

Interview with Melissa Studdard, author of *Six Weeks to Yehidah*

by Aparna Mukhedkar

Six Weeks to Yehidah, by Melissa Studdard, weaves a spellbinding tale that is rich with imagistic prose and glittering landscapes. Journeying through the eyes of the ten-year-old Annalise, the reader travels through the clouds to magical lands and down into the mythical shimmering underwater city, meeting, along the way, a slew of compelling and relatable characters that are, by turns, charming, effervescent, frustrating, and delightfully annoying. Melissa Studdard intersperses elements of music, magic, myth, Native American iconography, and mystery that leave the reader yearning for a sequel. Although, this is a children's book, like *Harry Potter*, adults will be just as mesmerized by the trials and travails of the cheeky and courageous Annalise.

An author, editor, talk show host, professor, and mother, Melissa Studdard makes juggling so many things at once look easy. She holds two masters degrees, one of them an MFA in Creative Writing from the acclaimed Sarah Lawrence College in New York. She has taught at several colleges, including Hunter College, John Jay College, Baruch College, and San Jose State, and she has a thick portfolio of published short stories and poems that encompass diverse subjects. *Six Weeks to Yehidah* is her first foray into the challenging world of children's literature.

In addition to her many literary interests, she practices yoga and loves travelling. Last week, she sat down for an in-depth interview in which she spoke about the inspiration behind the book. She shared invaluable insights into the spiritual background that helped give birth to the plethora of fascinating characters in *Six Weeks to Yehidah*. She reminds you of a Greek goddess with her statuesque, graceful presence, yet despite her accomplishments and appearance, she is modest, kind, and generous, and she offers hopeful yet honest tips to aspiring writers.

She currently teaches creative writing at Lone Star College-Tomball in Texas, where she lives with her teenage daughter and a bevy of cats.

1. *Six Weeks to Yehidah* is your first book. How did the concept for it come about?

I was in a wonderful critique and writing group in which we took turns assigning prompts each month. One woman asked us to read *The Oxford Book of Modern Fairy Tales* and write our own short tale. It turned out that I was so compelled by the voice and characters I'd created that I kept writing and writing until I realized I was no longer working on a short story. I was writing a novel.

2. Tell us about Annalise. Is she someone you know?

Annalise is largely archetypal – the wholesome *Everygirl* next door – and, in that sense, she's a fusion of the traits of many people. Some of her more unique characteristics, the ones that aren't universal, like

her musical and linguistic talents, and her precociousness, are based, very loosely, on my daughter. In the first chapter, I actually even have Annalise recite a poem my daughter wrote when she was Annalise's age, or even a little younger. I was advised at one point by a literary agent to take it out of the book because it was so complex that no one would believe a ten-year-old had written it. But Annalise is not just my daughter. She's me, too. And she's that part of every little girl that shimmers with wonder, goodness, curiosity, and delight.

3. The book is so rich with imagery – the musical instruments growing like plants, the talking sheep, Mabel and Mimi, the elaborate labyrinth, the shimmering city beneath the sea, and so much more. I'm curious about the process that went into creating these highly imagistic scenes.

Would you believe I dreamed them? Not all of them, but a goodly portion. For a long time, I've been fascinated by the mechanisms of the unconscious mind, and in the years preceding the composition of *Six Weeks to Yehidah* I'd done an intensive study of dreams, meditation, visualization, and so forth. I kept a dream journal and meditated regularly. I listened to guided meditations, which are rich with imagery. In the end, it was a combination of dreaming and waking imagination that birthed the scenes in this book. It was also a combination of the made-up and the observed, and by observed, I mean both in the physical world and in books. When I sat down to write, it all just flowed very naturally.

I hear that most writers find it easier to compose realism. For me, it's easier to produce the fantastical - making things up is fun, exciting, natural to me, whereas trying to accurately record reality is a great challenge. My imagination is much stronger than my memory!

4. It's wonderful that the book is so full of music and songs, especially the part where Annalise is able to use her talents to successfully coordinate a group of discordant musicians. How did you conceptualize that?

