

Embracing the healing power of words

Imagine entering a room while a poem is being spoken and not being sure if you've walked into a poetry slam or a church service on a really good Sunday. Women are crying openly without regard to their makeup. Men are nodding in understanding. People are on their feet and waving their hands, some shouting, "Amen!" in agreement. Others are wincing upon hearing something too true about themselves.

As the speaker sits, there is thunderous applause, and at the end of the slam — or the service, whichever it may be — audience members tell the poet, or the preacher, "Thank you. You've changed my life."

I've witnessed the ambiguity between the secular slam and the sacred sermon many times when seeing Hannah Drake read

or perform her poetry. Much of her work speaks of hard living, brokenness and eventual healing and deliverance.

In "I Love Me," her favorite of her own poems, Drake writes: *How could I believe that I was lovable when my soul bore graffiti like a New York subway with words unmentionable?/ And the question rings out again, "Do you love yourself?"*

"If I never wrote any poetry again,

I would stand on that piece forever," Drake said. "When you leave your soul on the page, you can stand on those pieces."

Since 2004, Drake has self-published four poetry collections and two novels. (Look for them on Amazon or on her website, HannahLDrake.com.)

Drake loves writing novels even more than she does poetry because of the opportunity to build a story and build characters, rather than having to condense everything down to two to three minutes, she said.

Her first novel, "Views From the Back Pew," first released in 2005, is the story of three women carrying the secrets of their pasts and the destructive habits of their present in with them to the fictional Abundant Life Baptist Church, and carrying them right back out.

Drake, executive assistant to the pastor at Louisville's Bates Memorial Baptist Church, always used to sit on the church's last pew.

"I was always intrigued by how

much you can see at the back of a church when people don't know you're watching. I was always intrigued with how many people came to church and were still so broken," she said. "I was one of those people, and people close to me didn't even know. I was very good at masking that. I wanted to write about real women with real issues, and they were women with real issues happening in the church."

Because Drake works in the church, she worried about how readers would respond to it. "The response has been really good because it's honest," she said. "It's a very relatable book. Even if you're not at that stage in your life right now, either you've been there or you know someone who's been there."

Since talking about the book on the DirecTV talk show "View From the Pew" earlier this year, Drake has been approached by a screenwriter about turning "Views From the Back Pew" into a movie.

Her second novel, "Fragile Destiny," released earlier this year, is the story of Drake's own life. "The book is pretty wild because I had a wild childhood," she said.

At 15, Drake went to live with a man after her mother kicked her out of the house. She was pregnant at 19 and "used to drink all the time and get high all the time. People look at me now and can't believe I ever lived that way. It's really inspirational for people to look at that book and realize you can come out of anything."

As a child, Drake thought she wanted to be an attorney, but she believes she is doing now exactly what she is designed to do.

"Even in all the trials of my life," she said, "to be able to write and help somebody else, I wouldn't trade anything for it." ♣

Mariam Williams is a Louisville native. More of her thoughts and stories can be found at RedboneAfropuff.com.



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