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## Allison Baggio: Writing the fear away



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**Allison Baggio is the author of *Girl In Shades*, which was hailed by *Chatelaine* as “an immensely satisfying coming-of-age tale and remarkable first novel.” Her latest, *In The Body*, was just published by ECW Press. Her writing has appeared in publications across Canada, including *Room*, *LICHEN*, *subTerrain*, *Today’s Parent*, and the *Toronto Star*. She is a graduate of the Humber School for Writers and lives in Whitby, Ontario. She will be guest editing *The Afterword* all this week.**

People often ask writers where they find their story ideas. This one is hard for me to answer because I feel that good stories are given, more than they are searched for. In my case, my story ideas often bubble up from some sort of fear I am trying to squash.

Take for example, the day last year when I was coming out of the grocery store. As far as I was concerned, my short story collection *In the Body* was finished. Complete. As in, I am not going to add any more stories, ever. And then I saw them.

It was a woman walking with her daughter. The woman’s face was even, serious and determined. And her daughter, well, her daughter was obviously sick. The girl’s cheekbones were jutting out; her eyes were dark and sunken. If she would have let me, I could have closed my fingers around her bicep. The sight of this mother and her anorexic child made me slow down my pace and bite my bottom lip to keep my face from contorting into an ugly cry. In the time it took me to pass them, I was overcome by what it must be like to be them.

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I wondered: did this girl know she had a problem, and was she talking to her Mom about it? I thought about how terrible it must be for a mother to watch her daughter starve herself and not be able to help her. Was it hard for her to go out in public with her child, knowing that people would probably stare at them, shake their heads in pity, or question her parenting skills? I needed to know how this woman was feeling about her daughter’s condition—was she angry, sad, exhausted? I wondered how this situation was affecting the family, and what the girl’s parents were trying to do about it.

By the time I got to my car I had taken on the emotions of this other mother, and was deep in thought about my own three-year-old daughter. What if this happened to her someday? What would I say to her? What lengths would I go to protect her?

Instead of letting these feelings fester, I went straight home and booted up my computer. I started to write a story about a mother whose daughter was slipping away because of this horrible disease. I imagined what she would do. I explored how her relationship with her husband would be challenged; how her child would push away from her. I ended the story with an embrace between mother and daughter. This fictional embrace was powerful enough that it actually left me feeling better too. At the end of the story, I had stepped over a lot of my fear and felt like I would be more prepared if I ever had to face that situation myself. I immediately added the completed story, “Saving Katie” to the manuscript of *In the Body*, even though I had sworn the book was finished.

Short story collections, even more so than novels I think, are like a slice of an author’s DNA, and more specifically, a microscope on the fear that is swimming through his or her veins. Many of the stories in *In the Body* have offered me a way to process something that has overwhelmed me emotionally. In that way, writing this book has been like a decade long therapy session that cost me nothing and yielded great results. I’m not sure what I would have done without it.



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