



EMMA IN THE NIGHT

by Wendy Walker

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A Conversation with Wendy Walker

Do you think your background as an attorney affects the kind of stories you choose to tell?

How so?

Definitely! Working as a family law attorney, I had training in psychological disorders to help identify problems within families. I find it fascinating how certain disorders can remain hidden behind behavior that appears normal, or even exemplary. The dysfunction occurs behind closed doors, impacting families and, in particular, children. While I was practicing in this field, I saw these disorders at work. Not only were they devastating to the emotional well-being of the family, the affected party was able to hide from the judges and outside evaluators who were instrumental in making final decisions about custody and parenting. The psychology at work within families can be seen in all of my novels. And in *Emma in the Night*, I go straight to the heart of the personality disorder known as narcissism and how dangerous it is to children.

In Emma in the Night, the mother suffers from a narcissistic personality disorder: What kind of research into this psychological illness did you do while you were writing? Did you discover anything that surprised you?

I began with online reading, starting with the basics and moving deeper into the complexities of the disorder. Of most interest were the blogs and essays written by children of narcissistic mothers. I also found an expert in the field and spoke to him at length about my characters and ideas for the plot. The most surprising aspect of narcissism is how misunderstood it is. We use the



term to describe people who are overly confident, arrogant, and self-centered. And while these people do exist and can be difficult to deal with, the illness that warrants a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) actually refers to an individual whose exterior alter ego is a mere façade for a fragile interior ego. In other words, the true narcissists are so emotionally vulnerable, they create a protective wall of perfection and bravado to guard themselves. Typically, they suffered trauma or dysfunction in early childhood and began to build this façade without conscious choice. This surprising discovery became an important aspect of the plot twists in *Emma in the Night*.

As a mother yourself, what was it like to write about a family, and particularly a mother, that is so dark and dysfunctional? How did it feel to occupy that headspace for a while?

I became acutely aware of how impactful I was as a parent on the emotional health of my children. Reading the stories of children with a narcissistic mother was harrowing. This is especially true in very early childhood, when the ego begins to form. Even the meeting of the basic needs of a newborn on a consistent basis impacts the healthy development of that child's ego. Luckily, my children were all teenagers when I started researching this disorder and writing *Emma in the Night!* But, like most parents, I can recall moments with my kids that I wish I could do over. These moments definitely showed themselves while I was living in the head of Cass Tanner. Now that I have some distance from this world of narcissism, I think I have managed to take some positive lessons from the experience.

*About the
Author*

Emma in the Night is your second thriller novel: How did your writing process change this time around? Did you do anything different in terms of plotting or character-building?

The plot of each novel evolved in a unique way for me. With *All Is Not Forgotten*, it began with a concept—memory science and the possibility of one day being able to erase the memory of a trauma. I built the entire plot around the moral dilemmas that might arise if that science continued to develop to this end. With *Emma in the Night*, the plot began with an opening scene—a woman returning home after being gone for a long period of time. Then, the ending just rushed into my thoughts and I knew I had to construct the plot to make it work! I also knew I wanted the basis of the story to involve a personality disorder, so when I had the ending, I researched the various disorders to see what would work best. Narcissistic personality disorder fit perfectly. The characters were then constructed to bring to life the disorder and the impact it has on children.

The film rights for several of your novels have sold: Are you excited or scared to see your characters come to life one day? What do you think it will be like to watch actors perform scenes you've written?

It is always thrilling to have interest from Hollywood! I have nothing but excitement to see my work come to the screen—big or small. I am a believer in finding the right people for the job and then letting go, and this is especially true when moving a story from the page to the screen. I am thrilled with the partners my wonderful agents have found to bring my work into a new medium,



so I wait eagerly to see what they create. People always ask me about the actors I envision to play different characters in my novels. Honestly, they become so unique to me that I cannot envision them any other way. This is especially true with actors whom I have seen in different roles over the years. So, again, I leave this to the experts and look forward to experiencing my stories in a new way, right along with the audience!

Are you working on your next book? Can you share anything about it?

Yes! I am always working on a new book, and sometimes more than one. At the moment, I am finishing a novel about a woman who disappears after going on a date with a stranger. While the setup is simple, the plot evolves to reveal a dark, violent past and family secrets that created distinct psychological fallout. The backstory begins with a less affluent neighborhood than my other novels, but also one in which the families are closely knit and intricately entangled. The plot is also more action-driven than my other thrillers and I am loving the process of creating this type of suspense. I hope my readers will enjoy the final product!

*About the
Author*



Plotting the Psychological Thriller

There is no way around it—in the world of the twisty, fast-paced psychological thriller, plot is *everything*.

What I have found is that most plots can emerge from an intriguing premise, a gripping beginning, or a twisty ending.

I was not always a thriller writer. In fact, I began writing general fiction with stories based around women and the issues in their lives. When I was encouraged to write a thriller three years ago, I immediately jumped on a premise that had been swirling in my head for years, but had nowhere to go in the genre of women's fiction. My first thriller, *All Is Not Forgotten*, was built on this premise—what is the fallout when the survivor of a brutal crime is given a drug to erase her memory?

