

AUTHOR Q&A

THE  
**STONE GIRL**

ALYSSA B. SHEINMEL

GET TO KNOW

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## WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE THIS STORY?

Honestly, *THE STONE GIRL* wasn't a book that I wanted to write—at least not at first. I knew that someday I would write a book that dealt with some sort of eating disorder, because it was a large part of my own adolescence and young adulthood. People who knew me then would ask me, when they heard I was writing YA, when and whether I would write about eating disorders. I always said no. I wasn't sure if there was anything more to say about eating disorders, given the amount of effective and poignant books that have already been written about them.

But one day, I was in a car with my then-fiancé, driving to the hotel where we were planning our wedding, and an image popped into my head: a girl, still as a stone, crouched beside a toilet. Suddenly, I knew everything about her. I knew she would never be 85 pounds; would never be admitted to a hospital for treatment; would never be watched over by doctors, force-fed and malnourished. But I knew she was desperately unhappy and I knew she hated herself. I knew her story. And, much to my surprise, I wanted to share it.

Sethie's is hardly a typical case, but body-obsession affects people so differently. In some ways, Sethie skates on the precipice of her disorder, rather than diving right in. With

*THE STONE GIRL*, I just wanted to tell one girl's story. The body-obsession aspect is part of it, but Sethie's problems reach beyond just her relationship with food.

## WHAT WAS YOUR RESEARCH PROCESS LIKE?

In a way, I've been researching this book since I was in high school myself. Being a reader, as my own body-obsession intensified, so did my desire to read about eating disorders. For years, I read every memoir and every article I could get my hands on, some over and over again. (There are lines from Marya Hornbacher's *WASTED* that I can still recite verbatim.)

At Barnard, when the time came to decide what my senior thesis would be, I chose familiar territory: eating disorders. I chose to write about a different—and, I think, under-examined—aspect of eating disorders, which is the social aspect. With that project, I wasn't just reading memoirs and articles, but medical and psychological journals—everything from Franz Kafka's story "A Hunger Artist" to the history of starving saints.

Most research shows that the deeper one falls into an eating disorder, the more isolated one becomes. But there is another segment of girls and women—women who might not

ever be diagnosed with an eating disorder—for whom body obsession is a social imperative, who share and nurture their body obsessions with their friends. This was the focus of my thesis, which I called “Social Bodies.” As with *THE STONE GIRL*, I wanted to write about a more common experience—not the 80-pound anorexic girl, but women and girls whose lives are dominated by body-obsession.

## **IN WHAT WAYS IS THIS NOVEL SIMILAR TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORKS, *THE BEAUTIFUL BETWEEN* AND *THE LUCKY KIND*? IN WHAT WAYS IS IT DIFFERENT?**

In the most basic sense, it’s similar in setting: Like Connelly and Nick, Sethie goes to school in Manhattan. Unlike them, hers is an all-girls’ school, and unlike them, her family isn’t exactly financially secure. *THE STONE GIRL* is my first novel in the third person, which I sometimes prefer because there are things you can talk about—especially with a book dealing with something so brutal—that can be impossible to write about in the first person. And, I think *THE STONE GIRL* is certainly darker than my previous books. I certainly tried to dig a little deeper.

## **WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SETHIE AND TO TEENS IN A SIMILAR SITUATION?**

It’s hard to know what to say that might help. When I was at my most body-obsessed, I had all kinds of rules that I wouldn’t have

