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## Haunted by Words

Once she began to write again, a Norfolk woman produced a novel challenging the myth of blissful new motherhood.

Janine Latus

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Todd Wright



**The neon fliers stalked her**, fluttering on tables in coffee shops and restaurants, tapping on the glass from store windows, always there with the words “The Muse Writers Center” tugging on her, reminding her of what she was at her core.

Kelly Sokol had heard of the center’s teachers – the state’s poet laureate, an Oprah’s Book Club author, a *New York Times* best-selling memoirist, the passel of travel writers and journalists and poets who guided, coached and workshoped the words of area writers. But she was a mother, with a job and a household and relentless hurdles between herself and putting pen to paper.

I was one of those teachers, holding the door open and saying, “Your words are welcome here.” Because that’s what The Muse does. It accepts the polished and the wannabes, people who know to their bones that they’re writers and those who were told in sixth or eighth grade that their poems and stories were terrible, that they should give up.

I was there when Sokol took her first class, and when she stepped to the mic the first time to read her words aloud her voice quavered, because standing up and being vulnerable terrifies her – far more than climbing mountains or skiing the back country, which she does without fear.

We didn’t know that one day she would speak before roomfuls of strangers about her debut novel, *The Unprotected*, published in April by Skyhorse Books – a novel that takes readers inside the swirling despair of postpartum depression.

It’s not autobiographical. But in its determination to achieve a goal it is, in a sense, about Sokol.

**As a child Sokol** wrote constantly, she says. “Terrible plays, clunky couplet poetry and melodramatic stories with thinly veiled family members and friends.”

It was her getaway, her fun, her play as her family moved from Omaha to Massachusetts, to New York and Connecticut, to New Jersey and Nebraska, then back to New York again. But then her brother, DJ, died of Hodgkin’s lymphoma at the age of 18, and writing for fun stopped.

“DJ was wise and wry and hilarious before he got sick,” she says. “It’s one of those moments that establishes the ‘before’ and the ‘after.’ ”

Instead she went to Wake Forest University and double-majored in political science and English, convinced that such a career path would be more responsible and bankable than the creative writing major with the French minor she probably would have leapt after. “It’s laughable to think of that now because I was still unemployable leaving college,” she says.

She took jobs in public relations, not recognizing that she was still writing, still inhabiting the voices of other people, still listening for the pauses, the idioms, the phrasings that allowed her words on the page to come out of the mouth of a Midwestern politician here, a corporate bigwig there.

“It was the greatest fictional training,” she says, “learning to write in other people’s voices.”

She landed a job with Norfolk Southern and traveled constantly, still afraid to indulge in something as frivolous as fiction. But the haunting didn’t stop. So she signed up for an online writing class, and wrote in airports and hotel rooms, submitting her work to strangers for their critique.

“I wrote awful things, pages and pages that had maybe a salvageable sentence or two,” she says. “But at least I was flexing that muscle again.”

Those neon papers, those reminders from The Muse, those fluttering siren calls, continued. But Sokol also realized that she was lying to her two daughters.

“I’d say, ‘Yes, you need to follow your dreams and not take no for an answer,’ and I realized I wasn’t doing it,” she says. “I was neglecting the part of myself that helped me make sense of the world. So the next time I saw those neon fliers I picked one up.”

The first round she took two classes. The second two more, one of them mine. They were gateway drugs and she escalated, more classes, more writing. She pounded out a novel, got it critiqued, sealed it in a box that remains under her desk. Four years after that first class – the support of her fellow Muse students at her back – she took the risk and applied for an MFA program. She had class the day she opened the rejection letter. “They hugged me and buoyed me. ‘That’s just one, and we’re all going to be angry if you don’t try again,’ they said. ‘How can you make this portfolio better? You need to keep working.’ ”

When Goddard College accepted her into its MFA program in 2012, it was her Muse writing group she called to celebrate.

“I had so many people at pivotal moments when it would have been easier to go back to a more normal day job who said, ‘Don’t; we care that you continue,’ ” she says, “and that was enough to keep me going.”



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Show up at the page, write, rewrite, and rewrite again. Sokol is moving on to her second novel – and the Muse student has become one of the Muse teachers.

**Now Sokol, 38**, does a lot of standing in front of microphones and cameras, talking about *The Unprotected* and its hero, Lara James, a woman who can have it all, do it all, be it all, her hair and nails and Jimmy Choo stilettos perfect, her drive relentless. For career success, for a husband, for a baby, to be the perfect mother and thus the complete woman.

James is an advertising executive who reveres image above all. She disdains the mommy look of spit-up stains and disheveled hair. She does not want a baby. Those are for normal people with their burp rags and their Baby Bjorns, their strollers and diaper bags and incessant exhaustion.

Then James' father dies and she chases down motherhood the way she pursued her education, her career and every other accomplishment she has checked off her lists.

Her body, though, says no. Thus begins the churning turbulence of fertility drugs and pregnancy hormones, of shots and bruises, of waiting rooms and quasi-empathetic doctors and scheduled sex that drains all magic from her marriage. When she finally gets pregnant, James is filled with joy and pride. She's going to be a mother! Her life will be complete!

Except it isn't. Instead she plummets into postpartum despair.

*The Unprotected* is fiction but it discusses a real problem. At least 1.3 million women (about 20,000 of them in Virginia alone) experience perinatal mood or anxiety disorder each year, yet only a fraction will be diagnosed or receive help.

That's more people than are diagnosed with diabetes, stroke and breast cancer combined, and Sokol is spot-on in depicting its reality, says Adrienne Griffen, founder and executive director of Postpartum Support Virginia, a group that Sokol aided with a book talk.

