



## Q&A WITH AUTHOR SUSANN COKAL



### ✧ *What was your primary inspiration for **The Kingdom of Little Wounds**?*

One morning I woke with a line in my head: “All the children in the royal nursery were sick.” I don’t know exactly where that sentence came from, and I wasn’t sure what was making them sick, but the words meant a lot to me. For a long time, this was the first line of the novel, as I thought about the vulnerability not only of the children, but also of their parents and the entire kingdom.

I was sick a lot as a child, and so was my sister. We had trouble with our lungs. One of our family legends is that our mother saved my sister’s life one night. Kristine had pneumonia and Mum took her into the bathroom, running hot water to keep her lungs working, whacking her on the back to make her cough, and feeding her medicine. So Queen Isabel came to me early on as a mother with the best intentions, but one who, given the medical practices of the era, might not be doing the best for her children. The other characters followed naturally. One day I started feeling I was Ava, a girl disgraced but pushing forward to make a new life. Her frenemy, Midi Sorte, came later as someone with whom she had to have tension—romantic tension, professional tension, and competition for any sort of favor in a world of limited good.

To me, the story is about three outcast women who have to find a way to negotiate the restrictions of a patriarchal society and also of their own conflicting desires and images of themselves. Can you tell I was terrifically unpopular in high school?

### ✧ ***Skyggehavn is an imaginary Scandinavian kingdom supposedly built by witches and mermaids, visited in this story in 1572. How did you begin to envision this land, and what was the process of creating it like?***

I love watery places and the way the light shines on waves and wakes. I also love the shadows cast between old European buildings sandwiched together. Skyggehavn is one of the places where I’d most like to live, though perhaps without as many “filths” as were part of life in the Renaissance, a time of glittering and gilded glory as well as of unspeakable misery.

I have a special connection to Denmark. My mother (who was named after a Danish literary mermaid) was born in Copenhagen, and almost all of my remaining family lives there. Some of my happiest memories are of Denmark and of a city surrounded by water with gorgeous tall castles, green copper roofs, and canals. A watery kingdom! I’ve gone back to Denmark almost every year to soak up the centuries of culture. One vivid memory is of *Sankt Hans Aften*, a midsummer ritual in which a small boat is set on fire and pushed out onto the sea, a callback to the practice of burning witches out of Denmark. For the novel, I decided to put the witches in Norway and send them drifting northward, to a place where the mermaids might have caught their rudders and guided them to habitable earth. Or so the residents of Skyggehavn believe. I love a good fairy tale.

I also went to Venice twice when I was researching this book. I took a gondola ride at night and asked to go down the small, dark canals to imagine how people might have experienced such a city in the 1500s. Pure inspiration. It’s a miracle to me that we still have remnants of history and the “otherworldly” in the world we all know.



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✧ *This book examines the roles of women, from royals like Princess Sophia and Queen Isabel to servants like Ava Bingen and Midi Sorte. Can you tell us more about the situations they are placed in and the choices they have?*

Here's one of the main foci of the story that I sorted out with help from a complex chart and a lot of gut instinct. The royals came to my mind first, but Isabel wouldn't make the right central character for the story I wanted to tell; she's a bit insane, but if she exerted herself, she could wield more power than I wanted my main characters to have. Thus, along came Ava and Midi. Ava is from a fairly well-to-do family but has been disgraced by an unplanned pregnancy and a public miscarriage. She's vulnerable because she's unmarried and has to use her talent with the needle to get a position in the Queen's household. Midi is the ultimate outcast—a slave captured and brought to this northern kingdom, where she has been abused until she has no sense of personal power at all.

So there are three women—three geeky girls, as it were—who are imprisoned because of life circumstances, manipulated by men, all either ignorant or jealous of one another, and they have to get together to save themselves and their country. All the more difficult because Ava can speak but can't write, Midi can write but can't speak, and Isabel doesn't always understand what anyone writes or says to her.

✧ *What other themes are prevalent in **The Kingdom of Little Wounds**?*

Other than female empowerment and learning to be strategic within your own limitations, I wanted to address power in general. King Christian, for example, is one of my favorite characters. He may seem cruel to his suspected enemies, but he is tormented by a shameful secret and by a physical ailment so painful it might prevent him from wielding wisely the power he does have.

There's also the theme of true love and whether we should be allowed to speak and act on it. There's always some obstacle, but I'd like to think the answer might be simple.

A third major theme is belief. What are we willing to believe about the stories of our own lives? Was Skyggehavn really founded by witches and mermaids? Could such chemicals as mercury and guaiac really cure the mysterious plague in the royal nursery? Did my mother save my sister's life all those years ago? And how far can we believe in our own ability to take charge of our lives and overcome impossible odds?

✧ *Who was the character you were most drawn to and why?*

I can't choose among my darlings. I think it's easiest to feel connected to Midi's story because she has undergone horrible tortures. But Ava is perhaps the character to whom I have the deepest connection, as she is the one who's most like me—a me who'd be in a dangerous situation, trying to be a good girl despite a bad past, longing for both romantic and family loves that have vanished, hoping for a happy but ultimately ordinary love. And I confess I loved writing about the villains, Lord Nicolas and Countess Elinor. They are so awful.



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✧ *This is your first novel for young adults. What has the experience of writing for teens been like?*

I didn't really think I was writing for teens! I was telling a story I wanted to read. It just happened to involve a couple of teenagers, as teenagers—especially girls—are at a vulnerable stage and a point in which they're figuring out what powers they might have. I'm thrilled to see it published for teens because the books I read as a teenager are the ones I return to most often when I want to be inspired or to reread something I know will be good. It's one of the most exciting fields now, with writers like Gigi Amateau, Meg Medina, Carolyn Mackler, M. T. Anderson, and more.

✧ *Is there anything else you would like readers to know about **The Kingdom of Little Wounds**?*

At the risk of making myself too vulnerable, I'll say I've poured my entire soul into this story and its characters and city. This book means the world to me, and I hope it connects with readers in some way.

Also, fairy tales—the sort of fairy tales that don't always end in “happily ever after”—pop up regularly in the book. Always in the back of my brain were the Grimm versions, in which terrible things happen after the wedding, the mother-in-law eats the children, and so on. Fairy tales help establish the world of magical belief despite there being no verifiable magic in the story itself. They complicate the idea of the happy ending—though I think this story ends as happily as it can.

Oddly enough, as I was working on this novel, I finally fell in love myself. I found a real keeper, the perfect guy who is always patient, funny, and smart, takes care of me when I'm sick, and talks with me about story ideas for hours. So fairy tales can end happily!

✧ *What is your favorite line from the book, if you had to pick one?*

I can't! I just can't! My favorite line might be the one that inspired the story but doesn't appear in it: “All the children in the royal nursery were sick.”

I'll confess that sometimes I wander around the house or the university where I work, reciting lines I particularly like. Does that make me a narcissist? Remember, I was the least popular person in my high school, so perhaps I have a right to some self-congratulation now. Mostly, I'm grateful to the gods of writing for giving me some words I love.



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