

# **VOICES CARRY**

A STORY OF TEACHING, TRANSITIONS, & TRUTHS

## **RAVEN OAK**

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A STORY OF TEACHING, TRANSITIONS, & TRUTHS

Raven Oak



Grey Sun Press  
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*For all those who formed the village that raised me, and for my  
chosen family now. I wouldn't be me without you.*



# FOREWORD

*Voices Carry* is a memoir that carved out a place in my mind mid-January of 2024. As an author, I live by a variety of timelines, but in this case, the muses wouldn't shut up. Perhaps that's for the best considering the contents inside—my thoughts about my life as both a former educator in the southern United States and a disabled queer. While all names, locations, etc. have been changed, these are my experiences as I lived them.

From childhood onward, I've been invisible to many around me. Society excels at pretending certain people don't exist, and why not? It's easier to ignore what makes us feel some sense of guilt about our own lives and choices. As I type this, some states are passing laws making it difficult, and in some cases illegal, for certain members of society to exist. Why should I be surprised to find myself invisible?

I've knitted stories together my entire life, first as a wanna-be child writer and then as a published author, but it wasn't until my forties that I discovered the power in storytelling. Even younger me grasped the power of words as I've always stood out for creating new worlds and characters. But for me to recognize the power in my voice, let alone my lived experiences?

That took time, not to mention several therapists.

From the moment I set foot in the classroom, I swore to be the teacher who fought for my students' rights, even when it risked my job. That's what I thought I was doing, but looking back, I allowed societal pressures to dictate my actions too many times. I allowed society to diminish me. To silence me.

During the moments when I spoke out, people accused me of "airing dirty laundry." People who made waves were problems to be disappeared because no one wanted to hear what people like me had to say.

Worse, I believed them.

Too many snapshots of my past show me silencing myself to please others, but the past few years have changed this for me as I've become a member of the disabled community. I've always been an autistic queer who's watched as society deemed me expendable, but seeing how the world treats its weakest citizens has been eye opening. I'll be damned if I'm going to remain invisible and silent.

So who am I and why should you care about what I need to say?

I'm a former Texas public school teacher turned full-time author and artist living in the Seattle area. Besides being opinionated, I swear. A lot. I've been disabled for longer than I wanted to admit, I'm neurodiverse, and I'm a nonbinary liberal married to a transwoman. For those in the back, that means I believe that equality and equity are *human rights* and that love is love is love. I also suffer from long COVID or post-COVID syndrome in addition to several autoimmune disorders. Oh, I *love* footnotes! You'll see quite a few of them in this book, either as snarky commentary or as sources for anything I say that needs citing<sup>1</sup>.

This memoir is full of politics, religion, and all those topics that people say you shouldn't discuss with family at Thanks-

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1. See? I couldn't resist placing one in the foreword. I mean, who does that? Besides me?

giving dinner, and I'm going to swear a lot while doing it. In fact, I'll probably drop an f-bomb or three. Besides teaching, topics may include prejudice in medicine, science fiction & fantasy fandom, child and adult abuse, eating disorders, and COVID. I will do my best to warn before diving into sensitive topics in order to help readers who may need to skip sections.

If any of this sounds horrifically offensive, perhaps this isn't the book for you.

It's okay. You can go back to re-reading *50 Shades of Whatever* and pretending it's high literature. Seriously—I won't judge<sup>2</sup>.

In the past ten years as a full-time author, I've learned there are many of us who feel alone in our struggles: teachers, disabled people, those suffering from long COVID, creators, queer members of society, or something else entirely. Many of us feel invisible. Silenced. Whatever muse beat me over the head with this memoir made one idea very clear: **you're not alone.**

I see you. I *hear* you.

And I hope you hear me too.

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2. Not much anyway. 🙄





A hand is shown holding a rainbow flag, with the flag's colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple) flowing outwards. The hand is positioned in the center, with the fingers wrapped around the fabric. The background is a soft, light gradient.

# CHAPTER ONE

## IT TAKES A VILLAGE

“ *Let the villages of the future live in our imagination, so that we might one day come to live in them!*”

MAHATMA GANDHI

I HAVE AN AMAZING MEMORY, or so I've been told by others who can't remember what they ate for breakfast yesterday<sup>1</sup>. As I'm now entering my late forties, some of my earliest memories are fuzzier than they used to be, but I can still recall the layout of my grandmother's house from when I was three, right down to the black, upright piano that rested against the dining room wall.

