

## How *Bittersweet* Came To Life

In the late sixties, my grandparents bought land on Lake Champlain, and built a year-round retreat there, where my family still goes. This land was part of an original tract settled and owned by a prominent Vermont family, and my grandparents were the first non-family members to buy and build on that land. Although my grandparents' home was a beautiful place affiliated with many warm memories (my younger sister, for example, was born in that house), I always felt my outsider status there profoundly (although that likely had much more to do with dynamics within my own family than the interactions we had with the descendants of the original landowners, who are warm and generous, if, yes, tall and blonde and gorgeously intimidating to look at).

I know the lake house and the surrounding land and water as well as the back of my hand. It's the only home anyone in my extended family has owned consistently throughout my lifetime, and was especially meaningful to me since I spent my childhood following my professor father across the globe. And yet, every summer when I would return to the lake house for a few weeks of swimming, I always felt as if I didn't quite belong.

Like Mabel Dagmar, I spent my teens in Oregon, and then went to college at Vassar (which is where I always imagine Mabel meeting Ev, although the college is never named). At Vassar, I encountered real, New York, sophistication for the first time: gorgeous, willowy girls who wore black and had come of age at boarding school. Compared to them, I felt like a country bumpkin, too serious, undeveloped, an outsider (although again, as is so often the case, this alienation probably had much more to do with my own impression of myself than anything those young women ever said or did to me).

The contemporary books I've loved reading in my adulthood tend to deal with this particular feeling of not belonging (which, in my adulthood, I've come to realize is universal), particularly vis a vis an elite place or group of people: Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, not to mention *The Great Gatsby* and *Brideshead Revisited*. When I started to notice this trend in my reading, I realized it might be time to write a book wrestling with the same central question of outsidership. But I still didn't have a handle on where such a book might take place. Then I read *Girl With A Dragon Tattoo* and realized I wanted to write a family as diabolical as the Vangers. And then it occurred to me that I'd actually known the place where such a family could live for my whole life.

Writing the book was quick- about four months from basic outline to first draft. I wrote feverishly, often setting down the twists and turns only moments after I uncovered them myself. As I got deeper, I realized how delicious and messed-up the Winslows could truly be—rotten to the core, and yet completely enticing.

The second draft came about with notes from my agent and a few readers, but also from a conversation with my father, who sat me down and reminded me of all the sounds, smells, and sights of that lake house, where he's been going since he graduated from college: the wood thrush warbling at dawn and dusk, the halyards pinging against the metal masts, the way laughter from a party carries across the

water on a clear night. When a place is in your blood, you find you can write about it as though it is its own character, and so Winloch was born, an amalgamation of a real place, my childhood insecurities about that place, and all the luxury of what my imagination wanted to project onto that known locale. I peopled Winloch with a fictional family full of twisted secrets, and created a young woman who wants nothing more than to belong, even as she comes to realize the full price of belonging.