

What is THOUGHTS & PRAYERS about?

When Lily Jeong—smothered by her parents and ignored by classmates—unwittingly aids her boyfriend in a school shooting, she struggles to hide her complicity from investigators. Forced to face the devastated survivors, she hides in plain sight as their grief turns to vengeance.

What made you want to collaborate on a novel?

This effort started as a lark. Could four of us, with our very different styles, write a novel together? After Parkland, though, we knew we had to write this book.

What was your process in writing this book?

We approached this task as the communication professionals we are, with large pads of blank paper and colored markers. First, we decided we were going to write about a school shooting, but with a twist. We would follow the accomplice, not the shooter. We developed the main points of the plot—inciting incident, threshold where the character makes a critical choice that changes her life, crisis, climax—and wrote brief moments of the scenes. Deciding on the characters by role in the story, what their names were and who would write them just fell into place. We made charts of what each character wanted, what thwarted them, and what the outcome was. Then we made a list of 86 scenes and decided the best order and began writing.

How long did it take?

A year of writing, a year of editing, a year of querying.

What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

You can find hope after a horrific tragedy.

Thoughts and prayers aren't enough.

We all have to be heroes in our own way.

What was the biggest challenge this book presented? What about the biggest opportunity?

Four of us co-wrote this book. The easy part was finding the plot, devising the scenes, identifying the characters and their arcs, and actually writing. The hard part was editing to achieve one overarching tone and meta-voice in a narrative told by eight voices.

The biggest opportunity was learning how to go from being soloists to members of a chamber orchestra—to blend our understanding, writing styles, language use, and approach to character and storytelling into one harmonious melody.

Was there anything new you discovered, or surprised you, as you wrote this book?

The gun show loophole. It astonished us and our publisher that it is legal for unlicensed individuals to sell guns to unlicensed buyers without any limitations or record keeping in 33 states in the US.

On the writing side, we discovered that unexpected humor even in tragic, tense situations leavens the narrative and can make a character endearing.

Without spoilers, are there any genre conventions you wanted to upend or challenge with this book?

Although we didn't set out to upend any genre conventions, magical realism crept into the story as naturally as a cat curling up in your lap. We didn't even question it.

What can you tell us about your book that we won't find in the jacket copy or the PR material?

Our schools are under siege. Every day our children need to worry about whether their sisters and friends will be shot along with remembering to bring their dirty gym clothes home to be washed. Teachers and administrators and their families don't know if they'll come home after work. It takes enormous courage to keep going back into the building day after day. This sense of their terror and bravery is in every word we wrote.

What authors or books have influenced your career as a writer, and why?

Dan Brown, Lisa Gardner, Paula Hawkins, PD James for their deployment of suspense, emotional development, and damn good stories; in literary fiction Ann Patchett, Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates for narrative voice, and (in sci fi) Ursula Le Guin. The overarching answer to why is simple: plot, character, pacing, setting, tone, style, rhythm, language, description, passion, intention.

What was the most challenging part of the co-authoring relationship?

Agreeing on edits and not killing each other.

Understanding the different backgrounds of the characters, why was diversity so important in this story?

We wanted the story to reflect the students in a normal American high school.

Did you worry about cultural appropriation?

We feel that all humans share the same emotions when faced with tragedy and trauma, no matter what their race or ethnicity.

What is your position on gun control?

We wrote a work of fiction. We didn't set out to make a political statement, but we are against shooting children.

Who is this story meant for? Everyone, or is it more for the parents of public school students? Or the students themselves?

It's meant for women between the ages of 15 and older. Fans of Karen McManus, Jodi Picoult, Nora Roberts. It's meant for anyone who cares about what's happening to their children.

What was your purpose with the story?

Writing is a little like mountain climbing. We wrote because the story was there, waiting to be scaled. We wrote to see if we could do it, to share our experience of grief and admiration with anyone who wanted it.

Do you have any plans to collaborate again?

Writing a book is like giving birth. It's painful and beautiful and bloody and exhilarating...and when you're going through the pain, you think you'll never do this again. But after a couple of years, you forget the pain....so we'll have to wait and see.