This was my maternal grandmother, Elle, a woman who won numerous awards as a public school teacher in California and taught me to read and write when I was a toddler. There's a bookshelf in my home library with children's books she bought for me—everything from Dr. Seuss to ancient books that had been hers when she was a child<sup>2</sup>.

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1. For me, it was a serving of Honey Bunches of Oats cereal and a Dr. Pepper Zero. How about you?

2. I have a thing for old books. Something about the smell of old paper sparks memories in me like nothing else.

My memories of Grandma Elle revolve around her love of language and teaching others. As a full-time author, one of my greatest joys comes from educating others on writing fiction. Considering how neither of my parents enjoy reading or writing, this devotion to the written word must have come from her and my earliest years living in her apartment.

Since the age of five, I've had three life goals: to be a writer, a musician, and a teacher like my grandma. Other topics of interest pulled me sideways as I grew up, but those core wants never changed. I managed to be all three, but in doing so, I lost myself as I allowed others to dictate what it meant to be each.

Most people don't remember what their child-self wanted. I'm lucky that I do, thanks to my grandma. She bought me one of those scrapbooks that's supposed to travel with a kid throughout their entire K-12 career so that they can one day look back and see what their childhood education was like. The book was divided into twelve sections, one for each grade level, and there was room for photos as well as notes about teachers, classes, hobbies, grades, friends, and whatever else one wished to write about. There were even envelopes for holding awards or various items from each school year. At forty-six, I'm still in possession of that book and consider it my first scrapbook. When I skim through it, these goals were the remaining constant in my life, especially after my grandma died.

Many have called me a virtuoso and a child prodigy. Since the age of five, I've been able to play music from memory (*aka by ear*<sup>3</sup>), and I have gifts in both writing and art as well. If I'd been born into money, it's probable you wouldn't be reading

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3. Most musicians play music by reading sheet music. Some people, like myself, can do more. "Playing by ear" is a phrase that means we can hear a song, sit down, and play it just by having heard it. Sometimes we get it in one go, but sometimes it may take a few listens. I like to think of it like a photographic memory but of sound. I hear something once and I can hear the entire piece in my head—each layer of the instrumentation, the vocals—all of it.

this as I'd likely have been afforded an education at some musical conservatory or art school. I didn't have the chance at music lessons, so everything my child self knew about creativity was self-taught.

My father was a single parent in his early twenties when custody shifted from my Grandma Elle to him. We were poor enough that sometimes he skipped meals so I could eat, which was often bologna and cheesy mac or fast food dollar menu items. Like many men of his time, he was too proud to accept the government assistance he was owed as a military vet and college student, so we lacked food stamps and free health care<sup>4</sup>. Some of the health complications I have today come from that lack of early health and dental care, which is a sticking point for me. My father tried, but his pride certainly made a mess of life. His evangelical beliefs added to this as they taught him to accept help from no one.

Out of everything he did wrong, he tried to do right by my creativity. Rather than ignore my talents, he used credit cards to fill my bedroom with used books, art supplies, and a tiny electronic keyboard<sup>5</sup>. Being sent to my room as punishment was a vacation for me as I don't think he realized what an escape it was to dive into those worlds.

While I tried to teach myself to read music, my ear was more reliable. When I wasn't outside swimming or exploring the native wildlife of North Florida, I was writing songs, spinning tall tales about my epic adventures, and tutoring neighborhood kids, whether they needed it or not. Nothing would stop me from my dreams. I had a promise to keep to Grandma Elle and to myself.

I spent the summer after sixth grade writing an entire 350+ page fantasy novel, which I still have pieces of. It's utter

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4. Though he had no trouble accepting public education grants to help pay for college. Funny how that pride works.

5. The musical kind, not a QWERTY. I'm a techie, but we didn't have a home computer yet.

drivel, but that summer proved to me I could finish what I started.

By fifteen, I was invited to join a local critique group of professional genre fiction authors, who made money from their craft. While my writing lacked the nuance of an adult, the foundation was solid enough to be the only minor in the group. I found it odd to be a teenager surrounded by people who had lived experiences<sup>6</sup> I'd only read about, but it helped me develop my voice and better understand what writing as a career was all about. I attended my first professional writing conference at sixteen<sup>7</sup>. While attendees were surprised at a teenager taking copious notes and hanging onto every word spoken by editors and published authors, they never questioned my right to be there.