When I begin with a premise for my plot, I follow the paths that radiate from its core. With *All Is Not Forgotten*, I considered every possible outcome for my young survivor and her family. I then chose story components for each of them. I drew diagrams, wrote scenes on index cards, then put them all together like a puzzle. In some ways, starting with a premise is a gift—there are countless possibilities for the rest of the plot. In other ways, having options can make you crazy! When that happens, I go back to the core of the premise and follow the path that causes the greatest emotional conflict for my characters. That conflict will then drive the plot, compelling readers to turn the last page because of the emotional pull the conflict has created. If the ending brings some closure, the book will hopefully leave readers both thrilled and satisfied!



The hardest plot for me comes when I just have a beginning. I can see the first few chapters, the characters, the drama, the hooks—but then what? With *Emma in the Night*, I had the beginning—two sisters disappear one night and three years later only one comes back. Great! But I needed more. So I wrote down the names of the characters with arrows pointing in different directions. I asked myself question after question—each one beginning with What if. Then—hardest of all—I let go of my attachment to every character and plotline and asked if they were helping or hindering. Finding the twisted ending to *Emma in the Night* was a watershed moment for me!

Once I have an ending, I am usually home free. Everything else in the book can be built around it—the characters, the conflicts, and the events that leave clues. I ask myself questions: *Why would she do that? Why would he be there? Why wouldn't they do something else?* The answers to these questions, and others like them, become the bones of the plot.

As I build my next thriller, I find I am facing new challenges! This time, I not only have a beginning and an ending, but also a structure to the narration that I absolutely love. Yikes! Now the middle of the novel—the part that connects the beginning hook to the ending twist—must be built within this framework. I have a feeling I am about to learn something new.

Coffee, chocolate, moral support . . . page by page I will keep writing until I (fingers crossed) have what I want: a compelling, thrilling, and thought-provoking novel!

Behind the Novel



Recommended Reading

The Woman in the Window

A. J. Finn

This bestselling novel has unpredictable twists, a classic unreliable narrator, and an exploration of the psychological condition agoraphobia. The tight construction and creative narration make you stop and read every word even as you're dying to turn the page.

The Wife Between Us

Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen

I loved the first twist in this novel—it was clever and fresh. And the others that follow create a new spin on old themes. Nothing in this novel is what you think it will be.

The Last Mrs. Parrish

Liv Constantine

Based in the same affluent setting as *Emma in the Night*, this novel shows another manifestation of a sociopathic woman who enters the lives of an unwitting family—and how easily they can hide and deceive people.

Behind Closed Doors

B. A. Paris

If you enjoyed the family secrets in *Emma in the Night*, this novel might be for you! The title says it all and B. A. Paris has mastered the art of the hook. It's impossible to stop reading until you know the ending.



The Talented Mr. Ripley

Patricia Highsmith

This oldie but goodie has a gripping plot, but also a masterful narration that tracks the thoughts and justifications of a psychopath who has assumed the identity of a wealthy socialite.

Running with Scissors

Augusten Burroughs

One of my favorite themes in storytelling is the impact of psychological illness on children, and the cycle that can be created. This memoir about the son of a narcissist and alcoholic is both chilling and heartbreaking, but also a testament to the strength of the human spirit.

The Blind

A. F. Brady

This novel manages to be tragic and witty all at once as we follow a psychologist in a mental hospital through her own personal struggles with mental illness.

The Sinner

Petra Hammesfahr

With the benefit of being turned into a recent TV series, this story about a woman who suddenly murders a stranger at the beach delves into a dysfunctional backstory involving two sisters and a mentally unstable mother.

*Keep On
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. Early in the novel, Cass says, “Our mother knew how to keep us hungry for her.” How does this statement set the tone for the rest of the book? How does it affect what you think about Mrs. Martin for the rest of the story? Where can you see this coming into play in the novel?
2. One of the first things we learn about Cass is the origin of her full name, Cassandra. Cassandra was a prophet who could see the future, but no one believed her. What are the parallels between Cass’s namesake and her role in the events of the novel?
3. What, if anything, did you know about narcissism before reading *Emma in the Night*? Was anything you thought completely wrong? What did you learn about this disorder throughout the course of the novel?
4. One of the most interesting things about this novel is the complex web of characters and how they interact with each other, from Hunter to Cass to Emma and their parents. Do you think you ever got the full picture of the relationships between characters, or were there still holes? Is there a similarly complicated web of people like this in your own life?
5. On page 60, Cass says, “I think there are two types of people. Ones who have a scream inside them and ones who don’t.” What do you think she means by this? Who do you think has a scream inside them in this story and what makes them different from those who don’t?



6. What did you make of Mrs. Martin's continuing insistence that Cass was ill? Did it make you suspicious of her motives, or anyone else's? Why or why not?
7. How did the dual perspectives of Cass and Abby affect your experience of the story? Did you identify with one narrator more than the other, and if so, why do you think that was?
8. At one point in the novel, Cass describes her theory that there are three different foundations for loyalty: debt, money, and keeping secrets. Do you agree with her? Why or why not? What kinds of loyalty can you see throughout *Emma in the Night*?
9. When did you begin to think there was more to Cass's story than she was letting on? Was there anything in particular that made you think she may not be telling the whole truth?
10. What do you think of the ending of the novel? Were you shocked? How do you think your reading experience would change if you went back and reread the book, already knowing how it will end?