

## **Apryl E. Pooley**

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As a neuroscience researcher at Michigan State University, Apryl E. Pooley is in a unique position of researching the very disorder with which she lives—posttraumatic stress disorder. She has made significant discoveries about how traumatic stress affects women and men differently, and while she has just begun her career as a trauma scientist, she presented her work on PTSD at one regional, one national, and one international scientific conference in the past year alone. Because of the groundbreaking nature of her research, she will be submitting a comprehensive paper to the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences journal for publication in 2016 (rather than publish several lower-impact papers along the way). However, no amount of scientific research will shed light onto what PTSD really is more than learning how this disorder affects every aspect of one's life. Therefore, in conjunction with her scientific research, Pooley openly uses her writing and art to expand public awareness of PTSD in order to help others recover from this debilitating disorder.

As for her platform, Pooley holds a master's degree in biology from Eastern Illinois University where she remains affiliated with the University and has ample opportunities for speaking engagements and guest lectures. She is currently in the process of completing her Ph.D. in neuroscience (all-but-dissertation) at Michigan State University. At MSU, she teaches undergraduate courses and interacts with hundreds of students a day, has opportunities to present research and organize seminars on a university-wide level, and collaborates with professionals across the country in the neuroscience field. Pooley is a member of the international Society for Neuroscience and the international Society for Behavioral Neuroscience, and she attends several scientific conferences each year where she presents her research and networks with other researchers, clinicians, and advocates in the field of PTSD and neuroscience. Aside from her academic platform, Pooley is also an artist and has been featured in the largest international art competition, Art Prize, in Grand Rapids, MI. In her blog, The Egghead Agenda, Pooley writes about topics such as science, women, education, LGBT issues, and mental health. She is also a founding member of the activist and advocacy group, Community Leaders in Transformation, which supports survivors and victims of sexual and relationship violence in the Michigan capitol area.

## **AUTHOR Q & A**

### **Why did you write this book, and for whom did you write it?**

When I started writing, I didn't know I was writing a book. I had just started therapy, and it was the first time in my life I had ever talked about, well, anything at all—so it just came to me in this unstoppable flood. Fifty minutes, twice a week, with my therapist was not enough to get all my words out, so I wrote. It wasn't until about six months later when the story started to develop a structure, and I thought to myself "if I would have read something like this 8 years ago, it would have changed my life." That's when I knew I had to publish. I didn't want anybody to go through what I had gone through, especially in feeling so alone. So I guess first, I wrote for myself, then I wrote for those people who had gone through similar experiences. As I was doing my final edits, I started thinking about the people who had not experienced rape or addiction or coming to terms with your own sexual orientation—I wanted them to learn and understand too, so they can help and respect people with these issues. So I've been advised to never say "this book is for everyone!" but really, I think there are very few people who are not affected by these issues.

### **How did you know when the book was finished?**

Oh goodness, I thought this book was finished so many times, and I'd put it down to start contacting agents and publishers, but then something really huge would happen in my life that I knew was absolutely essential to the story. This happened so many times that I stopped telling myself it was ever finished, and it became this kind of living document in my life for about three years. But when I got married on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014, I knew that was going to be the last chapter of the book. The book begins with the end of my relationship with my high school best friend, and she just happened to get married on the exact same day as me—out of all the days in the past eleven years—and that coincidence really shook me to my core and really became an anchor for the end of my book and a new beginning in my life.

### **So you were contacting agents? Why did you decide to self-publish?**

I really wanted to go the traditional publishing route, partly because I didn't think I'd have the power or know-how to effectively market and distribute the book, but honestly, it was mostly just some kind of validation of success for me. It was a tough decision to self-publish because I really felt like I had failed in some way by not being able to get anyone to pick up this book, especially after querying almost 50 publishing industry professionals. It did get some interested parties, but I just couldn't give up control of the book—the cover design, the interior design, who I wanted to market it to, how I wanted to use the book to raise funds for local agencies—I just couldn't let someone else do that for me since I had already invested so much in this project. And when everything started to really pick up last year surrounding the campus sexual assault issue, particularly on my own campus—this huge student movement began—I knew I had to publish now and couldn't wait for the publishing industry to catch up.

### **What do you hope this book will accomplish?**

I remember when I first started this project, I told myself that if my story could help one person, could give one person hope, could keep one person from taking their own life, then everything I had been through would have been worth it. Saving a life is a sacred thing. But I know for a fact that my story has already done that, even before the book was published, so I guess it has already accomplished what I wanted it to do. But to take it further, I want to reach more people, to give more people hope, to help more people understand the complexity of these issues, which I hope will ultimately result in a culture change and policy change surrounding campus sexual assault in particular—that's where I focus almost all of my activist work.

### **What do you do in your advocacy and activist work?**

I've been mostly focusing my efforts on my own campus at Michigan State University. A strong group of very smart, dedicated, and passionate students came together in December of 2014 when the University made some decisions and statements that caused many sexual assault survivors to feel betrayed. Since then, we have formed an organization, Community Leaders in Transformation, to address some of the problems regarding sexual assault on our campus. A few of our members have been very active in putting on consent workshops to talk about sex and relationships and how to take control of your body and your boundaries through active consent. We also lobbied to hire another sexual assault counselor for the university to reduce the wait-list that students have to endure. We are currently trying to make reporting sexual assault more survivor-friendly through implementing confidential reporting options, training police officers and administrators in trauma sensitivity, and making sure the survivors has a support system before deciding if/when to go through an investigation.

### **Your story is full of struggles, what do you consider the most difficult thing you've ever done in your life thus far?**

Well my father always used to say that, for an alcoholic, quitting drinking will be the hardest thing one ever has to do. I agreed with him when I was actively going through alcohol withdrawals, but I then learned that it wasn't so much the *quitting* part that was so hard, it was the staying sober part. The hard part was learning to live a sober life and finding my sober identity, and the reason that was so hard was because, in order to do that, I had to face all of the things within myself of which I was so ashamed and scared and guilty. That was the most difficult thing I have ever done.

### **What is your next project? Are you going to keep writing?**

Oh I will always write. I don't think I know how to function anymore without writing, it's how I express my emotions, communicate, process information, and learn. I do have some other books, novels, that I'm working on, but I'm not in a rush to get those out because I'm focused on my advocacy work right now. And finishing my Ph.D., which I'm hoping to have done in a year.