It was during this year that I also learned my first harsh lesson in the writing world. A local author had spotted my online posts about a book idea I had and suggested we "meet up for coffee" to potentially cowrite the novel together. Feeling quite grown up, I was elated by this idea. My father worried—as he should have—and suggested *he* talk to the man first. When the local author realized I was a teen, he wasn't sure about cowriting but after seeing a sample of my work, he agreed to come to a supervised meeting at our apartment to talk further.

We spent an entire Saturday afternoon discussing plot and character arcs. I showed off the character sketches and maps I'd made, and the local author was very excited to work with me. I think we met four or five more times as we worked to flesh out my ideas. Then he ghosted<sup>8</sup> me.

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6. It also taught me what real adult relationships and families looked like as my views of both were twisted by growing up in a religious, abusive household.

7. Thank you ArmadilloCon's writing track for your support and advice.

8. If you're not up on the lingo, being ghosted is when someone suddenly stops communicating with you without explanation. They just disappear.

Many, many years later, I see he tried to publish<sup>9</sup> “our” work through a vanity press with little success, which doesn’t surprise me as the ideas we had weren’t novel or unique. Most of what I dreamed up at sixteen was rather juvenile, but I guess he lacked his own ideas and thought this to be the way forward. Thirty years later and he’s still trying to find a publishing deal without any luck. Maybe if he wrote his own words, that might change. For all that I was a teenager, I grew up before my years. I wasn’t stupid. It was obvious to me what he’d done, and for a good stretch of time, I didn’t trust anyone with my creative endeavors.

As a person on the spectrum, I clicked better with adults than with others my age as they were less inclined to dismiss my ideas and thoughts as easily as my father and other kids did. As a pre-teen and later teen living on the bloom of home computing and the Internet, I’m amazed I never fell afoul of online predators<sup>10</sup>. While smart, I was still a vulnerable child who was confused about my own role in the world.

Being neurodiverse means that I don’t always see the forest for the trees. While my father did the best he could to provide for me and encourage my talents, juggling college and several jobs meant he wasn’t always around, and when he was, exhaustion and irritability fueled his decisions. And of course, religion—evangelical style.

My family follows their own flavor of religion—a mix between Southern Baptist and Pentecostal. They aren’t quite Quiverful<sup>11</sup>, but they come close in their fervor. While many of my friends are Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Pagan, and so on, I am not. At least, not anymore. I’m a live-and-let-

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9. Vanity presses are scams. They prey on gullible writers who haven’t had success with traditional publishing. They charge thousands of dollars and claim publication, when it’s little more than going down to your local photocopier and having them print out your book. These kinds of places still exist, but few use them for obvious reasons. Good rule of thumb: money goes *to* the author, not the other way around.

10. Aside from writing thieves.

11. Though I wonder about one of my aunts...

live person until those ideas and beliefs harm others. Growing up as I did, I do carry some religious baggage as religion was frequently used to silence me and hide the fact that I was being abused. When my father was a young man in his twenties, he exuded a charisma similar to the type used by many a pastor, which challenged any suspicions of abuse.

Being a military brat and a poor one, we moved often before settling in Florida during my elementary school years, followed by Texas for the rest of my K-12 education. When they say it takes a village, they're telling the truth. During elementary school, we lived in student housing<sup>12</sup> for students with families and children, and it was there where I found many parents willing to dote on me in the absence of a mother.

I was expected to wake and dress myself, eat breakfast alone, and walk myself to the bus stop because my father was catching the only sleep he'd get that day. While there were plenty of single parents living in student housing, most of our neighbors were married couples with children. I found myself "adopted" by many mothers who made sure my hair and teeth were brushed. Feeling such love from people who weren't blood relatives gave me my first lessons in chosen family.

In second grade, my teacher worried about how my shoes were too small and my clothing too big,<sup>13</sup> but my mind was curious to a fault. She stressed over my calling her "Mom," especially when I tried to persuade her to marry my father. Meet the Teacher Night was embarrassing for them both as I played match-maker. Grandma Elle had taught me that

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12. Since the writing of this, I've learned that the university demolished this student housing village in June of 2023, leaving many student families without housing. This makes my heart ache as I have so many memories of my village. You can read more about the closure here: <https://www.alligator.org/article/2023/06/trees-over-profit-gau-holds-peaceful-protest-for-graduate-housing>

13. The issue with hand-me-downs is that you can't guarantee the clothes fit.

teachers were our heroes, so I was sure this superhero had been tasked to save me from a motherless life.

When she announced she was pregnant, I danced at the idea of a sibling. Looking back, I can't imagine how she handled it with the grace she did. Each day in class was a new adventure and in her room, I was encouraged to express myself and be me. At the end of the year, our district fired her for having a child out of wedlock because that's how we roll in this country. Having spoken to her since, she never returned to teaching. Society missed out on an amazing and kind teacher with the patience of a saint because she had a child.

