

## Author Interview about BECOMING NAOMI LEÓN

Naomi, from your newest book, BECOMING NAOMI LEON changes significantly from the beginning of her story. What inspired you to write Naomi's story? Have you been to Oaxaca?

In early 1997, I was at the San Diego airport on my way to a conference. I bought a beautiful book about Oaxacan woodcarving to read on my trip. In that book, I came across a one-line reference to the Night of the Radishes. The event sounded so magical I knew I had to see it. Later that year, on the 100th Anniversary of La Noche de los Rabanos, I visited the romantic and mysterious Oaxaca City, a feast of colors, tastes, pageantry, and festivals. I knew I wanted to use the city and the festival in a book someday, but at the time, I didn't know the format. Picture book? Novel? Nor did I have a storyline. So the idea, simmered. Several years later, I was at a school and was asked to sign a book for a girl named Naomi Outlaw. I was very taken with the name and as I drove home that day, I began wondering about a character named Naomi Outlaw - it's such a strong name. And I wondered what it would have been like if she was very shy and quiet and had to grow into the name. I began writing Naomi's story and I needed her to have an outlet. She evolved into a soap carver. It was then that my imagination rushed me back to Oaxaca. I often wonder, though, if it was Oaxaca's spell that first mesmerized me, and inspired the lioness, Naomi León.

Is Lemon Tree a real place?

Lemon Tree is based on the city of Lemon Grove, CA, in San Diego County. There *is* a giant plastic lemon on Main Street and the residents tout it as the town with the “Best Climate on Earth.” I gave an endorsement to their claim in the story when the characters were able to eat outside on Thanksgiving Day.

Are you a list-maker like Naomi? If so, what kind of lists do you keep? What do you do with them?

Oh yes, I have always loved to make lists for all sorts of things: to-do lists, goals, potential book titles, groceries, menus, favorite quotes, funny sounding names. One of my greatest satisfactions comes in crossing things off of to-do lists. Some lists are in journal type books and I have left them there. Others get torn out and I carry them around with me and they get so wrinkled I have to throw them away. Now with the computer, it's easy to set up a file with a special list and keep it going. I have one for quotes I love, manuscript ideas, and books I want to read – things like that. As a young girl, I also liked to copy things out of books. Once, I tried to copy an entire encyclopedia page!

Like Naomi, your background is a mix of different cultures. As a child where you exposed to each of them? Does each culture hold a favorite connection?

Culturally, I was primarily exposed to the Mexican side of my family because they lived the closest so I saw many of them on a daily basis. I saw my Oklahoman grandmother almost every Saturday. My most immediate connections to these cultures are to food like

enchiladas, red mole, rice and beans. Or chicken, corn bread, smothered greens and peach cobbles.

Your characters are all so distinct, so one-of-a-kind. Do their traits sprout from your imagination or are they drawn from people you know?

Ideas for a book or fictional characters are similar to a confluence of rivers. The thoughts stream in from various paths and the final idea is the roiling water in the middle of my mind. I loved to make lists when I was a young girl and hang out at the library so those were traits with which I was familiar and they lent themselves to Naomi's personality. Naomi evolved from personal knowledge and imagination. The same was true of Owen. Over the years, I have known many boys who had traits similar to Owen but no one who had all of his characteristics. I did know a boy who had to have tape on his shirt each day. Another who was diagnosed as a F.L.K. Someone else had similar physical challenges yet an optimistic attitude like Owen. Then, there are a few similarities between Gram and my Oklahoman grandmother. For instance, many of the sayings came from my grandmother and she *was* a tiny woman, but Gram is much more contemporary and feisty than my grandmother. All the characters are composites, who evolved from many facets, real and imaginary.

Baby Beluga is so much a real character, another member of the Outlaw family. Does that authenticity come from personal experience? Did you ever live or travel in a trailer like Baby Beluga?

No, I never lived or traveled in a trailer. When I was in high school, I often went with my best friend to her family's summer trailer, which was in a park near Pismo Beach. I was always fascinated by all of the compartments and the efficient design. Over the years, we spent a lot of fun times in that trailer. Years ago, my husband and I bought a Chevy Suburban and we called it Baby Beluga because we thought it looked like a miniature whale. Our children always called it that, too, so that's where I adopted that name for Naomi's home.

It's amazing how something as simple as intriguing chapter headers can add dimension (and fun!) to a story. What drew you to use collective nouns in the chapter headings?

While I was researching a book on baby animal names some years ago, I came across many collective nouns and began keeping a file of them. I didn't know what I might specifically do with them someday but I loved the language and the imagery of the phrases. I knew early in the writing of BECOMING NAOMI LEÓN that she was a list-maker. Then to my surprise and delight, she became a soap carver of animals! So in my mind, it was a natural consequence that she might love to copy a list of collective nouns. The first words in the collective nouns especially fascinated me...a paddling, a skulk, a lamentation, a memory, a charm, a shiver. So many of them can be read as verbs, which I loved, and there are thousands from which to choose. As the book developed, certain words applied to the chapters. How this all synthesized in my brain is a mystery to me.

Have you ever done any carving yourself? Any advice?

When I was a young girl, I once carved soap as an activity at Camp Fire Girls. While writing the book I carved several pieces. One was a rudimentary little bear. The other was one of my son's initials, all connected, which wasn't as easy as it sounds. I also tried a duck. It does seem to help to unwrap the soap and allow it to dry out for a day or two. It doesn't crumble as easily. I found it helpful to carve over a small plastic salad bowl to catch the shavings. I found myself starting out with the intention of carving one thing and then not doing very well and saying, "Oh well, it can be a little whale." Then as I progressed and that didn't go well, so I said, "Oh well, this can be a little fish." Then it ended up a duck. I'm not nearly as accomplished or as talented as Naomi!

About carving Santiago says, "When the promise does not reveal itself early, your imagination must dictate your intentions. Then the wood, or the soap, it will become what you least expect. Sometimes the wood fools me. I think I am carving a parrot, and when I am finished it has a fish tail. Or I begin a tiger, and in the end it has the body of a dancer." Do you find this true about writing as well?

Yes, writing often fools me. When I start a book, I don't have a formula for getting from the blank page to a rough draft. The characters usually come first and I often follow their lead, letting scenes play out in my mind. I discard many scenes and write down the others. For me, writing isn't so much a process as it is an evolution. One thing leads to another.