



INTERVIEW WITH

# NICOLE PIETSCH

AUTHOR OF

## Sideshow of Merit



**You are a first novelist and also a professional advocate for victims of violence. What is the overlap between the two careers?**

I wrote *Sideshow of Merit* when I was working with women who had experienced domestic violence. In Ontario, where I live, we have a policy called mandatory charging for domestic violence, which means that when the police respond to a situation in which domestic violence has occurred, they charge the offender whether the victim agrees to this or not. It is no longer up to the victim to “lay the charges”. This is meant to keep women safe from partners who abuse them, as well as to absolve them from having to lay the charge (which often further enrages men who are, let’s face it, already abusive towards them). In Ontario as well, an alleged offender is not allowed to have contact with the victim of a crime until the case is resolved in court. This could take over a year.

While these policies are well-intentioned, they cause all sorts of problems: for example, the partner was removed from the home in the arrest, and now the woman could not pay the rent. Or the woman tried to defend herself and was also arrested under the mandatory charge policy. I put my two main characters, Tevan and James, in a similar situation to confront how survivors of crime can incidentally be victimized by systems meant to support them. I also wanted to look at how survivors of sexual violence become criminalized for expressing their outrage.

***Sideshow of Merit* is set primarily in 1960s. Why did you decide to write an historical novel, not a contemporary one?**

I decided that if I was going to write a story addressing abuse, the story needed to illustrate an environment where vulnerability and violation was made possible: not just describe a guy lurking nearby who chose to offend. In real life, that is often how sexual violence occurs.

When I began working on *Sideshow*, I knew that Tevan and James were linked together by some common experience that paved the way for abuse to occur in silence and secrecy, although I didn’t know what exactly that experience was.

Then I started reading about childhood-based illnesses and pandemics that interred youths together for many months or years. Because the medical field has made great progress in addressing illnesses like polio and tuberculosis—and because pandemics that require long hospital convalescence are now uncommon—it became clear to me that these boys grew up in a different time. When I read about the medical management of tuberculosis in North America in the 1930s–1960s, I knew I’d hit upon the right scene for *Sideshow*.

The key to recovery from tuberculosis then was compliance: compliance with medication, compliance with sanitation to keep the contagion from spreading, and compliance with physical self-care, like rest and nutrition. Shortcuts to recovery were not debated. Obviously, tuberculosis affected working class populations in more intrusive ways than in privileged groups. If you worked for a living, particularly manual work, you could not afford to take time off to rest and recover; yet you would sicken and infect others if you did not comply with the recovery regimen. Tevan and James are in the sanatorium for a long time, learning the importance of compliance. James is intellectually different than his peers and spends much of the story simply being told what to do by other people. Tevan, on the other hand, sees his brother lose his life trying to evade compliance with TB recovery regimens. To him, compliance is a life and death situation.

### **What attracts Tevan to Bern, another patient at the sanatorium? How does their relationship turn abusive?**

Bern appeals to Tevan because he actively rebels against the hospital routine: he stays up late, complains about the food, jokes around, and talks openly about taboo subjects like death and sex. He reminds Tevan of his late brother Kenny. Bern is also medically non-compliant, and yet he survives.

While Bern uses rebellion to appeal to Tevan, in key moments where he transgresses Tevan's boundaries to become abusive, he uses the cultural mandate of compliance against him: shut up, don't question, just persevere and do this, don't you dare ask why, because I said so, because you want to, I'm older than you, never you mind what's going on here.

These are the explicit messages of abuse; but it's actually also the implicit message of a lot of acceptable social practices. I wanted to put that discomfiting message out there and see what would happen.

### **Are the characters based on real people? Is the plot drawn from actual events?**

The characters are not based on real people. The plot is not based on actual events; although Tevan's sanatorium, Mount Rosa's, is based on sanatoriums that existed in Ontario in the 1930s–1950s. *Sideshow* also references historical in-patient and outpatient TB treatment regimens, sanatorium life, and governmental methods for testing and tracking TB patients in the post-war period. So all those parts are based on fact.

Some of my academic work examines sideshows and circus performers, particularly how performers' bodies were historically the sites of both oppression and resistance to oppression. Many sideshows used gender, race and disability to highlight difference ("freaks") and inhuman human skill ("working acts"). It's really an interesting topic.

(To read some of my academic stuff on sideshows, look up "Born" Freaks, "Made" Freaks, and Media Circuses: Systemic Management of Race and Gender in the Virk Case.)

### **Tell us about getting inside the minds of your characters. Was it ever difficult to pull yourself away from their tortured stories and return to your own life?**

I have been working with survivors of gender-based violence—domestic and sexual violence—since 1998. I did not find writing this story difficult.

Tevan and James are resilient. They continued to survive, to find a community, and to make sense of what they had been through and how it changed them. They try to understand who is responsible for the exploitation they endured, and in the end, they realize they do not bear this responsibility personally.

I guess a better question is what do we define as “successful” resolutions to stories about violation? To Tevan, resolution is not about Bern being arrested, forgiven or issuing some kind of payback. The bottom line for Tevan is understanding that what happened was not his fault. Or understanding that you can love the person who hurt you, and the abuse still remains absolutely wrong. To me, that’s success.

***Sideshow of Merit* has several sexually explicit scenes. What are the challenges of writing about sex from a male perspective when you’re a woman?**

I strategically constructed Tevan as a male who is completely feminized.

He notes his long eyelashes, his peers nickname him “Pretty”, and as a youth and adult he learns to flirt to gain standing, attention or favours from others. He is characterized as physically small compared to men and boys; his role in the sideshow is as the martyr who self-sacrifices, is physically attacked, and then revived by a man. As a youth, Tevan is sexually precocious; as an adult, he engages in sex work for pay. Like a woman, those around Tevan are drawn to him when he is overtly sexual, and yet they’re uncomfortable with and condemn this aspect of him. In the course of Tevan’s story, a man (Damon) even falls in love with him.

I have instilled Tevan with many sexual stereotypes, which, when applied to a woman, would cause the public to be suspicious of him, and tempted to label him of deserving of or “asking” to be raped. I wanted Tevan to be a real human, and to be free to react in ways that are realistic for survivors of childhood abuse to react. But I also wanted to free the reader from the distraction of sexism, which inevitably leads to victim-blaming rhetoric when it comes to sexual assault.

Tevan definitely isn’t a “good” girl (but then again, who is?). He being a male, however, the audience probably won’t feel compelled to categorize him as good or bad before they take his side and read onwards. And that’s really what I want them to do.

*Sideshow* is about violence and all the myriad ways we persevere through it; and then unpack it once the crisis has past, in a thousand complicated, fruitful but sometimes self-effacing ways.

It must be said, too, that while being under the age of eighteen increases a male’s chances of being targeted, in reality females are more likely to be targeted for acts of sexual violence, both as children and as adults. In this, Tevan’s story is a woman’s story as much as—or even more than—it is, a man’s.

**What is the difference between writing fiction and writing for academic journals?**

It’s much easier to get published in academia than in fiction; but way more fun to write fiction!

**How did namelos become your publisher?**

namelos believed in *Sideshow of Merit*. Stephen Roxburgh, the namelos publisher and my editor, did not express concerns about the subject matter (sexual violation and its aftermath) and how it may make folks uncomfortable.

**What’s next?**

I’m working on a story about a court-watch advocate who, incidentally, and in the midst of a crisis in his personal life, gets called to court as a witness himself.

It’s meant to highlight how frontline staff who support victims of crime day in and day out are affected by stories of victimization. If *Sideshow* is about trauma re-enactment, this story is about vicarious traumatising. I’m really enjoying working on it.