Seven years ago, pregnant with my second child and brimming with doubts about my mothering of the first, I came across an article in The New York Times Magazine about a mistaken case of child abuse. An infant’s accidental fall was misread in the emergency room as the consequence of parental abuse. After an inadequate interview of the parents and a series of bureaucratic mistakes, a decision was made by the state to remove the child from the home. The story was at once quotidian and hellish.

In retrospect, what fascinated me about the piece I remember standing at my kitchen counter reading it manically from beginning to end, apart from the wholesome sense of injustice, was the notion that the parent-child relationship could be quantified. Here was a story that dramatized the entire spectrum of parental guilt, from the literal and physical to the existential, original mother guilt that shadowed so many women I knew. I tore out the article, stuffed it into the top drawer of my writing desk, which was soon carried down to the cellar to make way for the changing table, and forgot about those sorry parents in the newspaper. Then, someone I knew found herself with a child in the hospital and a social worker at the front door.

That’s what I usually say when asked about the genesis of my novel, Degrees of Love (W.W. Norton, 1998) — mostly, I was a mother. The twenty-year-old me would have been appalled at the outward appearance of my life—I had arrived exactly nowhere but my own kitchen sink. The 34-year-old me was enraptured by the daily unfolding of these people who were my children and alienated at being so wholly defined by my relationship to them. Our popular culture was practically drowning itself in baby lust, but no book I read or movie I saw seemed to be getting at the complicated truth of my experience being home all day with young children. Every child expert and politician around had joined in the chanting of the societal mantra—there was no more important job than raising children. Yet, their language belied the problem. Any three-year-old could tell you that the valued work of this society was money-making work. And any grandmother could impart the wisdom that raising children was a function, not a job and, certainly, not a profession. Motherhood could not be retrofitted for quality controls, performance reviews, or ego gratification. Ambivalence, one of the least acceptable of all emotions, was not just my dirty little secret. Donald Hall has said that poetry is the place for contradiction. I wondered, then, if fiction could provide both home and hearth for ambivalence.

I hired a high school student one afternoon a week to watch my children so I could go to the library and sit at a big oak table where other high school students passed notes and senior citizens prepared tax returns. The library was in the next town. No one knew me there, so no one would ask me what I was doing. I dreaded having to admit out loud that I was paying a babysitter so I could doodle a little made-up world on a legal pad. After about 50 pages, when I allowed that I was writing a very long short story—a novella, maybe—I started sending my children to daycare a few mornings a week. This decision represented a considerable leap of spousal faith, given the small mountain of bills around which my husband, David Gould ’80, a freelance writer, himself, and I circled every day. Writing a check to the woman who cared for my children so I could write fiction rendered me appropriately beholden to the work.

A few weeks before the publication of my novel, I was at a party in the small town where we live. In conversation, the hostess mentioned my forthcoming book.

"I didn’t know you wrote," said a woman I recognized from the nursery school parking lot.

I smiled way too deeply.

"Yeah, well, I have this whole other secret life," I said.

The woman paused for a moment. "All mothers have secret lives."