

Shake Down the Stars

Renee Swindle

A Conversation with Renee Swindle

Q. In Shake Down the Stars, you take the bold step of making your protagonist an alcoholic who doesn't always behave responsibly or admirably. What inspired you to tell Piper's story, and what pitfalls were you aware of as you took on the challenge?

A. I always start with voice when I'm writing. When I first started the novel, I saw a woman in a room by herself nursing a drink while her best friend was celebrating her wedding. I sort of let her speak to me as I played around and "listened" to what she had to say. It wasn't long before I realized her struggle dealt with the loss of her child. I then thought, "Uh-oh, this is not going to be easy or fun," but I fell in love with Piper, and since I'm a one-idea-at-a-time kind of writer, I stuck with her.

Piper started with a drink in the opening scene and continued to drink in the scenes that followed. I knew she drank a lot, but it took my writing group and early readers to help me see that she was actually an alcoholic. I fought off the idea (much like an alcoholic might!), but after I accepted the fact that she had a problem, it was another uh-oh moment. I knew another part of her journey would have to involve gaining sobriety, and I wasn't sure how I was going to pull that off either. All of her problems were exciting challenges for me as a writer, though: How will Piper ever be happy again? How am I going to write about so many life events I know nothing about? As for pitfalls, I knew I was going to have to stay away from melodrama and scenes that lagged because of the subject matter. Some of the earlier drafts were too preachy. And I knew I wanted to keep humor present as much as possible. I like giving readers, and myself, the unexpected.

Q. For me, one of the strengths of the novel is your portrait of Piper's family, especially her sister and mother. These are capable but flawed women who just can't meet Piper's needs. Can you share a bit about how you came to pair Piper with Margot and her mother, Margaret? And how you saw their

relationships playing out?

A. You know, I really take things scene by scene when I write. Margot showed up in chapter one, and I figured out she wasn't Piper's best friend but rather her sister. She entered the scene the center of her own universe and stayed that way! She and Piper had a great dynamic, so I wasn't about to change her. Over time I started wondering what it would be like to grow up with everyone focused on your beauty and nothing else. This question led me to think about the mom and the type of woman she is. What kind of woman raises her daughter to focus on her beauty more than on her smarts? Why does she prefer Margot over Piper? With each draft, the mother became more and more integral to the story. Once I began working on Piper's sobriety, for instance, I knew her drinking was about more than the loss of her daughter; it also had to do with the longing she had for her mother's love.

Q. Piper tells Sherry that she believes in the sun, and when she's really feeling down, stargazing is one of the few reliable sources of emotional comfort she has. Are you also an amateur astronomer?

A. Hardly! I can find the Big Dipper, but that's about it! I don't own a telescope, although I hope to someday. I have visited Chabot Observatory here in Oakland, and that's always an incredible experience. I'm a lot like Piper when it comes to feeling amazement when I stare up at the sky or when I see images of space that the Hubble sends back. I think it's all so mind-boggling that we're out here floating in this galaxy, part of this vast universe. I'm surprised we don't all stare up at the night sky more often.

Q. I enjoyed the juxtaposition of people from very different economic backgrounds—from superwealthy Margot and Curtis to middle-class Selwyn and Spencer to the struggling students in the Oakland school and neighborhood near where Piper teaches and lives. Why did you want to include such a spectrum of backgrounds?

A. That's my life. I live in a neighborhood much like Piper's. There's a mix of races and socioeconomic classes. There are people in government-subsidized housing and people who own their own homes, all

within the same block. I also have friends who are doing well—not as well as Margot, but who is?! I guess it’s natural for me to write from a place where people have varied lives because this is what I see and it’s what I’m used to.

Q. You draw a striking contrast between two very different approaches to Christianity—the celebrity-driven evangelism of Piper’s mother and stepfather and the “basement Christianity” of Deacon Morris’s grief-support group. Why did you decide to describe both?

A. I practice Buddhism, but I grew up in the church. I’ve seen how cruel people can be to one another and I’ve seen how kind people can be as well. I think any religion has the ability to harden people or make them more vulnerable and compassionate. I knew Piper would never become a Christian, because she’s a devout atheist, really, but I wanted her to experience love and her own brand of spirituality; otherwise I didn’t see how she’d find any sense of peace or comfort or joy.

Q. Selwyn is one of my favorite characters in the book. He’s so all-out willing to give his heart to Piper even upon a short acquaintance, yet you refrain from making him a stereotypical romantic lead. Can you tell us something about what inspired Selwyn and what your intention is for him?

