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## What If the Bear Chooses You?

### An Interview with Randee Dawn, Author of *Leave No Trace*

How would you survive in the woods? Off the grid? Unnoticed? Without ... a trace?

Randee Dawn's characters in her new contemporary fantasy adventure *Leave No Trace* know. Some have been doing it their whole lives—and some are thrown into it after a tragedy and a snowstorm. But the reason they *know* is that Randee has done the research, and brings the receipts.

The devil, and the adventure, is in the details in any book. Putting your reader into the action means knowing the places inside and out. But when it comes to speculative fiction, one of the most overlooked and underappreciated factors is research. A writer has to be willing to go down deep rabbit holes (and sometimes into bear caves) to get the feel of a place. Imagination is where the story starts, but sound research is where it takes shape.

That verisimilitude is critical to *Leave No Trace*, which is—along with being a ripping yarn—a master class in magical realism. In it, the Rocky Mountains are a place of nature's wonder and supernatural moments. To achieve all of this, Dawn buried herself in works of Celtic mythology and Irish folklore, took field notes on a guided Colorado backcountry trip, and delved into the language-learning skills of feral children. It was a long journey to tell a magical, yet down-to-earth, story.

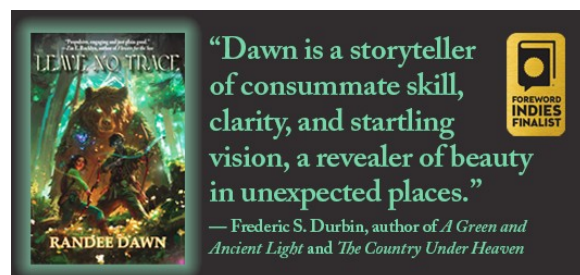
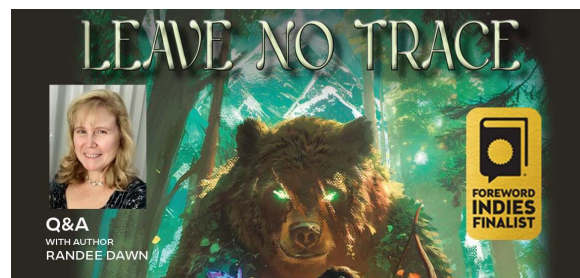
Never one to overlook flaws of lazy storytelling, *Leave No Trace* left *Foreword's* Executive Editor Matt Sutherland a bit stunned by its richness. He was thrilled at the opportunity to connect with Randee for a conversation.

<https://randeedawn.com/books/leave-no-trace/>

**At eight, wearing her Brownie uniform and wincing from wounds under her arm where her “tracker” device was cut out, Lexi jumps in the family truck with her dad and brother on a one-way trip to the deep, deep woods—leaving her mother and baby sibling and the real world behind. But we meet Lexi at seventeen years old or so, and it's easy to fall hard for her from the very first sentence. She's spunky, innocent for her age but perceptive and adorable. (The scene where she discovers herself in a mirror is priceless.)**

**So, let's talk a little bit of shop, storyteller. Lexi's chapters are written in first person with her particular childish drawl expressing her inner thoughts, while other chapters are in third person. And the Ghillie Dhu, Gil/Gillie, a fey creature who communicates with trees and is all-knowing about things that happen in the forest, speaks in an endearing Irish/Scottish dialect. Can you help us understand some of the decisions you made on how best to tell this wonderful story?**

Lexi has undergone a long evolution over the years. In fact, you could say Lexi and I grew up together. I actually started drafts of *Leave No Trace* when I was in middle school, when calling her Alexa wasn't going to be a problem with people's devices in their homes. I wrote chapters during Spanish class—which made me look busy—then shared them with my friends, who passed them



around and gave me my first sense of an audience.