There were a few important factors. One was that I was suffering when I wrote that scene. My personal life was a disaster, and I've never been one to write when I'm depressed, but I was on a very strict schedule with a friend to exchange a chapter every month, absolutely no excuses accepted. The book is nineteen chapters, and I wrote it in nineteen months. I got married, went on a honeymoon, got divorced, worked full time, moved twice, lost a grandparent, all while this book was being written, and I gave my friend a chapter a month no matter what, and she did the same with her book. I learned that I could write through anything. Somehow, having to write through that suffering worked a strange alchemy, transforming my own pathos into Annalise's lyricism and transcendence on the page. Honestly, and this is no exaggeration, I feel sometimes like writing that scene saved my life.

Another important factor is that I was reading *The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle, when I composed that particular chapter. I remember looking at pages of *The Power of Now* and seeing parallels between what I'd just written in *Six Weeks to Yehidah*, and what I was reading in Tolle; then I would write in response to what I'd just read. I couldn't believe the connections. Between what I was reading and what I was living, I knew the chapter had to be about letting go of resistance. After that, my biggest challenge was solving the problem of how to play that out with the musicians. I was looking at a premature, mini-denouement in the fourth of nineteen chapters. That seemed a little strange to me. It was a structure I

couldn't remember a precedent for, but I decided the only thing to do was to embrace it, so I acknowledged it directly through Mabel's and Mimi's comments.

It's also important that I'm not personally musically gifted. In some ways, Annalise is who I wish I could be, and that's an aspect of the conceptualization too. When I was in 6th grade, my school collected all of the students and had us try out for choir, and I was one of only three kids who didn't make it. The great thing about writing is that now I get to be whatever I want. I can be a singer through Annalise. She can be my voice. That's a great thing about reading too. We can all be a part of Annalise's musical vision.

5. I must admit, Hagski is one of my favorite characters in the book. Tell us about how you created her.

Hagski leapt onto the page fully formed, like Athena in her armor. It surprised me at first because Hagski's such a nut-job. I mean, where did she come from? Do you know what I mean? I had that crazy woman living inside my head! But then I quickly fell in love with her. Everyone does. I notice that you're almost apologetic when you say she's one of your favorite characters, but she is, in fact, most people's very favorite, even over Annalise. And, of course, I realized almost immediately that Hagski would become an important part of the book and that she was absolutely integral to the conflict, but it was slow to dawn on me, through the writing process itself, what she actually represented.

6. There's strong Native American symbolism in the book. How did you research that? How long did it take?

I didn't actually research that information for the book. I've been going to retreats and seminars in Taos, New Mexico for years now, and I've fallen in love with the pueblo, the town and its history, the grand, improbable love story of Mabel Dodge Luhan and Tony Luhan. I feel such a spiritual tug towards that place, such a longing – I can practically smell the sage and piñon as I answer this. Anyway, I learned by simply listening to people when I was in Taos, and from reading books by and about Mabel Dodge Luhan. I also learned from surfing the internet for history about the pueblo. So, it was the best kind of research – not performed as a means to an end – but , undertaken, instead, out of a blazing, passionate desire to learn more about a subject for no other reason than because I was in love with it.

7. There's a spiritual undercurrent that runs throughout the storyline without becoming moralistic or religious. I notice this especially in regards to the tasks that Annalise is assigned and the choices she has to make in order to right things. How were you able to arrive at those conclusions? I thought that was impressive.

Thank you for asking this question. I hoped to encourage certain life choices without being didactic, so it's good to know that from your perspective I pulled that off. In many ways, *Six Weeks to Yehidah* is about tolerance and acceptance of ourselves and others. Even when Annalise is given the biggest choice of all, it's made clear to her that although her decision will have consequences, she will not be judged for her decision. To me, judgment is an implicit part of moralizing, as is the assumption that there is always a right and a wrong. *Six Weeks to Yehidah* is not about right and wrong in the traditional sense,

though those words are certainly used at times. It's about learning, expanding, growing, evolving, and doing so consciously. Therefore, it cannot be about moralizing and is even antithetical to moralizing.