While teachers like her were chased away from the field with pitchforks, others were branded as model teachers, like Mrs. Blane. She taught one of my AP classes and believed that rote memorization of people and facts was the best way to learn. Having the life I'd had, her class bored the snot out of me. It didn't challenge me and my way of doodling my notes distressed her nearly to the point of apoplexy. It's been thirty years since her class, but I can recall this event clearly. Like a sunburn, my skin crawls at its memory.

Halfway through the second semester, Mrs. Blane sat down with every student individually to encourage them to take the AP exam for her course and gain college credit. Being the 10<sup>th</sup> grade faculty advisor, she also discussed students' futures and career goals with them. When my turn came, she frowned.

"I see you've already signed up to take the AP Exam," she said, and when I nodded, her frown deepened. "I don't think that's a good idea. I'm not sure you'll pass it as you often struggle to pay attention in my class<sup>14</sup>."

"Your class is the only AP class I have trouble with. If I could just—"

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14. Like many of my generation, I had undiagnosed ADHD and autism. Between that and boredom, I'm not surprised I "struggled" in her class.

I'd been about to suggest she allow me to take notes *my* way rather than hers, as I'd comprehend the material better that way, but being a stickler for her way or the highway, she didn't allow me to finish my sentence.

"Look, I know you have your heart set on college, but I don't think college is going to work on you. You aren't college material."

Every teacher I've ever had disagreed with her, but for some reason, her words burned me.

"Some students have it—that gift of thought and the drive to accomplish their goals, but not you. I don't see you amounting to much of anything, if I'm honest. Perhaps you should look at a trade school or stick with your grocery store job."

For a mostly A+ student like me, she couldn't have insulted me more if she tried. "But I want to be a teacher—"

She laughed at me. Outright laughed.

"I don't think that's in the cards for you."

That day, when I got home, I swore I would be a teacher. I promised myself and my now deceased Grandma Elle that not only would I be a teacher, I'd never be a teacher like Mrs. Blane. She was *not* part of a tribe that raised me, but in many ways, she became a living example of what not to be.

I met my wife in 10<sup>th</sup> grade computer class, and yes, we were high school sweethearts. Mrs. Blane told my wife similar things, completely ignoring that she'd just lost her mother to cancer and had reason to suddenly struggle in school. Other high school teachers saw our talents and our struggles and worked to encourage us to be whatever we wished, lessons we took with us out into the world together. Many of these educators suspected the abuse I suffered at home but helped me figure out how to escape it and succeed in spite of it.

Both my wife and I graduated in the top 10% of our class, and I graduated with honors. We remained in the Lone Star



State for both of my college degrees<sup>15</sup> at a school known for its teachers and musicians<sup>16</sup>—University of North Texas, formerly North Texas State Teachers College. What began as a music composition degree, shifted to one in education as I sought to keep my promise. After college, I spent thirteen years as a public school teacher across Texas, which was...an adventure.

Seeing as I'm a disabled, neurodiverse queer, it shouldn't be surprising that I'm very liberal. Teaching in a conservative hellhole while being me was like threading a needle the size of an atom while blindfolded. I survived it by the skin of my teeth, and when I had the opportunity to jump-ship to Washington State, I seized it.

If you know any teachers, you're probably familiar with the idea of "love the students, hate the politics," which is exactly why I'm no longer a K-12 educator. Most of the time, my students were amazing. Even when they had rough home lives and inevitably brought it to school with them, we found ways to understand and learn from each other. What drove me from education was twofold: bully administrators and helicopter parents, both of which I'll be sharing in more detail in the following chapters.

I've spent the past eleven years as a full-time author and artist, which has given me the freedom not only to find myself but to be myself. In Texas, much of my identity was nailed firmly inside the closet, though not by choice and not by me.

When my teaching career began, I wasn't yet fully disabled, though it didn't take long to join that group as teaching is a physically and mentally demanding job. I was born with an undetected birth defect in my spine that causes my nerves to fuse together. It's thought to be related to teth-

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15. Bachelor of Science in Education with minors in English, Music Composition, and CECS. Master of Science in CECS.

