

Samantha Mabry

on writing

A FIERCE and SUBTLE POISON

A Fierce and Subtle Poison came into being after I was hit by inspiration on a variety of fronts. First, there was the Nathaniel Hawthorne short story, “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” A friend of mine who’s a professor of eighteenth-century American Literature was the first to suggest I retell a Hawthorne story. At the time I was busy working on a different project, and while the conversation with that friend stuck with me, the name of the specific story she mentioned slipped completely from my mind. I eventually abandoned that other project, and months later, I picked up a copy of Hawthorne’s story collection *Mosses from an Old Manse* and skimmed through the contents, hoping to jog my memory. Honestly, I still don’t remember the story my friend suggested, but I landed that day on “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” a story about a boy who falls in love with a girl filled with poison.

Around this same time, I’d been reading a lot of Latino Literature, specifically works by magic realists such as Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende, and, as cliché as this sounds, something just clicked. I knew the setting of the book immediately. Instead of the Italy of Hawthorne’s story, mine would be set in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, set in and around a fictional version of the city and a convent-turned-hotel. In Old San Juan there are secluded courtyards (a must), sticky,



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credits her tendency toward magical thinking to her Grandmother Garcia, who would wash money in the kitchen sink to rinse off any bad spirits. She teaches writing and Latino Literature at a community college in Dallas, Texas, where she lives with her husband, a historian, and her pets, including a cat named Mouse. *A Fierce and Subtle Poison* is her first novel.

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AUTHOR INSIGHTS

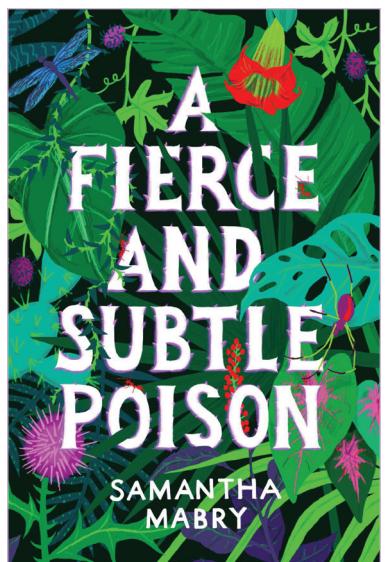
humid weather (the perfect atmosphere for poisonous things to grow), and major weather events (the gods must be angry). I wrote the first line (which is still the first line) and the tone, characters, and storyline all came together.

I knew I wanted to create a story in which characters were trying to reconcile their past—the layers upon layers of people and places and history that made them who they are—with what they wanted for their future. And I wanted a world where there was some form of magical thinking, with myths and reality blurring and colliding. But I didn't want there to be a sparkly magic formula for the boy to save the girl or for the girl to be saved by anyone other than herself.

It was equally important for me to write a young adult novel set in Latin America and featuring characters who were both Puerto Rican and of mixed heritage. My paternal grandmother was born and raised outside Ponce, Puerto Rico, and moved to Texas when she married my grandfather. My dad would tell me that when he visited her family, my grandmother would say things like, the “Americans are ruining my island,” which I think is such an intense and complex statement. My mother is Mexican American, and I owe my tendency toward magical thinking to her mother, who would wash paper money in the kitchen sink to rinse off bad spirits and would warn me not to look at certain women because they were witches. These women were my blood relatives, yet they were also, in a way, mysteries to me. When I was younger, I was embarrassed by my maternal grandmother and so I dismissed what I thought were her crazy superstitions. My paternal grandmother died when I was very young, and I’ve always wondered about the hidden ties she kept to her homeland because I never heard her speak a word of Spanish. In many ways, *A Fierce and Subtle Poison* is for and about them, two Hispanic women with mystery and depth.

At its thematic heart, *A Fierce and Subtle Poison* is about impossible love and the ways in which love can be all-consuming to the point of dangerous. In “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” Hawthorne writes that Beatrice (the girl full of poison) “instilled a fierce and subtle poison into” her admirer Giovanni’s system. “It was not love,” Hawthorne writes, “although her rich beauty was a madness to him; nor horror, even while he fancied her spirit to be imbued with the same baneful essence that seemed to pervade her physical frame; but a wild offspring of both love and horror that had each parent in it, and burned like one and shivered like the other.” My title is plucked from this section of Hawthorne’s story because the play of opposites captures the essence of the overall conflict. Between love and horror (or ferocity and subtlety), there is something that sparkles, overwhelms, feeds, and destroys.

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