Even when Annalise is tested, it's to see if she's ready for something, not to judge her worth. The question in the book is not whether Annalise, or humanity overall, will make the right choices. The question is about when we will make the choices that move us forward. And part of the answer is when we stop judging ourselves and each other. When Annalise judges herself or is judged by Hagski, it's a temporary obstacle to her physical journey and her personal growth. It's like a layover in her development until she gets beyond it. So the idea is that when we make unfortunate choices, it's not because we're bad or wrong. It's because we're at an early stage of the trial and error process that will eventually lead us to better choices. When Annalise listens to Hagski, for instance, that's a not a choice that's beneficial to her journey, but over time, she learns that Hagski doesn't have anything relevant to say.

It was also important to me to share certain wisdom traditions with children, and I absolutely knew that the best way to do this was through narrative. I wanted to share philosophies and ideas in a way that would be fun and exciting for the kids who read the book. We all know how gruesome canonical fairy tales can be, and, of course, these tales are based on an older model of human thought and behavior. They come from a time when we were operating on a lower rung of Maslow's hierarchy. I feel like we need new stories that more accurately reflect who we are becoming, and which give us something to aspire to. The subconscious mind is a powerful thing, and the stories we tell our children are an important facet of who they will become.

I'm not saying that everything should be all about light and fairies and sunshine, and I'm not suggesting that these new stories should replace the older ones. I write some very gritty stuff myself. What I am suggesting is that *some* of our new writing should exist alongside the older writing in a way that shows how our thoughts and lives are evolving on a generational scale – that our evolution as human beings should at some level be reflected in our literature. I'm also suggesting that some of these stories can provide models for personal growth. I do believe in art for art's sake, not that the purpose of literature is to merely instruct, but *one* of the functions often is to instruct, like it or not, and if we are not cognizant of the fact that children are learning behaviors from the stories we tell them, then we are missing valuable opportunities. Stories are so much more relevant than people realize and are often as much a part of the fabric of who we become as are our literal experiences.

8. What elements of your own spiritual beliefs or practices were you able to incorporate into the story?

Let me just start by saying that rather than being of a particular religious tradition, I'm interested in interfaith studies, as well as the mystical aspects of all traditions. *Six Weeks to Yehidah* is quite mystical overall, as are many of the beliefs and practices within it. The book also works to show the connections between different religions and traditions and to demonstrate that we are no longer served by the aspects of religion that separate us. Instead we should be focusing on the teachings that bring us together and also on the universalities that exist in all religions, such as The Golden Rule.

One of my beliefs, exemplified by the very structure of the *Six Weeks* narrative itself, is that life is a learning ground, and those of us who live best are the ones who learn best. Annalise is a great example of this, evolving and learning chapter by chapter. As is implied by Annalise's situation, I believe that we are responsible, to some degree, for our own evolution through this process and that we should make choices that reflect that responsibility. We should take part in choosing our life paths, rather than letting life be something that happens to us.

I also believe that we all have a deep core, a godself that is both ourselves and, at the same time, something more than our individual selves. It's not just within us; it's part of the vast expanse of being, too. Some traditions call it the unmanifest. Some call it the soul or spirit. Science calls it nonlocality. In *Six Weeks to Yehidah*, it's conceptualized a little more specifically, as a divine yehidah endowment. All of the answers we seek are there, and it's a place where we can shape our futures and discover the important roles that we are each meant to fulfill. Everyone's life can have deep meaning if they allow it, and everyone can find a way to connect to this meaning by slowing down and really paying attention.

You also asked about practices. One of the ways to connect to the godself and know ourselves better is to practice listening to our nighttime dreams, like Annalise does when she needs to solve a problem. We should also each practice some form of meditative activity daily, whether it's literally sitting in meditation, jogging, painting, praying, walking along the shore, or singing – it should be something that clears the workaday mind, connects us to the unconscious mind, and helps us to be present in our lives and not just stumbling through the days. Then, like Annalise, we can tap into the incredible power of the unconscious and conscious aspects of mind working together in harmony.

Through Hagski, we also see that the energy we project has a far greater impact on others than we've so far been willing to take responsibility for and that we should be more cognizant of this. Hagski shows us, additionally, that we're often our own worst enemies, and that we need to pay attention to how we talk to ourselves in our own minds – because the experience we draw to ourselves often mirrors our own inner states. I'm not saying that we're responsible for the bad things that others do to us, but I am saying that just as Annalise is able to draw the musicians into quiet by quieting her own thoughts, we can change life patterns and situations by changing ourselves.