But this *Leave No Trace*—not even called that then—was an eighth grader’s version. I had this idea that I didn’t even need characters’ last names! I was just a voracious reader who had a story, and wanted to put it on paper. I didn’t know anything about writing, or really about the world. My inspiration had come from seeing a film I was way too young to have watched: *Smash Palace*. It wasn’t a kid’s film at all, but there was one scene in the Roger Donaldson-directed film in which a father kidnaps his daughter and imagines they’ll live in the New Zealand bush forever. Their journey doesn’t last. But I kept thinking: What if they didn’t leave?

That was the genesis for me. I tried to craft a realistic Lexi and the world she lived in, but I didn’t know anything about Colorado, or living in the woods, or being kidnapped. As I researched, I grew my interests in off-the-grid survival, feral children, handmade weaponry, and bears. I originally had an idea that Lexi had been alone for most of her years in the woods, and so hardly spoke at all. The idea was that after she was discovered, someone would teach her how to speak. How long could it take, a week? Two.

Er, not exactly. The fact is, children (feral or otherwise) who don’t learn speech in their first few years apparently lose the ability to speak ever, even if they do find ways to communicate with the outside world. I never had Lexi living like Mowgli or anything—just a different world than ours. And I discovered that to find the way through this story, and into her world, I’d have to find her voice. With later drafts, I imagined a girl who spoke to almost no one but her father and brother. Who would use her imagination to tell the story of her world inside her own head. Her voice would be childish on some level, even if she was fully grown. Then I came across Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker*, and things fell into place. In that book, we’ve got a first-person narrator living in a version of England many, many years after the fall of modern civilization. Hoban’s narrator interpreted the world as he saw it around him, and it only had to make sense to him. Lexi’s voice—inner and outer—followed from there.

As for the Ghillie Dhu, they’re such an integral part of Scottish folklore—these “green men of the forest”—that to have them speak in an unaccented/uncolloquial tone would have felt wrong. I wanted readers to hear the musicality in his voice in their heads the way I had Lexi “speaking” in her own head. But what he was saying had to make sense to most readers, so I went with a hybrid of Scot dialect and more plain English. In the end, Gil and Lexi are two isolated characters who can do great good in the world, but have for different reasons lived apart from it. The story forces them to step forward and participate more, and that’s when things change.

**The fairyland, magical world you created suggests you either have inside knowledge or an incredible ability to synthesize all that’s ever been known (or conjectured) about the other side—also known as: The Country of the Young. The Other Place. The Green Place. The Land of Promise. Where did you source, research, or develop your sense of magic for the story?**

Initially, *Leave No Trace* wasn’t speculative fiction at all. We had Lexi, some musicians escaping the outside world who want to go hunting, things go wrong, snow comes and they have to be shown the way out. Oh, and there was always a giant bear. But once I started writing more fantasy, I realized that magic and magic creatures made sense in this world. I had read W.B. Yeats’ *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry* and felt illuminated. The book drew me into the magical worlds associated with Irish folklore—at least, according to Yeats. I loved the idea of a separate world where the magic lives, and the sometimes-permeable way in which humans can pass through into it. That concept comes into play with my book *The Only Song Worth Singing*, which also came out in 2025; both *Trace* and *Only Song* make reference to the fey world as “the green place.” (There is no direct connection between those books otherwise, at least not at this time.)

Having fallen for Celtic mythology, I wrote a paper in college about Irish storytelling, conducting some research at University College Dublin, which is known for being a hub of folklore papers, books, and research. Ever since then, I’ve had a strong attraction toward the folklore of the region and one of these days I might even try to go back to UCD to get a masters in it!

**Lexi’s “cranky old fart” father, Samuel, is a bearded, Old Testament-type, who brings Lexi and her brother, Jim, to the deep woods to escape a sickness. Lexi resents his “father knows best” decision to escape society, but she eventually comes to realize: “See, what I figure is Daddy didn’t think about the what comes next part when he brought us to the forest. He wanted to keep us safe even if he was wrong about sickness and he brought food and clothes but he forgot about the last part. That part where you say ‘the end’ and we all live happily ever after.”**

**So, Samuel plays a complicated role in the book. He and Jim, to be sure, had an extremely combustible relationship, one that Lexi—just a couple years younger—watched firsthand and it**

## terrified her. She feared for her brother. How was it to get inside Samuel's head?

I think we all know a Samuel somewhere. Sometimes it's a relative, sometimes it's a neighbor, sometimes it's a politician. The person who says, "Do as I say, not as I do," and believes respect is something they are owed, not something they earn. Samuel wasn't born as a bad person, but the world made him fearful. He doesn't embrace magic; to him, it's a virus. He doesn't want his children infected. It's strongly implied that there's a reason he only brought Jim and Lexi to the woods—it's even more subtly suggested that his wife and any other offspring have been done away with.