A. I’m so happy you like him! As I said, I had Piper alone in a room with a drink in her hand when I started the novel. I had one draft of the first chapter in which Margot walks into the room, and that was okay, but then I decided to scrap the scene because I wasn’t enjoying myself. I knew someone had to walk into the scene; otherwise Piper would just be standing there with a drink. So I had a guy walk inside and—*bam!* Selwyn took over! I was like, who the heck is this guy? But I was having so much fun with him, he stayed right through the first three chapters. I don’t write with an outline, so I was grateful he showed up. I wasn’t sure for a long time who Piper would end up with, Spencer or Selwyn, or if she’d end up alone, but the more I continued to write, the clearer it became that Selwyn should at least return as a friend. And then I liked him as a romantic partner. I like putting twists on things and liked that he wasn’t a typical romantic lead. Why does the love interest always have to be six feet tall and perfectly

handsome? Why can't the nice guy get the girl?!

Q. The homemade memorials to dead youth that dot Piper's neighborhood remind us of the tragic loss of young life that has become a constant in such places—a loss that we tend to easily forget when we don't live in those neighborhoods. Can you tell us more about why you wanted to include these memorials in the novel?

A. I think people do forget. I take my dogs for long walks every day and see these memorials all the time. I also see young boys wearing T-shirts with pictures of friends and loved ones who've died, the way other kids would wear T-shirts of their favorite rock bands. It seemed only fitting that since Piper lives in the same kind of neighborhood as I do, she'd see the same memorials.

Q. I found the classroom scenes particularly fun and engaging. Have you been a teacher? Is that why you were able to write such convincing student characters?

A. I teach as an adjunct instructor at two community colleges, and years ago I worked as a substitute public schoolteacher. I didn't base any of the scenes in the novel on anyone I know or anything in particular I've done in the classroom, but I'm familiar with that world. And my students definitely make me laugh!

Q. Can you tell us something about the path that brought you to this point in your writing career? And what's your "process"? How do you go from initial idea to finished book?

A. I start with voice. I love writing in first person and hiding behind or inside a character's voice and story. I also love surprising myself and writing material that is humorous or offbeat. If I'm stuck in a scene or I'm not interested, I always throw in a wrench. I also like to take on a challenge. With my first novel, *Please Please Please*, the challenge was keeping the reader interested in a woman who would sleep with her best friend's boyfriend. As soon as I wrote the first chapter, I knew I was in trouble—the good kind of trouble. How will I make readers care about a character who would do such a thing? How do I keep the story entertaining? The same questions came up with *Shake Down the Stars*: How

will Piper ever find happiness? How do I stay away from melodrama? How do I surprise myself? I write scene by scene with these types of questions in mind until I start to see the story evolve and I understand the characters and their motivations. I also make a point of learning what they want in life, and to create conflict I take what they want away.

Q. What can we expect to see from you next, and in the future?

A. My goal is to write stories I don't see out there much. I like characters who aren't perfect and who make mistakes. I'm also heavily influenced by living in a city like Oakland and feel lucky to live in a place with such diversity.

Questions for Discussion

1. What was your response to the novel overall? Did the story hold your attention and engage your emotions?
2. What parts of the novel made you laugh? Did any parts make you cry?
3. Did you ever lose sympathy for Piper because of her “acting out,” and if so, when? Did she win you over again? What does the author do to help make you like her?
4. Have you ever before read a novel with a main character who is alcoholic? Are alcoholic women more rare in fiction than you might expect, given how many people suffer from the disease? Did you find Renee Swindle’s portrait of Piper’s alcoholism realistic?
5. Stargazing is one of the few reliable sources of emotional comfort for Piper. When you’re feeling down, what sources of comfort do you turn to?
6. Piper’s mother and sister are capable but flawed women who just can’t meet Piper’s needs. Piper comes to realize that she must accept the family she’s got rather than the family she wishes she had. Is the same true for you and your family?
7. The novel includes characters from a wide range of economic backgrounds—from rich to poor, from used-to-be-poor to now-more-than-comfortably-well-off. Did you enjoy seeing rich and poor rub up against each other? How did that aspect add to the story for you?
8. Discuss the different approaches to Christianity described in the novel. Does one approach appeal more to you than the other? Does one seem more heartfelt and authentic?
9. Discuss the young people in the novel—from Piper’s twin nieces, Sophia and Margot, to the students she teaches to the kids she encounters in her neighborhood. Whom did you most enjoy spending time with, and why?

10. You could say that Piper is saved by some new friends she makes. Discuss the sacrifices her friends make, and the role of friendship in the novel overall. Has a friend ever saved your life?
11. Piper is, above all, a mother grieving for her lost daughter. How central is Hailey to the novel? How does this exploration of a mother's grief compare to similar stories you might have read?