adage that suggests you write about what you know, I choose to write about what I love and want to know more about. Writing is how I educate myself.

Questions for Discussion

1. Suzannah left Erik when she realized he was no longer invested in keeping the marriage alive. Do you think women tend to hang on to relationships long past the point of reviving them? And do you think Suzannah should have stayed longer or left sooner?
2. Suzannah wanted more from her relationship with Bo as a result of her marriage to Erik. Do you think she had the right to expect this? And do you think their relationship lasted past the point in which the story ended?
3. How did you feel when Suzannah began a temporary relationship with Deak and what do you think she gained from the experience?
4. Do you know anyone as zany as the Aunts?
5. Bo's father O.C. was prejudicial in away others of his generation have been. How do you handle a situation when an otherwise respected person makes prejudicial or inflammatory remarks in your presence?
6. Suzannah left home for Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the place she could imagine herself living alone happily. Where would you go? What qualities would you need such a place to hold?
7. Every character in Crybaby Ranch evolved toward a fuller, larger self except for the mother, Lizzie, whose Alzheimer's Disease contracted her sense of self. Perhaps the character that grew the most throughout the story was Bo. Discuss Bo's process of change from a heavy drinking cowboy to a productive artist.
8. Do you have someone as self-centered as Caro in your life and how do you deal with that person?
9. What role does the natural world play in your life? Like Suzannah do you choose to spend time with nature when you need comfort, or to celebrate your solitude, or to enjoy another person, get inspiration, exercise, relaxation?
10. Creativity is found in business, parenting, housekeeping, cooking, crafts, music and art; what changes have a creative pursuit, such as Suzannah's beadwork, made in your life?