



Shock Waves

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Growing up in the Philadelphia suburbs, Alice Sebold was haunted by news stories about murdered girls. “I would ask my mom, ‘Who are these girls? What’s their story?’ My mom never really had an answer,” says Sebold, noting that in those days “their story wasn’t in the newspaper; it was always the story of the murderer. The girls seemed almost disposable.”

In her debut novel, *The Lovely Bones*, Sebold, 39, sets about imagining the tale of one of those victims. Narrated from heaven by a raped and murdered 14-year-old, Susie Salmon, the book recounts in harrowing detail the crime that took her life and the lives changed by her death. Despite its grim topic, the novel has landed high on the bestseller lists and wowed critics; novelist Anna Quindlen went so far as to pronounce it “a classic in the vein of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.” Sebold—”who was thinking maybe five people would read her book,” says her husband, writer Glen David Gold—enjoys the acclaim, but she is most pleased by what she hears from readers. “People are finding it a healing book,” she says. “One man [who had lost a loved one] said he felt it was a permission slip for grief.”

If *The Lovely Bones* can heal, one of its beneficiaries may be its author, who, as a freshman at Syracuse University in 1981, was brutally raped one night in a tunnel near campus. Sebold’s attacker may have spared her life because “I made him think I would be too ashamed to tell anyone.” A few months later she spotted her rapist and called the police. She testified at his trial, where he was

sentenced to 8 1/3-25 years; he has since been released. “When you’ve really been violated,” she says, “the truth is your friend. You keep repeating it and hope someone hears you.”

Which doesn’t mean that Sebold—one of two daughters of Jane, 70, a retired columnist for a suburban Philadelphia newspaper, and Russell, 74, a former Spanish professor—modeled Susie Salmon’s story on her own. She told her tale in *Lucky*, a memoir published three years ago, which recounts her long road back from the rape, punctuated by several rounds of psychotherapy. She also abused drugs and alcohol. “I did anything I could to distract myself from the rape,” she says.

In 1995 Sebold headed west to earn a graduate degree in writing at the University of California at Irvine and met fellow student Gold (author of last year’s bestselling novel *Carter Beats the Devil*). They were a couple within a month. “She could tell me about the rape and I didn’t flinch,” says Gold, 38. “And I could tell her about my stuff.” Says Sebold: “He had a compelling backstory.” (He came from a broken home.) The pair wed last November and now share a Spanish-style house in Long Beach. “I loved Glen really fast,” Sebold says. “If he’s out of town, I’ll go, ‘What’s different? Oh, I’m not laughing as much.’”

After this summer’s highly publicized rash of abductions of young girls, Sebold hopes her book may help their families, as well as teach the rest of us how to understand and comfort them. “Though it can be difficult to have all that media,” she reflects, “I also think it’s less alienating, because people are at least listening to their stories. It’s validating their experiences. So I’m hopeful for the families...and, of course, devastated for the girls.”

Karen Brailsford in Long Beach