

Author Q&A with Courtney Cook



1. Where did the inspiration for *The Way She Feels* come from?

Writing a book, especially the kind of book that *The Way She Feels* is, wasn't something I consciously set out to do, at least not initially. My mental health has been a constant struggle I've dealt with since I was kid—I can't remember a time where I haven't had anxiety (if such a time ever even existed); I first felt depressed at age nine, and entered mental health treatment at age thirteen, which I've continued in some form ever since—so writing essays on the topic began as a way for me to examine the impact mental illness has had on my life.

I wrote with the intention of gaining personal clarity and understanding, but realized during the first year of pursuing my MFA that my work had the potential to help others make sense of their own experiences with mental illness, even if those experiences didn't perfectly mirror each other. This idea was reinforced when I was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) that same year, and I could hardly find any books written from the perspective of someone with BPD other than *Girl, Interrupted* (which I love, don't get me wrong). Mainly, I found books that offered advice on how to have a relationship with, support, or “deal” with those who have BPD. I couldn't help but feel frustrated: where were the books that gave an honest look into what it's like to have BPD written from an own-voices perspective? Why should I or others with BPD have to be “dealt” with—isn't every relationship built on learning how to best support and communicate with one another, regardless of mental illness?

I resented the ways I saw BPD portrayed in literature and other media. I couldn't recognize myself in the characters who were supposedly intended to represent my disorder/experience, and felt they were written from a perspective wrought with stigma and misunderstanding, which was contributing to the demonization of my disorder. I really believe lack of representation, or inaccurate representation, leads to a lack of understanding, which breeds and exacerbates fear. This cycle feeds upon itself. I thought my writing could help begin to fill the void of work about BPD written from the perspective of someone who actually has BPD, which could then help to combat the rife misrepresentation and stigmatization of BPD as a whole.

So, using what I'd already written as a starting point, I set out to write the kind of book I wish I'd had when I was diagnosed—one that shows an authentic, unflinching look into what living with BPD is like, ranging from the periods of sadness I thought I wouldn't survive, to long stretches of happiness and fulfillment, and everything I've felt between those extremes. Hopefully, one day, there will be enough books written by those with BPD about their experiences (both with BPD and otherwise) to fill a library, and the fact that BPD isn't something wholly horrifying or awful becomes abundantly clear, because I really don't think anything is entirely any one thing, good or bad.

2. What is your artistic process like? Do you have an idea of what you are going to draw before you begin?

Most of my work stems from an experience or idea I want to explore through writing. I do a lot of what I view as “writing in my head,” where I think about an essay as if I'm traditionally writing it. The way I think when I'm doing this “writing” drastically differs from my usual internal monologue, which is jumbled and fragmented. By the time I go to write things down, I feel like the essay is pretty much already written and all I'm doing is transferring it from my brain to the page. I generally write the entire essay in one go because of this, and I don't consider these iterations to be first drafts, because I feel like I've “written” multiple drafts already through thinking the essay over and over again.

Being able to *see* the essay rather than *hear/think* allows me to identify themes, moments, and lines I want to emphasize through illustration, and then I start to draw. I typically only revise my essays one or two times once they're outside my brain, but I'll rework or completely redraw an illustration over and over again until I'm either happy with it, or I can't stand to look at anymore and refuse to keep drawing, so it'll have to suffice as is.

3. When did you decide to first combine prose and drawing?

Maybe when I tried to write and illustrate my own versions of my favorite books when I was a kid? But if we're talking the way I do currently, in the fall of 2018!

4. If readers take away one thing from reading your book, what do you hope that is?

Ultimately, I hope the book captures that while, yes, I do have borderline personality disorder, more than anything else I'm a relatively “normal” person living a relatively “normal” life (whatever that means). I'm doing my best to work with the hand I was dealt, just like everyone else is, neurotypical or otherwise. I also hope readers understand that *The Way She Feels* is not one-size-fits-all, and my experience with BPD

is only my own. While I can't speak for anyone but myself, I hope that my experience helps to humanize the way people view those with BPD as a whole.

5. Did anything in the writing of *The Way She Feels* surprise you?

I'd heard from other writers that by the time a book is published, they're often not a great representation of the way one writes currently. Books end up being a sort-of time capsule of one's voice and abilities from when they were written, which can be months and months prior to their actual publication. Despite having heard about this, I was surprised when I experienced it for myself.

About a third of *The Way She Feels* was written prior to my BPD diagnosis, and the remaining two-thirds were written in the first year and a half of receiving that diagnosis. Getting diagnosed with BPD changed my life immeasurably. It gave me the ability to identify the root of the negative patterns and behaviors I was continuously cycling through so I could work to break free of them. After all, you can't change something you don't know exists. I think I grew and learned more in that year and a half than I had in the previous eight years combined—I hadn't experienced that sort of exponential change since I was in residential treatment at thirteen and fourteen years old.

I felt so proud of the growth I'd undergone at the time of my writing *The Way She Feels*, and it's absolutely wild to see the growth I've undergone since writing it. It really is a time capsule filled with things like coping skills I no longer utilize, adoration for a medication I'd never dare take again, and praise for a relationship I don't look back on with much fondness or kindness at all. Having BPD can make it difficult for me to view anything outside of extremes, and I think a past version of myself would be frustrated by the discrepancy between the Courtney in *The Way She Feels* and the Courtney I am presently. But the Courtney I am presently is comfortable with the fact that *The Way She Feels* is a time capsule, because it's a time capsule of a really transformative and beautiful time in my life where things made sense in a way they never had before. I now know that multiple truths can exist at once, and I can be proud of *The Way She Feels* Courtney and present Courtney at the same time. They're both doing their best.

And honestly, it's pretty cool to know that I'd write about some things differently nowadays. It means I've grown, and that's something I hope to keep doing forever.

6. Do you have any writing rituals while you're working on a book?

Nothing that jumps out to me at this moment; let me get back to you once I've written another!

7. What was your favorite book as a child? Who read to you?

My mom read to me before I could read myself, but I'm drawing a blank on what books we read together that I enjoyed and for some reason can only remember crying for days after we finished *Charlotte's Web* (why did Charlotte have to die?!) and *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume (why did his brother have to eat that turtle?!). Which is a bummer, because I know I loved reading together and remember begging her often to keep going for "just one more chapter!" when I was supposed to be asleep.

When I began to read on my own, I loved books like *The Doll People* and the *Magic Tree House* series. In middle school, I was really into the *Cirque Du Freak* series and I devoured every *Gossip Girl* book I could get my hands on, a duo I think is still indicative of who I am and my vibe, which a friend recently described as "goth Lilly Pulitzer."

8. What's on your nightstand now?

Milk Fed by Melissa Broder, *Suicidal: Why We Kill Ourselves* by Jesse Bering, *Solutions and Other Problems* by Allie Brosh, and *How to Change Your Mind* by Michael Pollan.