

## Q & A WITH SHANNON O'NEIL



**Q:** Where did you get the idea to write *I'll Be Home for Peacemas*?

**A:** *It started with a short story I wrote in 2000 for a holiday contest in my local paper (The St. Augustine Record). That story sort of set forth the very basic idea for this big family who gathers to celebrate the holidays in spite of a recent tragedy. When I decided to turn it into a full-length novel last fall, I started playing with the family tree and bending it and twisting it until I came up with what I felt was a slightly exaggerated version of today's modern family and their subsequent holiday traditions. Growing up in Florida, I never felt like I had a "traditional" Christmas so to speak, because of my location and because of my family. But we still had a great time, just being with each other and reveling in the traditions that make our holidays special. I wanted a novel that would convey that, as well as the power and redemption that can blossom from your family's unconditional love.*

**Q:** So is your family a lot like the Hamilton-Bailey-Flowers-Danforth-Lopez clan?

**A:** *I may have taken a few characteristics here and there from some of my relatives and sprinkled them in with some fictional attributes, but no one character nor the overall layout of Bailey's family is based on my own family. There is, however, a similarity in the overall philosophy of Bailey's family and mine. It's about love more than blood with us. I share DNA with some amazing people, but I've also got a few wonderful folks who I love like family members even if the genetic connection isn't there. I think Bailey feels the same way about her family.*

**Q:** While there is a lot of humor in this book, there's also a touch of sadness. Why did you decide to inject that hint of bittersweet taste? (*Warning: This answer contains a spoiler!*)

**A:** *In the early stages of developing the plot for this novel, I wrestled with that part of the story more than anything else. I desperately wanted to have Brandon, Bailey's twin brother, come swooping in to rescue Bailey on Christmas Eve and help her patch over her old wounds with her family. But unfortunately, the reality is that there a lot of families every year who don't get that kind of happy ending. They have to find a way to move forward in the face of tragedy and learn to live again. I wanted to show that even in the deepest sorrow, there is still a way to find solace and move on. I lost my grandmother not long before I began writing this book, and I found that being without her at Christmas was incredibly painful. My favorite memories with her were from the holidays. But like I try to show in the book, I truly feel that even those who have been physically separated from us can still be with us in a sense, especially when we need them the most.*

**Q:** What made you decide to become a writer?

**A:** *I fell in love with writing when I was eight years old, thanks mostly to my wonderful third grade teacher, Mrs. Baldauff. She really encouraged me to let my imagination bloom through creative writing*

*and I felt like an explorer discovering a new planet. She helped me find a world that I could make my own, and gave me the encouragement to believe that whatever I decided to build in that world would be beautiful. I had a lot of other great teachers along the way who also inspired me, but was really the one who got me started.*

**Q: Who are the other authors who have inspired you and your own writing styles?**

**A:** *There are so many! I'm an admirer of so many authors for so many different reasons. I love the characters Carl Hiaasen creates in all of his novels--they are so colorful and lively that it's not easy to imagine them wandering amongst the rest of us. I love the beautiful language Anita Shreve uses to conjure the scenes in her novels, she's like a painter wielding a delicate brush, it's incredible. I love the way Pat Conroy and Joshilyn Jackson infuse my favorite parts of Southern culture with humor. I love the John Irving's satirical wit and well-crafted plots, Chris Bohjalian's non-judgmental perspective on tough issues and Nick Hornby's beautifully flawed (but lovable) characters. Those are just a few, there are so many more! Come pour over my bookshelves sometime and you'll get a better idea!*

**Q: So what's next for Bailey?**

**A:** *As of right now, I am in the middle of what began as a short story and evolved into something of a novella about another Christmas with the Hamilton-Flowers-Danforth-Lopez family. I'll tease you with just this—Bailey and Memphis go on a semi-romantic cruise over the Christmas holiday only to have it crashed by Bailey's family and Memphis' girlfriend. Hilarity and trouble ensue! After that I'm hoping to take a peak into the family's life outside of the holidays so the series can expand a little more as Bailey works on growing up and finding herself.*