So back to my original genesis question: What if they went to the woods, but never left? Samuel brings his children to the woods to keep them safe, but by the time we're introduced to the story we see not the method—but the major flaws in his madness. Getting into his head was a personal thing, because I did know someone who was like Samuel—though not as violent—and it was a matter of transcribing my feelings about him into Lexi's limited viewpoint. She hits the nail on the head with him in that quote—about how he planned everything except an exit strategy. People who think the way Samuel does rarely do. They just assume everything will work out the way they want, and don't pay attention to the debris they leave in their wake.

<https://randeedawn.com/books/leave-no-trace/>

**Both Lexi and Stef are exceptionally sensitive and introspective. It's easy to think of them as the most sane of all the characters. And then there's rockstar T.J., whose singing has a mystical effect on his audience. You write, "The crowds start out screaming, then slide into a kind of soft hypnosis, waving their phone lights high, singing or humming along—but with a dreamy, lost expression on their faces. Like they'd just gotten straddled by an angel and were ascending to a heavenly climax." Were some of these characters easier or more difficult to create? Which did you enjoy the most?**



As mentioned, Lexi and I grew up together, so I feel as though she evolved as I did, even though we were on different paths. I wanted to show characters who were affected by the magic leaching into the world, but who didn't know what to do with it—and that's where T.J. and Steph came along. Their sibling-esque relationship mirrors Lexi and Jim's. With T.J., I wanted to dive into what super-privilege and loss of identity can do to a young person; he's spoiled but not spoiled rotten. He has Steph as his counterbalance. As for what his "magic" does, well, anyone who's ever been a teenage girl staring up in wonder at a concert featuring the band that makes you feel things like you never had before, well, what T.J. does is that. That's a very specific, unique magic he has. It only becomes something quite different—a healing magic—once he's among the fae.

Steph was the surprise to me. There was no other female character in the earliest versions of *Leave No Trace*, and I rejoiced in the way she showed up in the story, blossomed, and became Lexi's first real friend. Writers often talk about characters taking over the story, and Steph seemed to be guiding me in a way few other characters I've written have. There's a line from a Don Henley song ("Not Enough Love in the World") that goes, "I was either standing in your shadow, or blocking your light." That's Steph's story—she's been standing in T.J.'s shadow for many years, and this is her chance to shine and find her own magic. I loved that she fit so well alongside Lexi.

**From descriptions of native flora and fauna in the Rocky Mountains to felling and field-dressing a buck with a crossbow and paralytic-tipped arrows to Zen-infused moments of serenity on pine-needled trails—in addition to the way a frozen lake moves and moans—the book very capably handles itself in the wilderness. Where did you acquire your outdoor knowledge? Is nature a big part of your life?**

What's funny about the idea that I have outdoor knowledge or expertise is that I don't think of myself as an expert camper! I have more memories of camping outdoors where things got cold, and wet, and the tent fell down, and nightmares of having to get up at three in the morning to pee in the dark, and getting eaten by insects—than I do of more pleasant ones, like s'mores by the fire. Thanks to the endurance of the manuscript for *Leave No Trace*, I kind of talked myself into becoming something of an outdoors expert. I watched a lot of videos and listened to experts talk about field-dressing animals (I've never gone hunting myself), being something of a magpie when it came to lingo and expertise.