16. Famous alumni include Norah Jones and Don Henley. (Yes, *that* Don Henley.)

ered spinal cord syndrome<sup>17</sup> and spina bifida<sup>18</sup>. With my major nerves fusing, I'm slowly losing my ability to feel in my legs. Throughout my twenties, I suffered increasingly horrific lower back pain that impacted my ability to function and work. After a decade of failed surgical procedures and physical therapy, both of which worsened my symptoms, I discovered a doctor willing to diagnose me correctly.

Our move to Seattle was about me taking a chance to write for a living, but it was also an opportunity to have a profession that wasn't as brutal on my spine. I hadn't realized it yet, but I was well on my way to understanding that I'd never hold a normal 9-5 job again.

One of our first adventures in the Pacific Northwest was to drive up Mt. Tahoma<sup>19</sup> to one of the ski lodge restaurants as well as adventure onto some of the shorter trails. During this trip, I discovered that the lack of sensation in my legs left walking on uneven surfaces challenging. I couldn't tell when I'd stepped on a rock or if my footing was solid. This led me back to physical therapy and another doctor in hopes of finding treatment.

Other symptoms began to occur and soon after, I was also diagnosed with several autoimmune diseases, one of which destroys nerves, meaning there was no reversal or cure for my symptoms. Walking on level carpet led to several falls and broken ankles, followed by doctors labeling me a "trip

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17. This is a neurological disorder caused by the melding of tissues that can limit the spinal cord's movement. ("Tethered Spinal Cord Syndrome – Causes, Diagnosis and Treatments." [www.aans.org](http://www.aans.org), American Association of Neurological Surgeons, [www.aans.org/en/Patients/Neurosurgical-Conditions-and-Treatments/Tethered-Spinal-Cord-Syndrome](http://www.aans.org/en/Patients/Neurosurgical-Conditions-and-Treatments/Tethered-Spinal-Cord-Syndrome). Accessed 18 Mar. 2024.)

18. Spina bifida occurs during fetal development when the neural tube in the spine doesn't close all the way. This results in damage to the spinal cord and nerves. (*What is Spina Bifida?* | CDC. (2023, October 4). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/spinabifida/facts.html> )

19. Tahoma is what this super volcano was named by the Native peoples of Washington. Americans named it Mount Rainier after Rear Admiral Peter Rainier in 1792.

hazard." I was instructed to walk carefully at home, but when out and about, use a wheelchair or scooter to ensure I didn't continue to harm myself. In 2016, I gained the official label of disability, complete with parking placard.

Several bouts of COVID worsened both my autoimmune diseases and my spinal damage, leaving my body irreparably damaged. Even if I wanted to return to teaching, my body wouldn't allow me to do so. Writing tends to be something I do in short bursts broken up by long breaks where I rest and stretch carefully. Through the brain fog, I've fought to return to writing and in doing so, I've found the pieces of my broken self as less jagged than I remember.

Like a kaleidoscope, I've handled each piece and memory with care, but with a critical eye as well. For much too long, I've hidden fragments of myself and with this book and the help of so many villages, I say, no more.



MY CHILDHOOD WAS...DIFFERENT to put it mildly. Besides growing up in a religious, abusive household, my mother hopped in and out of my life—though only when she needed money<sup>20</sup>—leaving me confused about what it meant to be a young woman. All the questions one normally would ask their mother, remained silent on my tongue. Even if I'd had the courage to ask my father, doing so meant potential consequences.

Middle school is a time already fraught with chaos and angst as kids suffer through puberty and bullying. It's challenging enough to face with a normal childhood and two parents, but for me, it was hell. Actually, it was worse than hell. I personally don't believe in Satan, let alone heaven or

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20. A shitty habit she's passed on to my half-sisters.

hell, but if Satan existed, I think he would have taken one look at my teenage years and noped the fuck right out.

I suspect that's why I chose to teach middle school. Deeply rooted in my being was the need to help students survive what was the second worst time of my life. Trying to convince your single father that puberty is an actual event occurring to you is rough, or at least it was for me. Despite teachers and nurses explaining to him that I needed to wear a bra as my overly large breasts were a distraction for everyone, he couldn't admit that my body was changing, and I was no longer his little girl.

This began well before sixth grade, but when I began my period, he couldn't avoid the topic any longer. It's embarrassing enough for most teens to ask their mothers for period supplies or advice on cramps but asking your avoidance-loving father is an exercise in cruelty and shame. For a time, other friends' mothers would take me bra shopping. I'd change into my bra on the school bus<sup>21</sup>, attend school, and then take my bra off again during the bus ride home. On Fridays, my bras went home with a friend where they would be laundered and returned to me come Monday's bus ride.

One day, I forgot to take off my bra.

