

Alice Sebold: The writer who saved herself

"You save yourself or you remain unsaved."

There are people for whom there is one event that shapes their lives so dramatically that it comes to define them, or worse, to possess them. Alice Sebold is one of these persons. Deplorably, her event was a violent and brutal rape. It occurred in 1981 when she was a freshman at Syracuse University and was walking through a park on her way home when she was assaulted and raped at knife-point. After reporting the attack to the police, an officer told Alice she was "lucky" because another woman, also raped in the same place, was "unlucky", they found her murdered and dismembered. This information was probably meant to comfort the 18 year old victim, but it didn't, "My life was over; my life had just begun."

What had just begun was her new life as a 'rape victim/survivor' and how that fact made her 'the other.' For a long time she felt isolated and stigmatized. Her family did not know how to handle the aftermath of the heinous assault. Alice could not talk about the details of the rape. She felt faintly blamed, as her father could not comprehend how the act occurred once the knife had dropped out of the assailant's reach.

Despite the terrible trauma Alice returned to Syracuse University and later saw the man who had raped her walking on the street. He was apprehended and she went through the ordeal of a trial with the help of her poetry professor, Tess Gallagher, who accompanied Alice to the courtroom when Alice's parents lost their courage and could not bear to attend.

Tess encouraged Alice to write about it. Alice managed 40 pages. These pages would become the foundation for her first book, the chilling memoir *Lucky*, published in 1999. Alice has said, "Murderers are not monsters, they're men. And that's the most frightening thing about them."

After graduation Alice was determined to live a normal life and moved to New York to make it as a writer. Her emotional vulnerability coupled with a slew of writing rejections sent her into depression and drugs. "I am not proud of the things I did during that time." She left New York for graduate school at the University of California at Irvine. It was at UCI that she began writing *Lucky* and met her husband, Glen David Gold.

"It wasn't my dream to grow up, get raped and write a book about it." But "I always dreamed of being a novelist." *The Lovely Bones*, her debut novel published in 2002, became an unexpected huge success. To her surprise, Alice Sebold became an overnight best-selling writer and her book was made into a movie in 2009. The novel's success may be laid at the feet of the pitch perfect voice of its 14-year-old narrator, Susie Salmon, who tells her 'not lucky' rape and murder story from a place that is something like heaven. The story is about the aftermath of the unsolved murder and its affects on the girl's family. It is the delicate not at all maudlin tone that makes *The Lovely Bones'* gruesome topic readable and even comforting. "It is a book about survival, which is actually heroic," Alice noted in an interview with Viner in the *Guardian*. Her earlier efforts to write a novel based

on her rape experience failed because “ I felt the burden of trying to write a story that would encompass all rape victims' stories and that immediately killed the idea of this individual character in the novel. So (the writing) tended to be kind of fuzzy and bland, and I didn't want to make any political missteps,” she told Dennis McLellan of the *Los Angeles Times*. Alice is a talented witness to her own writing process. Perhaps this is due to writing being the thing that has saved her, helped her to be the person she is now. "The stereotype is that you're always weak or passive or falling apart—so you don't talk about it because if you do, people will change their opinion of what you're capable of. When the truth is that you're probably capable of a lot more if you survived rape."

At the 2011 Ubud Writers and Readers Festival Alice Sebold will be discussing her latest book, *The Almost Moon*, a novel that ventures into the touchy territory of matricide and begins with the sentence, “When all is said and done, killing my mother came easily.” This is either very intriguing or off -putting depending on the readers’ literary tastes. The book has received mixed reviews by critics and readers alike. It explores family love, guilt and anger. It is the story of Helen Knightly who devotes herself to her family, to her parents, to others, then one day she steps over an unthinkable line and smothers her 88-year-old mother. What happens afterwards is the exploration of what devotion might be. Alice Sebold ventures where other writers fear to tread. You can bet the venue will be full to bursting when she speaks so get there early to claim a seat.

The **Ubud Writers and Readers Festival** will take place Oct. 5-10, 2011.