I believe, as well, that all of life is interconnected, and we should behave accordingly. *Six Weeks to Yehidah* is filled with interconnected webs, threads, passageways, stairways, walkways, elevators, paths, tunnels, portals, trails, and other symbolic and literal connectors that act together as a motif to reflect this point. The practices associated with this concept are acted out by characters such as Bob, Tony, and Kána, who model love, kindness, respect, understanding, and tolerance of ourselves and others.

In addition to these larger concepts, there are also many, many more specific and smaller concepts present in the book that are very important to me, ideas about things such as how to behave around the dying or the importance of humor to spirituality.

9. What spiritual masters were you influenced by while writing the book? Why?

This is a very complicated question because an entire lifetime of reading and study are embodied in this book. Some influences could be there at such a subtle level that I may not even be aware of them. That said, the influences that were at the forefront of my mind were the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament; the teachings of Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama; and the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh the Buddhist monk who was nominated for the Nobel Peace prize by Martin Luther King, Jr. All of them teach love, and that's what *Six Weeks to Yehidah* is ultimately about.

There are more influences, of course, and it occurs to me that some of the people I'm about to mention would loudly object to being called spiritual masters, so I'm going to just say that what follows is a list of people, movements, books, and organizations whose theories, spiritual guidance, or modeling impacted *Six Weeks to Yehidah*.

Among them were two magazines: Andrew Cohen's evolutionary enlightenment journal, *EnlightenNext*, and Donna Baier Stein's spiritual literary journal, *Tiferet*, for which I am now an editor. In *Tiferet*, for instance, there was a wonderful essay by Rabbi Lenore Bohm about labyrinths, which, of course, informed the creation of Annalise's labyrinth.

Some authors and books that influenced *Six Weeks to Yehidah* were The Old Testament, The New Testament, The Bhagavad Gītā, Wesselman and Kuykendall's *Spirit Medicine*, The Tao, Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Kenneth Wilbur's *A Brief History of Everything*, Gina Cerminera's *Many Mansions*, The Jātakas, Thyme and Orion's *The Lemurian Way*, Christopher Hansard's *The Tibetan Art of Living*, Viktor Fankl's *Man's Search for Meaning, A Course in Miracles*; and in a more general sense Julian of Norwich, Socrates/Plato, William James, St. Thomas Aquinas, Natalie Goldberg, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Huston Smith, Deepak Chopra; Thomas Moore, Eckhart Tolle, Robert Monroe, Rūmī, Carl Jung, Hildegard of Bingen, and Joseph Campbell. I also read extensively about meditation, world religions, mysticism, Edgar Cayce, the ancient cities of Atlantis and Mu, physics, biology, psychology, lucid dreaming, NDEs, consciousness, and so forth. But again, as with the "research" about pueblos, this reading was done purely out of interest and not in preparation for writing a book.

Some groups that influenced me were the Chung Tai Zen Center of Houston, The Houston Theosophical Society (particularly Fali Engineer), the Association for Research and Enlightenment, the Transcendentalists, and the Unitarians.

I also attended Natalie Goldberg and Jeffrey Davis's writing workshops in Taos, which were both very spiritual experiences and strong influences on my thinking.

I'm having a Whitman impulse here, wanting to list everything. I could go on for pages, but let me just stop here, knowing that it's inevitable that I've forgotten something or someone very important.

10. Let's talk about some of your favorite children's/young adult authors. Who are they, and why are they your favorites? How were they influential in the composition of *Six Weeks to Yehidah*?

Oh dear. Here I go with the lists again. Lewis Carroll and L. Frank Baum are huge favorites and obvious influences. I love their imagination, their imagery, the new worlds they create, their sense of wonder,

and the journey-based narratives. Norton Juster's *Phantom Tollbooth* is a favorite for humor and imagination, and for the journey, as well. Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* is a model for a young book-loving protagonist. Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* is a model for adventure and the journey, and Chris Van Allsburg's *Jumanji* is a model for the out-of-control animal scenes.

