Question and Answer with Amber Hathaway, Author of *Little White Flowers*

Tell us about yourself.

I’m Amber Hathaway (she/her), a horror and dark fiction writer from central Maine. My short stories have appeared in a number of horror and dark fiction anthologies including several from January Ember Press. *Little White Flowers*, the first book in my Little White Flowers series, is my debut novel.

Although I’m currently a full-time writer, I previously worked as a physics lecturer at the University of Maine. UMaine is also where I earned my post-secondary degrees including my PhD in Physics. I hold additional degrees and specializations in Mathematics, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy.

When I’m not writing or reading, I enjoy crafting, cosplaying, and galavanting around my neighborhood in search of Pokémon. I live with my equally eccentric partner, Brian Toner.

Give a brief description of your debut novel, *Little White Flowers*.

In *Little White Flowers*, Alice Drayton and her brother are sent to the remote town of Evanston, Maine to clean out an estranged relative's estate. Alice has wondered for years why her grandmother ran away from home as a teenager, and this trip seems like the perfect opportunity to delve deeper into her grandmother’s past. However, Alice quickly realizes that Evanston’s insular religious community holds an insidious secret. Getting to the bottom of the mystery could save lives, but it might also cost her her own.

What inspired *Little White Flowers*?

“Children of the Corn” by Stephen King. I read *Night Shift* as a teen, and “Children of the Corn” raised a question for me that ultimately spawned this story.

Why did you write this book?

I think with *Little White Flowers*, it was largely a right time, right place situation. My main characters, Alice and Andy, predate this story by a couple of years. I had tried writing tales with them before but soon abandoned each project. But once I combined these characters with the premise of *Little White Flowers*, the words came flowing out of me. I composed the first draft in 21 days.

As for why I stuck with it through rewrites and dozens of rounds of edits, it was because I believed in the characters and the story. I haven’t looked at the original draft in ages, but I imagine if I were to read through it now, beneath all the imperfections I would still find the seeds of a powerful story.

What was the most challenging part of writing this book?

I wrote the first draft when I was nineteen. Even though I had been an avid reader since a young age, I didn’t know much about storytelling or story structure. The hardest part was turning that first rough draft into something worth reading. I completely overhauled the manuscript twice, and I performed countless smaller-scale edits, some on my own and some with the help of my amazing editorial team. But I’m so glad I put the time and energy into making the book the best it can be. It has come a long way, and I couldn’t be prouder of the end result.

Your primary POV character Alice struggles with anxiety and panic. Is that something you can relate to?

Absolutely. I’ve dealt with anxiety for as long as I can remember, although it really became intense when I was in my mid-twenties. One thing I hope to accomplish with Alice’s story is to show how painful and terrifying anxiety and panic can be. I also want to provide an alternative to the “defeating anxiety” narrative that is popular in books with anxious protagonists. There's nothing wrong with books that do that, and they can be very powerful and empowering to some. But I wanted to provide an alternate narrative focusing on perseverance through ongoing anxiety, which better matches my lived experiences.

People will say that anxiety is all in your head, but that’s not really true, not from a physiological standpoint. It’s a full-body experience, and as with any other emotion, you can’t just decide you're not going to feel it anymore. You may be able to use certain techniques to de-escalate in the moment, but permanently getting rid of his anxiety is out of the question for many of us, which is why I feel like Alice's story is so important. Anxiety definitely makes life harder, but you can still live and succeed with it.

What can readers hope to gain from this book?

First and foremost, I hope readers will be entertained by the story. But beyond that, I hope that *Little White Flowers* provides some folks with a different perspective on autism. There are as many ways to be autistic as there are autistic people, but so often in media, we are reduced to a small number of rigid stereotypes. Alice certainly has her struggles, and hopefully her POV chapters will help readers understand those a little bit more. But there also are so many things she can do. Her life isn’t necessarily better or worse because she’s autistic. It’s just different.

When did you become a writer?

I started telling stories at a young age and started writing consistently at eight. The first story I remember writing during that era was called “The Ghost,” and it was about a girl who was tormented by a ghost in her home. Unfortunately, I have since lost most of the pages, but it spawned three sequels which I still have. Ghosts were a big point of fascination for me during that phase of my life, as were vampires and science experiments gone awry.

What’s your writing process like?

I’m largely a discovery writer. Going into a novel, I usually have a sense of how the story begins as well as a possible ending. I often use what’s called the flashlight method. Basically, picture the story as a cavern. The chapter I’m working on is what's in the center of the flashlight beam. I have some sense of the next few chapters to come, those that are still partially illuminated by the flashlight, and I often know very little about what lurks in the shadows. But as I move deeper into the cavern, in other words, as I progress through the story, my flashlight beam slowly illuminates additional areas until I know everything the cavern contains.

Most of your work has a dark bent to it. What inspired your love of the macabre?

I’ve loved spooky things for as long as I can remember. I started telling scary stories at a young age and tormented my family and friends with tales about ghost dogs and haunted ice cream trucks. Some of my earliest memories are of watching horror movies; I saw *Arachnophobia* at five and the 1997 miniseries adaptation of *The Shining* at six. *The Shining* actually became one of my early special interests. I talked about it constantly, drew movie posters, and referenced it in a number of the stories I wrote while in third and fourth grades. Which is to say, *The Shining* had a pretty big influence on me, but my love of the macabre almost feels like it was woven into my DNA.

As an adult, you were diagnosed with autism. How does this facet of your identity enter into your writing?

I think the most obvious place where you'll see the impact of my autism on my writing is in terms of my choice of protagonists. I've always been drawn to characters who are “Other” in some way. My leads often feel like outsiders, whether because of gender, neurodivergence, sexuality, social class, etc., something I myself have felt many times.

Also, despite the stereotype of autistic people being emotionless robots, many of us feel deeply and abhor injustice. I try to be aware of and draw attention to injustice in my work. *Little White Flowers* is entertainment, of course, but it’s also a political statement, a critique of gender essentialism, misogyny, and ableism, among other things.

In addition to your STEM degrees, you also majored in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and minored in Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy. Do these degrees play a role in your writing?

They absolutely do play a role in my writing. My background in WGS and ethics provided me with theoretical frameworks to help develop realistic characters and dive deeper into real-world issues. It encourages me to think about my framing. Which voices am I centering? Am I inadvertently using stigmatizing language? How will having a particular set of identity facets affect how a character thinks and how they are perceived by others? Thinking critically about these and other such factors helps me craft better stories.

What writing advice would you give to your younger self?

One thing I would remind my younger self is that there is no universal timeline for writing and publishing. It took me well over a decade to turn my rough draft of *Little White Flowers* into a publishable manuscript, and I certainly have felt frustrated at times by my slow progress. But the first time you try anything new, that initial attempt is almost guaranteed to leave room for improvement. If I had rushed to publish sooner, my story wouldn’t be as strong as it is now.

What’s next for you?

My main focus right now is my Little White Flowers series. I’ve drafted the second and third books in the series, and both manuscripts are in various stages of the editing process. I’m also currently drafting a prequel to the series set in the 1940s, a 90s Fear Street-esque YA novel, and I have a short story collection in the works as well.

What’s the best way for readers to receive updates about your progress?

The easiest way to keep up with my writing (and shenanigans) is to follow me on Instagram and Threads @amber\_hathaway\_writes and on Bluesky @amber-hathaway.bsky.social.