

That's Why I Wrote This Song Literature, Lyrics, Music & Film Crossing mediums

By Susanne Gervay with lyrics and music by Tory Gervay

In the tradition of 'Catcher in the Rye', realistic young adult literature is defining, cutting edge, reaching into new areas. Tory, my teenage daughter and I explored crossing mediums through music and technology as part of the drive for new forms of expression within the genre. The result was our collaborative new YA novel, 'That's Why I Wrote This Song'. Tory wrote the music and lyrics and I wrote the text in a confronting but rewarding, personal and creative experience.

'That's Why I Wrote This Song' came out of my daughter's challenge to me. 'Can you write a book inspired by me Mum?' She laughed. 'Please not another book about my 'ugly' brother.' She actually adores her brother Jamie. However he is noisy, dominant, funny but loving. Jamie is the inspiration for my children's book 'I Am Jack' and my YA novel, 'The Cave'. It was time to focus on Tory.

Tory grew up with the emotional turmoil of a troubled divorced family, an aging and ill Grandma who lived with us, my life threatening illnesses. Working with her on this collaborative book, felt like acknowledgement of what she'd been through and her great spirit. There were many writing colleagues who questioned my 'sacrifice'. 'How can you commit years to writing a book for your daughter without a publishing contract? You're a professional author.' My writing friends meant well. However for me, writing had to have an emotional core that drove me. I desperately wanted to write this book for Tory, with Tory.

'That's Why I Wrote This Song' is about four sixteen- seventeen year old girls who connect through their music. The book reveals their relationships with their fathers - the good, the bad and the ugly - and how that impacts on their relationships with guys and each other and their search for identity. It's also about mothers, daughters, brothers, friendships and dependence-independence. Set against the rock music scene in Australia, 'That's Why I Wrote This Song' is how music is their way of revealing who they really are.

It took three years to create 'That's Why I Wrote This Song' through a rocky, difficult yet joyous process. There were four key areas to tackle. Firstly the writing, where I had to access the youth music scene in an authentic way. Secondly there was working as a mother-daughter team. There were hilarious, loving and dire times. The third was that melding of music and literature through text, performance and technology. Fourth was convincing a publisher to believe in our project. Every stage was hard work, like a real rock band finally making it onto stage for that great show that defines them.

The first key area. The youth music scene was outside my experience. Tory had a serious task in introducing me to the real life of rock concerts, overnight camping festivals, BIG DAY OUT, bands, singers and the music that seemed to be always plugged into her ears or on her computer or MP3 player. It took me a while to get into the culture. I watched DVD's of rock concerts, writing notes on every aspect from the audience raising their hands to the mosh pit to the bands smashing the stage. I became addicted to RAGE, the all night music programme that is programmed from midnight Friday to Saturday morning. 'Good Charlotte' rocked from my study as I wrote. I became engulfed in the world of youth music with Tory as my guide. It was fun and wild and meaningful. The lyrics of rock songs reached me, just as The Beatles had as I was growing up.

Second key area. Tory's stories and feelings were the bedrock of my words. Some of the stories were very funny, some sad. The vodka teddy bear scene is bitter-sweet and very young adult, filled with crossed love, betrayal, humour and naivety. Some of the stories are especially moving when the girls become trapped by family expectations and conflict. As Tory navigated her own search for identity during the years of writing this book, I tapped into her emotions. Sometimes the door was open. Sometimes she slammed it into my face and our household became tense. Was I an intruder? Had she really given me permission to enter private territory?

Third key area. Tory took the stage here. She wrote the music and the lyrics. Her lyrics are powerful driving the themes of father-daughter relationships and the characters' journeys to find their own power. When I listened to Tory's 'I Wanna Be Found' I was overwhelmed that my daughter felt this way:-

Why do I feel all alone,

Like I'm standing here all by myself,

When there's people all around,

I'm lost but I want to be found.

Her music brought us closer as we talked about everything, ultimately realising that we are here for each other.

Tory and I wanted her songs to be more than her written lyrics as the rock songs are central to the book driving the characters, themes and narrative. It became an imperative to include the actual music in the reading experience.

While there have been books published with music, the music has been an adjunct to the book, a value added product such as a CD tucked inside the back cover or a recital of segments of the book or an extension of text. 'That's Why I Wrote This Song' is different. Tory's songs are entwined inside the story.

Tory and I searched for a producer for her songs, 'Psycho Dad' and 'I Wanna Be Found'. Young rock-hip-hop music producer Tony Buchan worked with Tory on the production. Tory didn't want to sing the songs initially. However as an authentic

experience for the reader, it felt right that she did. The producer coaxed her into recording. So now when readers download the songs free from the web, Tory is singing. This crossing of mediums melds her songs into the reading experience in a way that enriches the literature.

Fourth key area. Crossing mediums, uniting music and text was a tough concept to sell to publishers. The cost of producing the songs was a major issue. In the end, we produced the songs ourselves. Book publishers are also not music publishers. So I faced continual rejections which made me seriously dejected. However I continued writing this book in the belief that my enthusiasm and determination would find that publisher. This determination was hardened because there was no way I could let Tory down. I had promised her that our book would be published. Finally HarperCollins offered a contract. It was a relief and wonderful.

Suddenly a fifth and unexpected area crossed into 'That's Why I Wrote This Song'. A young talented film producer who I had known all her life heard Tory's songs. Rachel Geurry felt the songs spoke to her. When she read the manuscript, she felt it was hers. So began the complex process of producing the film clip for the song 'Psycho Dad'. Rachel interpreted the book and songs expressing the themes transformation and gaining your own power. Rachel wrote twelve draft scripts refined and refined the text, lyrics and music into emotional filmic scenes. Producing a film clip was complex. Rachel was the producer/director and script writer bringing a team of young editors, camera people, actors and numerous participants into developing the three minute film that encapsulates 'Psycho Dad' with virtually no budget.

'That's Why I Wrote This Song' was launched on 31st July at Bondi Pavilion overlooking the beach, with Tory singing 'Psycho Dad' and 'I Wanna Be Found' and Rachel Guerry's film clip flicking onto the scene for a book that reveals the passion of youth.

by Susanne Gervay
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