When I walked into our apartment, I'd expected my father to be attending class. Instead, he sat on our ratty couch, surrounded by textbooks. His gaze shot to my chest.

"What are you wearing?"

He was off the couch in an instant, and he slid aside my t-shirt's collar.

I remained silent. He didn't want an answer. He already knew it was a bra and answering would be seen as 'talking back.' What he wanted was for the moment to be undone.

"Go take it off. Don't let me see you wearing it again."

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21. I used my shirt to cover myself as I pulled the arms into my sleeves to put on and remove the bra. It was challenging at best and embarrassing at worst. I was the subject of many bullies who wondered why I'd be changing clothes on a school bus surrounded by other kids.

Ladies, gentlemen, and everyone else, I was twelve. I was wearing a C cup by necessity as I had inherited my mother's ample chest. I'd been needing a bra since I was ten, but goodness forbid I be comfortable in my own skin.

That was a sin.

Goodness forbid I not be the butt of yet another joke. It would've been nice to not be grabbed and rubbed by pubescent boys who thought I was the best thing since sugar.

I'm sure that would've been a sin too, but to my father, it was my fault. Somehow, I was "encouraging" it and needed to pray harder.

Needless to say, puberty was a rough ride for me, full of secrets and hiding and wishing with every ounce of my being that I had a mother.

What further complicated these years was the experience of figuring out who I was as a person in terms of attraction, crushes, and gender. My upbringing meant that I never knowingly encountered someone of the LGBTQ+ community until high school. I've learned since that several people I knew then were queer, but back then, no teen was openly out if they could help it—especially not in middle school or in Texas, land of the Deere not Queer. Because of this, I didn't have the terminology to identify as much of anything.

Rather than understanding that I was queer and nonbinary, both of which were normal, I figured myself as weird or odd. Broken.

While my friends were boy crazy and hopped from crush to crush and boyfriend to boyfriend, I didn't. At least not at first. Looking at a magazine photo of a topless teen heartthrob did nothing for me. My friends flushed pink and fanned themselves while I stared at the photos, emotionless. These heartthrobs were strangers to me. Without knowing them or having any connection to them, they could have been completely nude and I'd have only shrugged.

Why didn't I want to kiss these boys like my friends did?

Why didn't I feel anything?

I wasn't a stranger to kissing as I saw my father do it often enough with the coeds he dated. In fact, I had my first kiss at age ten though it meant about as much as tying my shoes. I couldn't figure what all the fuss was about. Most boys weren't 'hot' or 'cute'. They were just boys.

The word for how I feel attraction or the lack-thereof is demisexual, which falls in the asexual or ace umbrella. For me to have a sexual attraction to someone, there has to be a deep connection to them first. I need to know them, to be friends with them, and have a form of emotional intimacy first before feeling anything else. This is a term I didn't discover until my thirties and once I found it, I found that portion of me wasn't broken, just different. Everything about me and who I'd been clicked into place.

"It's a-me<sup>22</sup>!"

For a time, rumors floated around my middle school that I was a 'lesbo' or a 'dyke' because of my lack of kissing partners. On the rare occasion that I found myself a boyfriend, folks called me a prude because the relationship never progressed further than kissing. I mean, I wasn't stupid. Not with my mother being who she was. My father's only advice with boys was "don't," but I'd had sex education in school<sup>23</sup>. Become a teenaged mother like my mom? No way. I'd seen how *that* turned out for her. It helped that none of these boys were anything more than friends, and some, barely that. Certainly not a strong enough connection for me to consider anything more than a kiss.

The pressure to give a boy a hand-job sent a fair number of my friends into places they didn't want to visit. You could tell who gave it up based on the speed with which they cycled through boyfriends. As a former teacher, I taught my

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22. Inside joke for the video game lovers out there.

23. Useless as 'abstinence only' education is, science classes and medical textbooks teach a lot more than folks think. Lucky me that I loved the library and was well read.

share of pregnant middle schoolers, which makes me both cringe and cry<sup>24</sup>.

Because I was seen as uptight and potentially gay, my middle school years included nasty notes, cold shoulders, and a few dead animals stuffed in my locker. Where we lived, even the Catholics pretended to be Protestant because this was the Bible Belt. If you weren't Southern Baptist or Evangelical Christian, you were run out of town. Or at least they'd try. So I kept my head down and muddled through.

But then seventh grade happened and with it, Shelly.

Part savior and part hellion, she changed my life by setting me more firmly on the path to finding myself. When I say this, I'm well aware of how cliché it sounds, but honestly, I might be a different person without having met her.<sup>25</sup>

Shelly was an enigma.