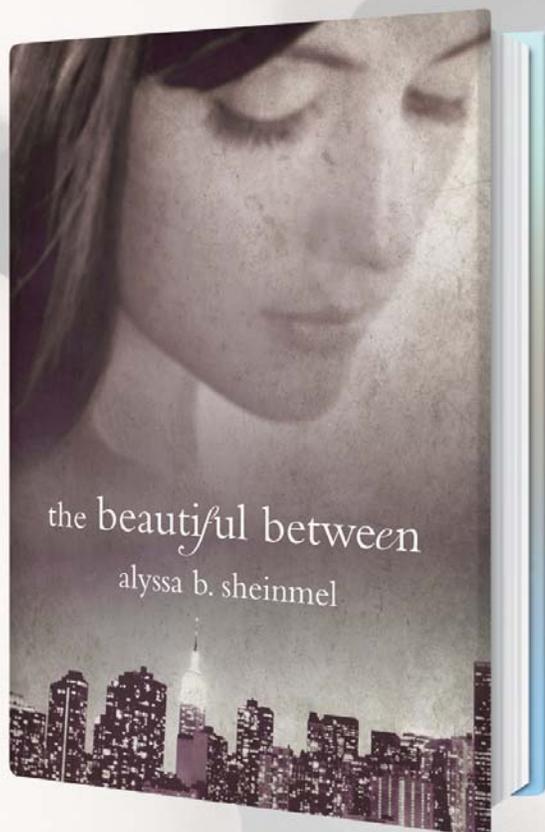
changed, no matter what you told me. For one, I never, ever ate breakfast. No matter how many times you’d tell me that skipping breakfast would actually make me gain weight, I wouldn’t believe it. I thought that was a trick, a fact that applied to other people but not to me. I knew with absolute certainty that the only way for me to lose weight was to eat as little as possible, and starting my day by skipping a meal seemed like the best possible way to begin. (For the record, years later, when I began eating breakfast every day, I did lose weight. Now, I am one of those people who cheerfully chirps that breakfast is the most important meal of the day.)

But what I wanted to say to Sethie while I was writing is what I would say to teens: it will get better. You will not always feel this way. You will not always hate your own flesh. You will not always be scared of food. You will not always allow your boyfriends or your best friends to walk all over you.

And, finally, you are not alone. You can talk about it. For many years, I didn’t like to talk about my own body-obsession. Honestly, I was ashamed of it, of the time I’d wasted with it. Today, I wish I’d been able to talk about it sooner. Sometimes, I’m still embarrassed by the years I spent alone with my precious body issues. But looking back, and looking at the girls who are struggling today, I wonder if I might have come through the other side sooner if I’d been able to talk about it. Our troubles don’t have to be our secrets and there’s no shame in asking for help. I think talking to each other, sharing our stories, is the first thing people can do to help one another. At its heart, *THE STONE GIRL* is my attempt to keep the conversation going.

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# ALYSSA B. SHEINMEL

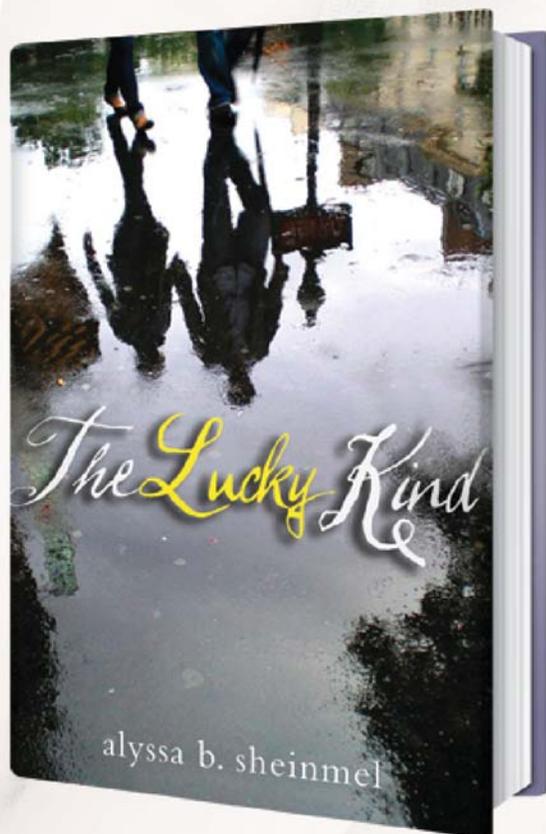


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