

# TRANSFORMING PERSONAL CRISES INTO COMPELLING FICTION

## The Resilient Journey of S.M. STEVENS



Photo by Cynthia Treen

*S.M. Stevens, acclaimed author and former business executive, whose novels explore complex societal issues with depth and authenticity.*

BY BEN ALAN

*S.M. Stevens transitioned from business writing to fiction after health crises, creating novels that tackle societal issues with strong female protagonists and authentic, thought-provoking narratives.*

**S**.M. Stevens' journey to becoming a fiction writer is as compelling as the narratives she crafts. A seasoned business writer with a robust career in corporate communications, Stevens found her true calling in fiction through a series of unexpected life events. Her transition from the boardroom to the writer's desk was catalyzed by two significant health crises, which provided her the time and impetus to explore her creative side.

After a severe horseback riding accident left her with a broken pelvis, Stevens turned to writing as a means of coping with her temporary immobility. This period of enforced rest resulted in her first middle-grade novel, "Shannon's Odyssey," written for her animal-loving daughter. Almost a year later, a diagnosis of ovarian cancer and the subsequent chemotherapy sessions gave her the opportunity to pen "Bit Players, Has-Been Actors and Other Posers," a novel aimed at musical theatre-loving teens, including her older daughter.

Stevens' writing career, born out of personal adversity, has since flourished. Her first adult novel, "Horseshoes and Hand Grenades," was inspired by the #metoo movement and explores the parallels between workplace sexual harassment and childhood incest. Her

*S.M. Stevens masterfully blends compelling storytelling with profound societal insights, creating unforgettable characters and narratives that resonate deeply.*

tensive experience in corporate communications has undoubtedly influenced her approach to writing, teaching her the discipline to write amidst constant interruptions and the ability to convey powerful messages succinctly.

Stevens' novels are known for their strong female protagonists and their exploration of challenging circumstances, offering readers both entertainment and thought-provoking content. Her dedication to authenticity and representation in literature is evident in her meticulous research and the use of sensitivity readers to ensure diverse and accurate portrayals of her characters.

**As Stevens continues to write and inspire, her story serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of storytelling. Your novels often tackle complex societal issues such as workplace harassment and mental health struggles. What drives you to explore these topics, and how do you balance entertainment value with the exploration of serious subjects?**

While I love a good escapist beach read on occasion, I'm more drawn to fiction that challenges me in some way. So that's what I write. Complex themes provide

ample room to explore and provoke thought. As for balancing entertainment, that's easy: simply portray life as we know it, which is, hopefully, filled with humor, light and love as well as challenges and tragedy.

**Your upcoming novel, Beautiful and Terrible Things, delves into themes of friendship, mental illness, and social justice in a contemporary American setting. What inspired this story, and what message do you hope readers will take away from it?**

I wanted to depict contemporary society realistically, and that meant including multiple social ills rather than highlighting one. I am pleased when my younger readers confirm, "Yep, that's life in a big city today."

I hope readers, regardless of their views on each issue, put down the book with a greater empathy for the real people that exist behind the statistics. And I hope I inspire people to get more involved in the causes important to them, by showing the various paths, large and small, that my characters take toward greater activism.

**Your extensive career in business includes executive positions at Fortune 500 companies and non-profit organizations. How has your background in corporate communications informed your approach to writing fiction?**

The greatest impact my communications career had on my fiction-writing career was teaching me how to write with constant interruptions. I learned to write in five-minute increments—literally, and to not lose focus, despite multiple interruptions from my staff and my boss. That carried over to interruptions from the family and the dogs when writing at home.

**Your novel Horseshoes and Hand Grenades depicts both childhood sexual abuse and workplace sexual harassment. What drove you to merge those topics in one narrative?**

I had a draft of a novel about a woman dealing with "mild" incest, sitting on my shelf. When the #metoo movement took off, I was

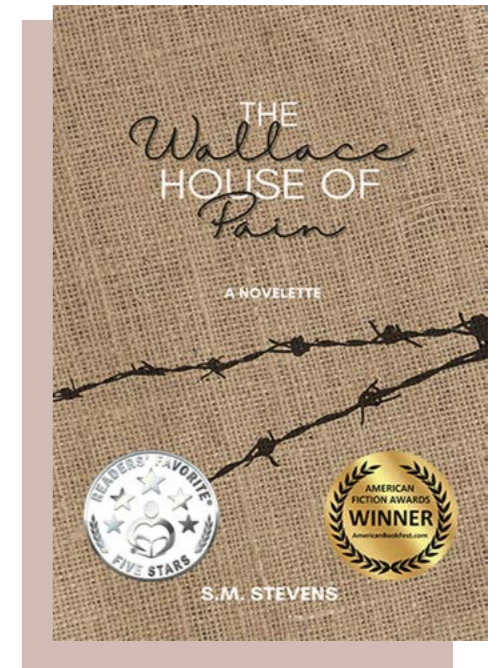
fascinated at how society asks the same questions of harassment victims as it does of incest survivors; questions such as: Why did you wait so long to speak up? What's your ulterior motive in speaking up now? Was it really that bad? The novel attempts to answer those questions (which, when you think about it, are never posed to victims of other crimes).

**Your novels often feature strong female protagonists navigating challenging circumstances. Can you speak to the importance of representation in literature, and how do you ensure authenticity and depth in portraying diverse characters and their experiences?**

Representation, and cultural appropriation, are very important topics. All any author can do in an effort to be authentic is to research, research—not only reading but talking to people, and then draw on our understanding of human nature to craft three-dimensional, believable characters. Having a multitude of sensitivity readers, as I did, is also critical. I drew on the experiences and insights of others in the areas of mental health, race, gender, sexuality and immigration to inform Beautiful and Terrible Things. I even found a Filipino artist to offer feedback on one character!

**The Bit Players series was inspired by your daughter's love for musical theatre. How did your personal experiences as a parent influence the creation of these stories, and what challenges did you face in writing for a younger audience?**

I participated in high school and college drama, and then volunteered at my daughters' school theatre program. Those experiences are reflected in the Bit Players series. The biggest challenge was to not embarrass my teenaged daughter; it was for her I came up with my pen name, so her friends wouldn't find out that her mother wrote about teens behaving badly. (She is now a mature and astute writer herself, and no longer ashamed of our connection.)



*The Wallace House of Pain: A Novelette by S.M. Stevens is a compelling exploration of strained family dynamics and modern social justice issues.*

*Winner of the 2023 American Fiction Award and the Chanticleer International Book Award First Prize, this work delves into the tumultuous relationship between activist Xander Wallace and his conservative father, Jim. Stevens masterfully portrays the palpable tension and awkwardness that define their interactions, making readers feel*

*Xander's discomfort and his stepmother's desperate attempts to bond. The novelette's powerful message of acceptance and love resonates deeply, highlighting the struggles of living authentically in the face of societal and familial pressures. With its rich character study and emotional depth, 'The Wallace House of Pain' is a short but profoundly impactful read that leaves a lasting impression.*

*Highly recommended for those seeking a thoughtful and touching narrative.*