She lived with her single mother who was a die-hard feminist and liberal. In fact, Shelly was probably my first exposure to someone who truly believed in a woman's right to choose, not to mention the idea that the patriarchy needed to die in a fire. Shelly took after her mother and showed up for the first day of school wearing a t-shirt that read, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle" and khaki cargo pants. Her sandals were something out of Burning Man, which didn't exist yet, and her long, blonde hair sported a single side braid woven with colored thread. She carried her books in a bohemian-style messenger bag instead of the traditional backpack, and the bag was covered in patches with all manner of liberal expressions. Around her neck, she wore a

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24. Looking back, I think we had it easier than students these days. With easier and broader access to porn, the pressures and expectations these days are intense.

25. If you've ever read my sci-fi novella, *Class-M Exile*, you may recognize some of this story as I turned it upside down and reinvented the ideas behind it for that story.

massive silver pentacle<sup>26</sup>, and in her hands was a pack of Robin Wood<sup>27</sup> tarot cards.

The only knowledge I had of tarot cards was from my father and the Bible. They were evil. They were a tool of witches and only evil people used them because no one knew what the future held but God. But Shelly didn't look evil to me, so I was genuinely curious about her. She lacked moles and green skin, so I figured I was safe enough.

When Shelly stepped out of an old, beat-up hatchback, a herd of dogs tried to follow her. The barking gained the student body's attention as we awaited school to open, but her—her appearance and confidence—scared the hell out of everyone. It was almost comical the way people fled towards the school doors, which were still firmly locked.

I kept my distance at first and observed.

Besides sharing my English class, I discovered we also shared band. During the passing period, I found her sitting on the carpeted floor, her tarot cards spread before her as she did a self-reading. People gave her wide birth, though they were brave enough to throw a few nasty words her way. Rather than be like them, I sat down next to her and introduced myself.

She smiled, then gestured to the cards. "Ever played with tarot cards before?"

I shook my head and she grinned as she gave me a quick reading. I was destined to try too hard, but in the end, I'd succeed. Or something like that. I remember being impressed at the time and wondered if it was true.

Over the next few days, I spent more time with Shelly,

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26. Dating back to the 1500s, pentacles are five pointed stars used as magical talismans in a variety of spiritual and religious practices, including Wicca and forms of Paganism.

27. American artist specializing in game art and fantasy, most known for portraits of characters from Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* series, the Robin Wood Tarot Deck and the cover art for several of Scott Cunningham's books on neo-Paganism.



who taught me about the huge world of science fiction and fantasy books. While my father enjoyed a good spec-fic<sup>28</sup> flick, he hated reading, whereas I loved it. He'd never told me that some of the movies I'd seen were books. Shelly made me a lengthy list of "must reads" and I devoured every book I could get my hands on. Lucky for me, my father never looked too closely at what I was reading.

From Shelly, I found the worlds of Anne McCaffrey, Raymond Feist, Mercedes Lackey, and many other speculative fiction giants. I ran through the books in our school library in a week as it didn't have much genre fiction, so Shelly's mother took me on a trip to Half-Price Books. This was back when they still had their half-off half sales. I rushed home yammering about it to my tired father, who took me back in order to get me to "shut up about it already."

Because my father wanted to encourage my love of books, he began taking me to their sales semi-regularly. I'd have \$10 in spending money and figured out the older the book, the cheaper the price. There were a few exceptions to this but since those special editions were behind locked glass, I never gave them a second glance. Instead of paying \$2.99 for a \$5.99 paperback, the old copies had a retail price on the cover of \$1.99, so half off would be 99 cents! Take into account the half-off half, I could get a book for 49 cents. That meant walking out of Half-Price with twenty new books<sup>29</sup> to read.

I budgeted wisely in those days, and in reading these books, I encountered unique characters—people and alien civilizations full of neurodivergent folks, queer relationships, and societal concepts I'd never encountered before.

My father never made the connection between these books and my sudden interest in liberal ideals, nor did he understand that the *Star Trek* show he watched was incredibly

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28. Short for speculative fiction, the overarching genre encompassing science fiction, fantasy, and horror

29. Or at least new to me.

liberal for its time. The original series made waves for having a white man kiss a woman of color, not to mention the Next Generation, which hosted universal healthcare, a lack of capitalism, and a desire to represent all people as equal. It was during this exploration of fandom that Shelly and I became best friends, but there was more to it than that.

I loved her.