There were also some authors of adult literature that I felt were big influences on the book in one way or another, though those influences may only be apparent to me. These were Jonathan Swift, Elizabeth Cunningham, Homer, T.S. Eliot, Franz Kafka, Sophocles, Cervantes, Emily Dickinson, James Redfield, Dorothy Bryant, and Wu Cheng'en.

The film *What Dreams May Come* was also heavily on my mind as I wrote this book, as were the guided meditations of Melissa Rose.

11. What comes next? Is there a sequel in the offing?

The ending certainly allows for a sequel, or even a series, if interest is there. I didn't plan it that way, but people are starting to ask, and I'm not at all opposed to the idea. I'm working on some other projects right now – a literary short story collection and a collection of interviews I've conducted for *Tiferet Journal*, both of which will be released later in the year. Once those projects are completed, and *Six Weeks to Yehidah* has been out for awhile, I'll decide whether the next novel will be a sequel or something new.

12. What was one surprising thing you discovered about yourself while writing the book?

That I *can* write a book. This is a life-changing discovery. For years, I've been writing and publishing shorter works – poems, short stories, essays, book reviews, academic articles – but I'd never completed a book-length project before *Six Weeks to Yehidah*. I didn't think I had the time or the lifestyle for that kind of sustained attention to a single project. Now that I've done it, it seems strange to me that it felt so daunting before.

13. You are a children's writer, poet, fiction writer, professor, editor, talk show host, and mother. How do you manage all of these roles and find time for yourself?

I love to do all of those things, so when I'm doing them, that *is* my time for myself. For instance, the things I love most about teaching are being in the classroom and reading great literature. When I'm in the classroom, and I can see that the students are inspired by what we've read, and we're having this great discussion, that is my time for me within teaching. I feel the same way when I get to read a wonderful piece of literature. Sure, I'm preparing for class, but if I truly had free time, I'd want to spend it reading that literature anyway.

In regards to managing the roles, a few years ago I learned about this wonderful thing called asking for help when you need it. I'm able to do so many things because I have so many wonderful people – friends, family, colleagues, neighbors – helping me with almost everything I do. I'll even ask my daughter's friends to help with chores if they're hanging around a lot. I mean, why not? I'm feeding them, driving them everywhere, entertaining them. It's not going to kill them to set the table. In fact,

they like it because they know it creates time for me to take them for ice cream or to play a game with them after dinner.

I also meditate every day, and I think that's the key to everything. Meditation is one of those great activities, like exercise, that seems to somehow create more time than it takes.

14. As an author, what is your advice for up and coming writers who are inspired by what you have accomplished here and hope to also complete a novel someday?

Before we close, Aparna, I want to say that you ask great questions, and it's been a pleasure having this exchange with you. Thank you.

I think it would take a book to answer this question, but here are a few tips that have served me well.

You should always remember that you're the only person who can speak your truths, and you are worthy of being heard. Nail this reminder over your desk. Tattoo it to the top of your hand. Make it your screen saver. Do whatever you have to do to remember it every time you write.

Become a great and regular reader. It's unlikely that you will ever become a great writer without being a great reader.

Set a schedule that works for you. Be realistic so you don't give up. If you schedule writing twice a week for two hours a pop, so be it. The writing will accumulate over time. If it's eight hours a day, five days a week, even better. The important thing is to thoroughly incorporate writing into your lifestyle as fully as you would anything else that really mattered to you. Don't think of it as optional. If you had monthly appointments to take your child to a pediatrician, and you missed one, you would re-schedule it. Do the same with your writing. Try to never miss the appointments, and if you do, re-schedule them. The first time you tell someone you can't get together because you have a writing appointment, you'll realize how powerful this is. Soon you'll be scheduling doctor's appointments and other important events around your writing time. If you treat writing like a hobby, it will most likely only ever be a hobby. Instead treat it like what you want it to be.

--Be patient and keep after it and write without ridiculous expectations. Sometimes your writing won't be good, but you have to write through that to get to the good stuff. Quitting writing won't fix anything. Don't be wary of writing the bad stuff. Just laugh at it, think of it as practice, don't show it to anyone if you don't feel like it, and keep writing until the good stuff starts flowing again. Just do not stop writing. Do not stop writing. Do not, for any reason, ever, stop writing.