

HOLLIS SEAMON

on writing

SOMEBODY UP THERE HATES YOU

Somebody Up There Hates You began many years ago when my four-year-old son started going to Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York, to the hospital known then as “Babies,” for multiple surgeries and other treatments. Between 1976 and 1990, he was a “repeat offender.” That’s what the kids who returned for frequent hospitalizations called themselves. These kids often met up during coincidental visits to Babies, instantly falling back into hospital friendship mode. When well enough, they played video games in the playroom, reluctantly attended school sessions in the mornings, and raced the ancient wooden wheelchairs through the corridors. They learned to use their IV poles as scooters, pushing off with one foot and then putting both feet on the bottom of the pole and sailing down the halls, bags of IV fluids waving above them. That was the fun side of being in Babies. The other side was pain, suffering, and a constant longing for home. My son always did get to go home, and we celebrated every time. But some of those kids never left the hospital. And in many ways, I’ve come to realize, Babies has never left me.

The patients at Babies who made the biggest impression on me were the teenagers, at once heartbreaking and hilarious. No matter how ill, how miserably uncomfortable, how very real the mortal danger, those kids remained, stubbornly and defiantly, teenagers: rebellious; foul-mouthed; irreverent; pains-in-the-ass to nurses, doctors, and parents alike—and wonderfully funny. Often, the teenagers on our floor would gather at the nurses’ station late at night, talking, laughing, and flirting. I would lie on the cot beside my son’s bed and listen. Their voices spun stories through

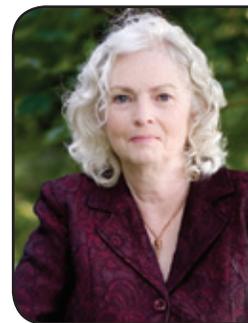


Photo Credit: Teresa Rieder Photography

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spent years visiting a children’s hospital caring for her own young son, fascinated and touched by the young people she met there, who remained teenagers no matter how ill they were. This is her first novel for young adults. She lives in Kinderhook, New York.

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those long, sleep-deprived nights, and when sleep did come, their voices wove themselves into my dreams.

That's where Richie, the seventeen-year-old narrator of *Somebody Up There Hates You*, came from. He represents all of those smart, mouthy, indomitable, fiercely alive kids. Sylvie, the girl he falls in love with, came from there, too. Richie and Sylvie are in hospice; they are dying. But they are still alive, growing up in that intense hospital space where time flows at a different pace and every moment is heightened. Things happen, to them and around them, every day. As Richie says, "Dying is pretty boring, if you get right down to it. It's the living here that's actually interesting, a whole lot more than I ever would have imagined."

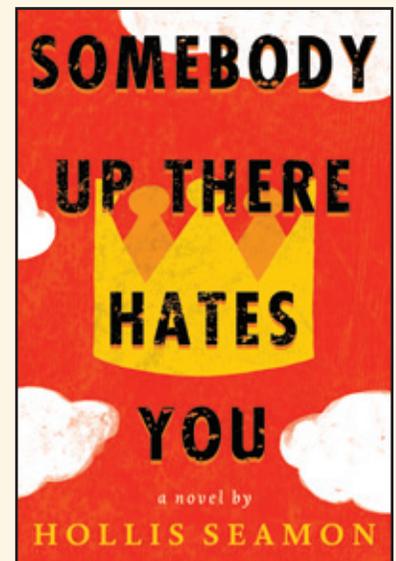
Richie's right: hospitals are bursting with stories. Walk down any corridor and glance, only briefly, for hospital etiquette requires that you never stare, into the patients' rooms. Listen for a minute: in every room, a drama is occurring. Fights and struggles, triumphs and devastating losses, in every single room, every single day. Everyone there is a character, and every event becomes part of a plot. Nothing is certain; everything seems dependent on some arbitrary roll of some strangely loaded dice. Everyone is a gambler, and the stakes are sky high. What a training ground for fiction writers.

One other thing, more recent, helped create *Somebody Up There Hates You*. In 2005, my beloved brother-in-law Matt was admitted to a hospice unit in a small hospital in Hudson, New York. In the corridor there, beside the elevator, was a harpist. The effect of stepping into that place and encountering harp music was, well, just totally weird. That harpist appears on the very first page of the novel. That's also where my original "SUTHY Syndrome" story began, with Richie describing the weirdness of the harpist and then telling us how he and Sylvie lit up their hospice on the night before Halloween. After that story was published in the *Bellevue Literary Review* in 2009, I thought I'd heard the last from Richie.

Nope. Richie kept right on talking. Clearly, he had much, much more to say and to do.

So that story grew into this novel. The echoes of all those kids' voices somehow came together, mixing with the notes of a harp. This composition played in my ears for years and then emerged as *Somebody Up There Hates You*, a book written to honor repeat offenders everywhere.

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