I held a platonic love for all of my friends, don't get me wrong, but there was something more to my relationship with Shelly. I think that had I been raised in a family supportive of being yourself, even if yourself was queer, I could have had a nice romantic relationship with my friend as I absolutely had a crush on her—probably my first *real* crush. Even though she later came out as gay, she never knew my feelings for her. It wasn't something I could admit to myself at the time, let alone anyone else.

Being demi means that friendships are a must. I could never have a one-night-stand as strangers are empty for me. Because relationships are the most important piece for me, a person's gender has never mattered. Does that make me gay? Yes. Does it make me straight? That too.

Be it a man, woman, nonbinary, or transgender person, it's all about the relationship; the wrapper or physical body around the person doesn't matter much at all. It's easier to tell people I'm bisexual, but the actual term for what I am is pansexual<sup>30</sup>.

In many ways, my crush on Shelly set me up for the people I would encounter in high school—an amazing group of geeky, queer folks who broadened my world in so many ways. It was here that I realized that not every household was like mine, and that abuse wasn't limited to the physical.

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30. Pansexuality is the romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to people regardless of their gender. Like everyone else, pansexual people may be attracted to some people and not others, but the gender of the person does not matter.

Verbal and emotional abuse were real problems, and ones I was intimately familiar with.

I also learned that love is love is love. That queer people are people too and deserving of equality, as are people of color. Rather than remaining rooted in an ideology that wished me to be racist, homophobic, and misogynistic, I grew into a person who saw people for who and what they are and encouraged others to live their lives as their true selves.

Looking at those words now, it feels silly to say that queer people are people too. My brain automatically wants to respond with, "No shit, Sherlock!" but for a stretch of my childhood, I was taught otherwise. Anyone who wasn't white and wasn't Christian was evil and lesser. They weren't people in God's eyes and thus, I should avoid them at all costs.

Imagine growing up in a world that small and bigoted. The fact that I escaped and became the person I am today is nothing short of amazing, and I have to attribute it to people like Shelly. People who led by example and demonstrated real love for others.

My experiences are part of what made me a great teacher, one that students sought out when they needed help, and it's what made me an even better writer.

As I'm typing this, my partner is beginning her transition from male to female, to become who she has always been internally. I have transgender friends whose relationships fell apart when they decided to live their truths. It doesn't always happen that way, but it can. For me, the exterior wrapper changing means nothing as she's still the person I married and the woman I love.

I don't think I would have been ready for a relationship like this without all the people before her. My ability to love and be loved comes from the understanding that everyone is worthy of love and that no one is deserving of hate<sup>31</sup>.

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31. Except Nazis.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Multi-international award-winning speculative fiction author and artist Raven Oak (she/they) is best known for *Amaskan's Blood* (2016 Ozma Fantasy Award Winner, Epic Awards Finalist, & Reader's Choice Award Winner), *Amaskan's War* (2018 UK Wishing Award YA Finalist), and *Class-M Exile*. She also has over a dozen short stories published in anthologies and magazines. She's even published on the moon! (No, really!) Raven spent most of her K-12 education doodling stories and 500-page monstrosities that are forever locked away in a filing cabinet.

Besides being a writer and artist, she's a geeky, disabled ENBY who enjoys getting her game on with tabletop games, indulging in cartography and art, or staring at the ocean. She lives in the Seattle area with her wife, and their three kitties who enjoy lounging across the keyboard when writing deadlines approach. Her hair color changes as often as her bio does, and you can find her at [www.ravenoak.net](http://www.ravenoak.net).



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### Anthologies

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"Not Today" in *99 Fleeting Fantasies* (Pulse Publishing)

"Drip" in *99 Tiny Terrors* (Pulse Publishing)

- "Weightless" in *The Great Beyond Anthology* (BDL Press)
- "Scout's Honor" in *The Last Cities of Earth* (Sturgeon Press)
- "Amaskan" in *Hidden Magic* (Magical Mayhem Press)
- "Pretty Poison" in *Wayward Magic* (Magical Mayhem Press)
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- "Alive" in *Swords, Sorcery, & Self-Rescuing Damsels* (Clockwork Dragon Press)
- "Mirror Me" (1ST EDITION) in *Unveiled Magic* (Creative Alchemy Inc.).  
(2ND EDITION) in *Mercedes Lackey Fantasy Quarterly Magazine, Issue 0*  
(Pulse Publishing)
- "Ol' St. Nick" and "The Ringers" (1ST EDITION) in *Joy to the Worlds:  
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\* Forthcoming

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