"The way she captures the emotion is amazing," she says. "It's absolutely authentic."



So much so that when Sokol steps off stage after discussing her book, women come up and whisper, *I thought I was the only person who ever had those thoughts, and I never said that out loud before.*

"What this says to me is that the picture we peddle of the year after birth

being the most satisfying and completing and blissful time of a woman's life, while that may be true for plenty of people, we're selling a dangerous expectation," Sokol says. "So many women keep coming to me and saying that they felt like they had failed from the beginning because it hadn't lived up to the image we put out there of early motherhood, so what a difficult way to start a lifelong relationship, that 'I've



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The main character in "The Unprotected" is a woman who at times is hard to like, and whose emotions and struggles have led women to tell the author: I thought I was the only person who ever had those thoughts ...

failed because I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel.”

Sokol particularly wanted to show that postpartum depression doesn't

discriminate by demographics. It doesn't just hit women who are poor or young or unprepared for parenthood. It hits women who want their babies desperately, too.

Griffen is thrilled that the book is opening up the conversation. We talk about mental illness too rarely, she says, and postpartum depression even less.

“Early motherhood is supposed to be the happiest time in a woman's life,” she says, “especially if you've gone through what Lara has in that you wanted to have a baby, you spent a lot of time and effort and money getting that baby, and then you're like, ‘What the hell happened to me?’”

### **The book is not memoir.**

“We could go down a dossier of things I don't have in common with Lara, but I don't know how helpful that is,” Sokol says. “I'm excited if Lara and her struggles can bring a voice and shine a light into these dark corners that for some reason we are societally uncomfortable talking about, but it's fiction, and when we do it well and we honor the form, we're telling a lie that accesses a truth.”

It's a story Sokol couldn't resist writing.

“Lara was the first character to keep me up at night,” she says. “I worried about her, wondered how far she would go and if she could survive the life she'd built for herself.”

The protagonist is not entirely likeable, which is deliberate.

“She was as maddening to write as I'm sure she can be on the page,” Sokol says. “She was so flawed, could be so nasty. She was very human in her judgments and weaknesses and sadness and her drive. I just wanted to get her right.”

Apparently she did, because in its review *Publishers Weekly* wrote, “[An] engrossing debut. ... Motherhood is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, and Sokol's streamlined prose takes an unflinching look at an illness that is still treated as taboo.”

An anonymous online reviewer put it better. “It's all the things nobody tells you about how motherhood doesn't just change your life, but steals it, ripping it inside out and backwards; spitting back a reality that is so far from your naive, romanticized thoughts of your exact life with the, small, addition of a sweet little baby.”

To get Lara right took discipline. It took showing up at the desk day after day. In the beginning it took Sokol's Muse group insisting she turn in a dozen pages every two weeks. And as with getting in shape, writing became a habit and she began to crave it.

She tucked it between mothering and coaching soccer, between ski trips

to the Wyoming mountains and serving on the board of directors of ForKids. She had stories published in *The Manifest-Station*, *Connotation Press* and *The Quotable*. One of her essays got nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

The Goddard program required her to complete a manuscript, and some of what she wrote then appears in *The Unprotected*. It was hard, but she listened to the wisdom of her adviser, John McManus, who also directs the creative writing program at ODU; he told her to lock the draft away and ignore it for six months, to work on something new so that she could return to it with fresh eyes. She made it four months before she dug back in.

After what she jokingly refers to as her 27th draft, she asked around for agents, ultimately signing with Michelle Johnson, a former Muse student who founded Inklings Literary Agency.

“The book was compelling and gut clenching and horrible in the way you want a book to be horrible,” Johnson says. “You're just watching this train wreck of this woman as she gets what she wants and then falls apart. It's the kind of book you finish and you can't read another for another week because you've been so altered.”

Sokol was walking out of her daughter's third-grade Halloween party when she got the news that Johnson wanted to represent her, jack-'o-lantern apples whose marshmallow teeth were stuck to them with Nutella sliding all over the tray as she tried to answer the phone. The news made her squeal in the hallway.

McManus, Sokol's former adviser, couldn't be more proud. "I say that, but that would make it sound like I had anything to do with it," he says. "I just sat back and watched. I remember being really impressed by her access to the protagonist's subjective point of view; she had a way of making me feel that character's feelings as much as hearing her thoughts. There was a palpable sense of how stifled and desperate that character felt."

Sokol is traveling to speak at bookstores and at events meant to bring attention to postpartum depression, looking out into audiences and reminding herself not to clutch her hands or cross and uncross her legs, not to look at the ceiling but instead to make eye contact. But she also shows up at her desk, talking with new characters as she crafts her next novel, this one about a military wife who is trying to hold everything together as her husband adapts to civilian life. And she has returned the love, teaching at The Muse and serving on its board of directors. As part of a fundraiser for The Muse's new location on Norfolk's Colonial Avenue she contributed the money to dedicate a classroom that bears the name of her beloved brother. It is where she now teaches another round of writers.

"When you teach you get to see people light up when they hear that what they're doing has worth and that they need to keep putting their words in the world," she says.

It's the same lesson The Muse taught her.

"I've never seen an art and writing community anywhere else that is like what we have in Hampton Roads," she says. "There are so many working and succeeding and thriving and supportive writers in this community, it's just astounding."

Sokol is one of them.

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Janine Latus is a former Muse teacher and the author of the New York Times best-seller "If I Am Missing or Dead." She wrote a blurb for the cover of "The Unprotected."



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