

# Meet Libby Atwater, Double Dragonfly Award Winner

by Rachel Koestler-Grack

“You know what happens when people read your book?” asked Libby Atwater’s cousin after reading her memoir *What Lies Within*. “They fall in love with you.” It’s no surprise that readers become enamored with Libby, a child who triumphs amid adversity. As the world around her suddenly unravels, she finds a way to remain true to herself and become the woman she was meant to be. Through her experiences, she displays strength as well as vulnerability, both wisdom and foolishness, and her genuine personality is one with which anyone can identify.

*What Lies Within* covers the first 21 years of Libby’s life, which begins in the tightly knit neighborhood of Hillside, New Jersey in the 1950s. Her family life mirrored



that of her neighbors, where fathers went away to work every day while mothers handled household duties. She lived in a carefree world, flitting unsupervised from house to house, running through unfenced yards and enjoying a

nearly privileged childhood. Sweet and gentle, Libby strove to please her parents and was dubbed a “good girl.” Life was perfect in Hillside, or so she thought. Little Libby didn’t realize her pristine view of her home life was merely a mirage. One by one, her family’s secrets were revealed, leaving her shattered. Forced to say goodbye to family and friends in New Jersey, she moved to California and into a life much different than the one she had known.

A journalist and personal historian, Libby has been helping others write their stories for 25 years. All the while, she knew she had a story of her own but didn’t know how to tell it. “As I started writing other people’s stories,” she explains, “I started getting ideas for writing mine.” Libby began actively

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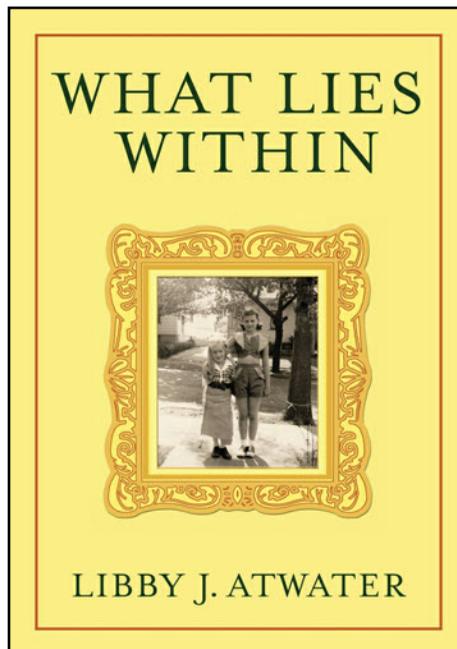
**Special Contributors: Lisa Marie Berthel, Eli Berthel**

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writing her memoir in 2003 after she joined an online memoir-writing group through the Association of Personal Historians. She worked on her manuscript for nine years in between client projects.

Writing about events that occurred a lifetime ago can seem like a daunting task. But as soon as Libby began writing about her early years, more memories suddenly returned to her at all hours of the day and night. “There were times when I’d wake up in the middle of the night and think, ““Oh, I forgot to put that down,”” Libby explains. She jotted down stories on scraps of paper and notepads whenever a memory came to mind, creating a mosaic of her childhood.

Libby’s adolescent years were riddled with pain and loss. In order to document these experiences, she had to relive them. She often

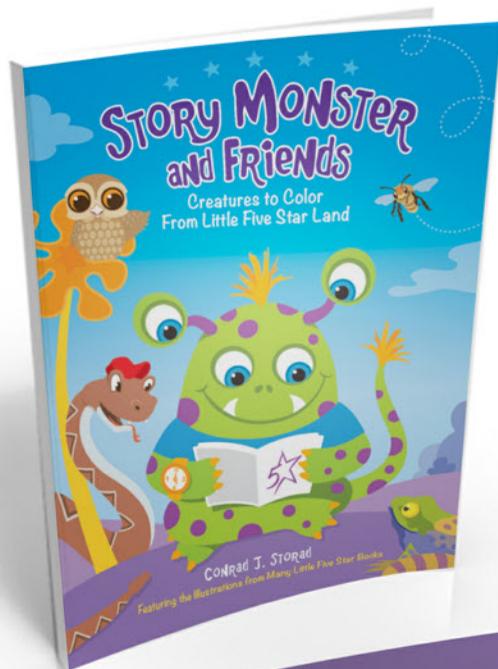


broke into tears. On these dark days, she went for long walks with her husband and dogs. The fresh air and exercise seemed to clear the clouds hanging over her and restored her strength to continue writing. Libby managed to write the painful stories and the failures

of those featured within them with respect and compassion, rather than anger and resentment. Ironically, Libby admits she found it more difficult to write about pleasant memories. “Writing about the happy times was often bittersweet,” Libby said in an interview with Denis Ledoux from The Memoir Network.

For the most part, Libby wrote her memoir for herself and her family. “I think it was therapeutic,” she says. “If no one else wrote this story, at least I got it down.” However, Libby also hopes her story will show people that it is possible to endure a difficult childhood and still become a productive adult. “Few of us get through life unscathed,” she explained to Ledoux, “but it is not what happens to us that makes us who we are. Rather it is how we deal with what happens to us that defines who we are.”

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*What Lies Within* won two Royal Dragonfly Book Awards for 2014. The memoir achieved the award for best biography/memoir and a second in the category of other nonfiction. Libby says she was absolutely thrilled to be among the winners. "I'm happy to be associated with a group that has such high standards," she says.

While her childhood was marred by pain and loss, Libby's story is not one of defeat. Instead, *What Lies Within* carries the theme of resilience, the tale a girl who faced hard times and survived with the help of family, friends and even a few strangers. By the end of the book, readers will develop a friendship with Libby, and for some, perhaps, a crush.

Currently, Libby is working on three sequels to her memoir. *Out into the World* will cover Libby's adult years, and *What Took You So Long?* is the story about finding her birth family in 2004. Libby is working on a third book titled *Beloved Horse*, which is a tribute to her son Ross, who passed away suddenly at the age of 35, one day after her memoir was released. Libby continues to document other people's stories through Choose Your Words, her personal history service that records both oral and written histories.

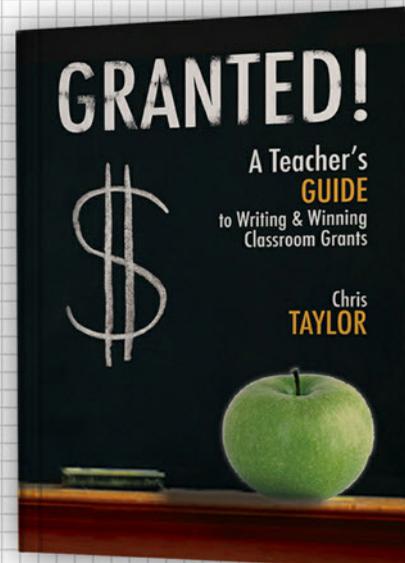
To learn more about Libby Atwater and Choose Your Words, visit [www.chooseyourwords.net](http://www.chooseyourwords.net).



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