For me, understanding Lexi's life was so important that I became like a method actor—walking in her footsteps, and living in her life. At least, partially—I never slept in a cave. I read a lot of books about living in the woods, and watched series like *Survivorman*. I even died a little bit when I saw there was a movie that came out a few years ago also called *Leave No Trace* in which a father and his daughter semi-live in the woods, off the grid, but the overall story was so different I didn't panic entirely.

In any case, by 2007 I felt it was time to get my hands dirty personally. I signed up for a six-day guided backcountry hike in Colorado, walking through some of the same woods I'd tried to write about. I found Lexi's meadow, I got first-hand experience in the trees and what it felt like to be in a cathedral of them, and I nearly got trapped in an electrical storm near a lake. Anyone who'd like to know the raw details of that trip—and see some lovely scenery in the photos I took—can go check it out [here](https://randeedawn.com/2007-colorado-backcountry-hiker-trip-july-15-20/). <https://randeedawn.com/2007-colorado-backcountry-hiker-trip-july-15-20/>

I don't mention *Leave No Trace* except in the final line, when I realize I have to rewrite the book. Again!

All that to say—when you spend a few decades on research, hopefully you get some of the verisimilitude right. Sounds like I might have, which does my heart good.

**Let's not forget how Tony's special forces background comes alive in your hands. Not just the equipment and warrior skills but also the mindset of these highly-trained soldiers, the way they process threats, run through protocols instantly, survive threats. Indeed, Tony is the wild card in the story. He's deadly, unpredictable, and commands attention, not the least because he's attractive in a Terminator sort of way. He, more than the others, also understands that the fairy world is not all magic and beauty and love. There's "exchanges" and tradeoffs, gives-and-takes and commitments with no escape. Tell us about piecing together the darker side of the human-fey relationship?**

In all of my earliest versions of the book, a musician named Tony was the villain. Eventually, he became a separate entity when I shrunk the focus of musicians down to just two. By then I'd spent so much time thinking I wasn't going to ever get *Leave No Trace* published that I started writing ancillary short stories about some of the characters. I have a short story called "The Way Is Clear," an alt-history of Lexi's time in the woods, her meeting with Gil, and how she survived her father. That came out in the anthology *Another World: Stories of Portal Fantasy* (2021). Then there's a prequel to *Leave No Trace*, showing more of Tony's experience in the world, and his initial meeting with the faerie queen Clíodhna, in my short story "Can't Find My Way Home," which was published in the anthology *Children of a Different Sky* (2017).

All of which is to say that I think about Tony a lot. He's a tragic character, a man who may mean well and who thinks he knows the truth but who trips over his own expectations every time. I don't think of him as a villain, I think of him as a realistic other side to all the faery woo-woo going on around him. He knows it's real in a way the other characters can't, and that puts him on a collision course with the power of the fae. I spoke with members of the armed forces, and listened to documentaries about battle and the fog of war, and I honestly can't recall where the idea of choosing what you can save, what you can abandon, and where the exit is comes from but to me that encapsulates Tony's mindset. He almost doesn't have his own identity; his self image comes from who he is protecting, or pursuing. But by exploring the fae world through his eyes, I started to think about the downsides to it all. Maybe fae aren't all about fun and magic and wonder and majesty; maybe they are different creatures than we are and see the world differently. What does it mean if we're just ... in their way?

### **Who's the ideal reader for this book? Did you have a certain age in mind as you were writing?**

Anyone who can sit down and get through the opening parts where Lexi's talking at you strangely is the right reader. Since I started writing a version of this when I was in middle school, I fully think the book could be read by a mature, well-read middle schooler. It wasn't designed for them, not specifically. I tend to push back against the idea of books for age ranges. I was a young, advanced reader, picking up John Updike and Judith Krantz and Alexandre Dumas (there's a trio no one has ever connected before). Did I get it all? Certainly not.

But a book requires effort, concentration, and imagination—if you're too young for it, it will bore you. Now, at conventions, if people ask me if the book is okay for their youngster, I will be honest: There's some implied sexual situations, maybe a little rude words, and death of animals. Only the last one has ever caused someone to put the book back down as not right for their kids. I disagree—everybody needs to be affected by some animal death book—whether it's *The Yearling* or *Where the Red Fern Grows*—but I'm not the

parent. If the parent thinks the book is okay for their kids, I'm not going to argue.

