

## Author Q&A for THINGS WE DIDN'T SAY

What inspired this novel?

I was imagining how an external crisis impacts our internal lives. What if a woman was ready to walk out and leave a situation she could no longer tolerate, but something prevented her from doing so, some kind of immediate and sudden disaster? When the crisis was over, what would she do, then? Would she still go? How would she be able to conduct herself through the crisis knowing what she'd been prepared to do? Oddly enough, this line of thinking came up after watching the movie *Thirteen Days* about the Cuban missile crisis. I'd been imagining someone enduring family strife and on top of that, this frightening global threat hanging over her head. Casey and Michael's disaster is not of national scope, but it's significant enough to bring everything else in their lives to a halt. I call this book a messy, grown-up love story because real love must be able to endure through the worst, most confusing and difficult times. Sometimes love alone isn't enough to sustain a couple, when the storm comes, as it always will.

Why did you choose to write about a blended family?

As I just mentioned, it's a messy, grown-up love story and it's also a contemporary story. Families come in all varieties now, and sometimes that means a young woman falls in love with a man who comes pre-packaged with three kids. I'm in awe of the optimism and determination of those who create blended families. By their very nature, these couples walk into a their new relationship bearing scars of the past, moreso than those who have never been married before, and I find their willingness to give it another try inspiring. I also wanted to write about a competent single dad who has primary custody of his kids, because it goes against the grain of the pop-culture stereotype of the distant or bumbling divorced dad. These characters come out of my imagination, I should say. I count blended families among my friends, certainly, but I didn't quiz them for this book and in fact spoke very little about it as I was writing. I didn't want to excavate their private lives, nor put them on the spot.

You're back to a real setting for this book, as opposed to the fictional town in your previous novel. Why are you back to a real spot on the map?

*The Life You've Imagined* had a bigger canvas: it took place over the course of a whole summer, and featured many kinds of settings. For that situation I wanted optimum flexibility to make up landscapes as they suited the story. For *Things We Didn't Say*, it's back to a compact time frame, as with my debut novel. Most of the action takes place within forty-eight hours, and most of it within the walls of one house in one neighborhood. I was attracted to the crucible effect this would create, especially with characters who are thrown together unwillingly. I chose the Heritage Hill neighborhood of Grand Rapids,

Michigan, for the simple reason that I love it. It's a beautiful, old and interesting part of town. As with my first novel, this book features a mix of real and fictional landmarks. Heritage Hill is real, the schools mentioned in the book are not. The newspaper where Michael works is not a faithful reproduction of The Grand Rapids Press, which is why I called it the Herald. But the Meyer May House, the Sixth Street Park, Literary Life Bookstore, the "Castle" building which now holds a dentist's office, all those places are real.

How did the title come about?

Credit goes to my editor, Lucia Macro. This phrase represents so much of what goes wrong for the characters. I think most people in a relationship can relate to this. Think of how many times you want to say something to your loved ones, and circumstances prevent you, or you stop yourself. Why? We fear the results of our words sometimes, but silence does damage, too. It turned out to be so poignant for me, because we happened to settle on this title as my beloved mother-in-law was dying of cancer. It's only natural when we lose someone to think of all we didn't say.

This novel, like your others, has a large cast. Who was the most challenging character to write?

Writing from the perspective of the children was a fun challenge, but by far the trickiest character was the ex-wife, Mallory. She's the first true antagonist I've tackled, but I did my utmost not to turn her into a caricature of pure villainy. She is damaged, but I would not say she's evil. It's an interesting question that Michael wrestles with throughout their marriage, how much control she has over her own actions, and thus how much personal responsibility she bears. I also found the failed marriage between Mallory and Michael to have a life of its own as well, and it was a challenge to portray that relationship in a way that was understandable and relatable. Sometimes the story of a marriage isn't easily understood, especially by those from the outside looking in, and I hoped to give the readers some insight into that story.