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AUTHOR ESSAY

Writing in the Dark
By Elizabeth Graver

In her fourth work of fiction, *Awake* (Henry Holt, 2004), Elizabeth Graver '86 confronts such universal themes as parenting, identity, and love in her tale of a mother whose son has a rare disease. The author reveals how her latest novel draws upon subjects she had explored in her past writings.

Follow the accident—fear the fixed plan," wrote the novelist John Fowles, advice I sometimes share with my students at Boston College. When I start a new piece of fiction, I begin (I think I begin) with very little—a seed, germ, glimmer. I consider myself a writer who doesn't plan ahead much—who works, at least in early drafts, almost entirely in the dark. And yet something curious has started to happen to me over the years as I've kept on writing: I've begun to be able to track my obsessions backwards, so that subjects that might seem, at first, to have risen of their own accord out of the dim, murky mud of my unconscious turn out to have visible footprints leading up to them, tracks I can only stop to identify after the fact.

My third novel, *Awake*, is narrated by a woman named Anna, who has been living in the dark ever since she gave birth to Max, a child with a rare genetic disease called xeroderma pigmentosum (or XP), which means that he cannot be exposed to daylight without an enormous risk of skin cancer. The book is set largely at a camp for children with XP, but at its center, it's about Anna—her relationship to her sons, her abandoned life as a painter, her stale marriage, and what happens to her own sense of self when she finds herself at a place where Max is finally safe and free.

I started the novel in 1999. Why this subject? At the time, I'd have said I had no idea. In 1990, I'd read a cover story in *People* magazine about two sisters with XP. I'd tossed the article into a box where I save clippings that grab my interest. Most of the articles founder there; somehow, years later, this one rose to the top. I was, at the time, trying to get pregnant. I was thinking, I suppose, about family, about safety and danger, about the ways my identity might shift when—if—I became a mother.

All of this was inchoate, though, as I groped my way toward a new project, not at all thought-through. Mostly, I was drawn toward something that seemed, at the time, quite simple—an image of children living in the dark. I looked up XP on the Web and learned

about a camp for kids with the disease, a place where the whole family came along and everything took place at night. Two days later, I drove to upstate New York and spent the night at Camp Sundown. After my visit, I became a quiet listener on an Internet listserv for people living with XP.

That summer, I began the novel. A few months later, I got pregnant. *Awake*—which is about a woman whose sons are 9 and 12 and whose marriage is falling apart—was written during a period when I, in a fulfilling marriage, gave birth to two daughters. I finished it—breathless, exhausted—when my first child was nearly 3, my second, 8 months old.

But when did I really begin this book? When I stop to think, I can track the concerns of the novel back to fifth grade, when I volunteered in the class for children with special needs, compelled, even then, by what I experienced as both difference and sameness, for I was always a bit of an outsider and saw, in those children, something of myself, even as they clearly inhabited foreign worlds. I can go back, too, to the paper I wrote in twelfth grade about collective child-rearing on a kibbutz, for in *Awake* I am fascinated with the idea of communal life, of a place set apart, where boundaries blur and families take on new shapes.

I can go back (though, oddly, this never crossed my mind as I wrote the novel) to a feature story I wrote for the *Berkshire Eagle* during a summer internship in college, a piece on camps for "special" children. I visited a camp for kids who'd had open-heart surgery, a camp for children with mental disabilities, and a camp for kids who were (or thought they were) overweight. That was 19 years ago. I had a great editor at the *Eagle* who let me pick my own subjects and dive in. That same year, I took my first writing workshop with Annie Dillard, who, in addition to being a wonderful teacher, writes wisely about writing and has observed that "appealing workplaces are to be avoided. One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark."

Awake is itself set largely in the dark, and as I wrote it, I convinced myself that it was, at least in its early drafts, written in the dark as well (in fact, my study has four nice windows, though my desk faces a broad, blank wall). But what of all those footprints? I cannot shake the feeling that to have sought them out in the middle of the project might somehow have jinxed me, made me self-conscious, trapped me inside the rigid borders of a feared "fixed plan." I'm glad I didn't look back much during the journey; I will, in whatever I write next, try to stay

focused on the path ahead, for this is where the real pleasure lies for me: in how the characters do seem to take on a life of their own; on how the fictional world does become itself, not a patchwork of where I've been or what I've seen, not a literal or even a figurative cobbling together of my past, but a mysterious, evolving place where "imagination . . . meet[s] memory in the dark."

*Elizabeth Graver '86 is the author of a story collection, **Have You Seen Me?** and two previous novels, **Unravelling** and **The Honey Thief**.*

*Her work has been included in **Best American Essays, Best American Short Stories, and Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards**.*