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### What's next for you and your talented pen?

Right now, I've just turned in a short story about Emma the writing were-cat from my *Tune in Tomorrow* funny fantasy; it'll be part of a whole anthology about were-creatures called *Were-2* and should be out later this year.

Also, I'm waiting for the revisions from my editor for *Don't Touch That Dial*, the next book in the "Tune"-iverse of *Tune in Tomorrow* and *We Interrupt This Program*, my two funny fantasy books about what can go hilariously right and wrong when the fae decide to start creating TV shows and movies—starring humans. I think the ghost of Tony is in *Don't Touch* a little bit, because while it remains backstagey and fun and silly and punny, I'm also looking at the way the fey treat humans in a new light with the story and one very particular character. If you were raised in a fae-created village, would you want to stay your whole life? Or would the real, human, unmagical world have a unique appeal?

As for the rest of me without my pen—I'm doing a lot of traveling right now. My husband just retired, and we're on the road for several months Down Under and soon, in Japan. I'm learning to write on the road, or write when I don't have the comforts of my writing cave at home. It's an interesting transition. I look at myself as taking it all in, giving food to the Muses, so I can call on them with fresh ideas and scenes and characters in the future. I'm building up the magic, and hope to release a lot of it again in the near future.

Matt Sutherland

June 8, 2026

Articles ›

## Foreword Announces Winners of the 2025 INDIES Book of the Year Awards

TRAVERSE CITY, Michigan: June 04, 2026—*Foreword Reviews* announces the winners of its INDIES Book of the Year Awards today. The INDIES celebrate outstanding books published in 2025 by small, independent, and university presses.

A comprehensive list of the winners can be found here:

<https://www.forewordreviews.com/awards/winners/2025/> <https://www.forewordreviews.com/awards/winners/2025/>

"Each year, as our number of entrants increases and diversifies, the job of narrowing each genre category to a select few finalists gets harder," notes Editor-in-Chief Michelle Schingler. "But that also makes the judges' ultimate selections all the more exciting. We so look forward to their final choices, and we are so proud to celebrate this year's exemplary slate of winners."

In addition to the category winners, *Foreword's* editors handpick Editor's Choice Prize winners in both fiction and nonfiction. This year, the winners are *Raiding the Heartland*, by William D. Lopez, from Johns Hopkins University Press for nonfiction; and for fiction, from Tursulowe Press, the winner is *Tomorrow Will Bring Sunday's News*, by Beth Kephart.

Finally, *Foreword* annually names an INDIE Publisher of the Year for the presses that exemplify the spirit of indie publishing, and this year honors the University of Nebraska Press. Now in its 85th year, the University of Nebraska Press publishes around 150 titles



### ANNOUNCING THE FOREWORD 2025 INDIES WINNERS



annually across multiple imprints, including Bison and Potomac Books. Their output includes academic titles, general interest nonfiction titles, poetry, and novels, and they are a consistent favorite among reviewers and INDIES judges. Their noteworthy commitment to storytelling and to amplifying “the authentic voices of diverse people, advancing the boundaries of human knowledge and experience worldwide” is worth celebrating.

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### **About *Foreword Magazine*:**

Since 1998, *Foreword Reviews* has provided trade book reviews of the best titles from independent presses. In print, and online, its FOLIO: award-winning design and editorial content makes the magazine a favorite among librarians, booksellers, and readers—an excellent resource when it comes to purchasing books. *Foreword* INDIES and the fee-for-review Clarion service complement our online content and print magazine, helping to showcase diverse independent presses and their authors for over 26 years. The [Library Insights Summit](#) (<https://libraryinsightssummit2026.sched.com/>), held pre-ALA, is a collaborative, day-long conference co-hosted by *Foreword*, which provides publishers and librarians space to network and learn from each other.

Chris Nesbit

June 4, 2026