

# *Abbreviate*

*Interview by Ethan Bullock and Gonzalo Felix*

*Sarah Fawn Montgomery*

Sarah Fawn Montgomery is the author of *Abbreviate* (Small Harbor Publishing, 2025), *Halfway from Home* (Split/Lip Press, 2022), and *Quite Mad: An American Pharma Memoir* (The Ohio State University Press, 2018). A recipient of the Nautilus Book Award for lyric prose for her work *Nerve: Unlearning Workshop Ableism to Develop Your Disabled Writing Practice*. Her works have appeared in *Brevity*, *New England Review*, and *Writer's Digest*, to name a few. She has received an MFA from California State University-Fresno and a PhD from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Montgomery's *Abbreviations* constructs a multifaceted view on girlhood and female relationships. She curates the collection as brief but intense moments of interrogation and personal reclamation. The collection further observes the power plays of society and misogyny with how the dynamics impacts girls' identity creation and self worth.

*PR: Starting at the beginning, how did Abbreviate come to be?*

SFM: This book came about somewhat by accident. I was finishing up another book, but looking for a bit of distraction and procrastination along the way. Because I had a book deadline and not much time to write long-form essays, I started writing flash essays. Eventually, I discovered that many of these flash essays coalesced around similar themes, so I collected them together, wrote a few other essays to fill in the gaps, and *Abbreviate* was born.

*PR: And what was it like to organize all these pieces?*

SFM: To describe it, I often think of its organization like a giant game of Tetris. I want to position essays next to each other to create interlocking meanings and ideas. While this collection moves somewhat linearly from early childhood to adulthood, much of the organization comes from positioning essays together that transition through similar images and ideas and build larger themes through collage.

*PR: Do you have a favorite from the collection?*

SFM: I don't really have a favorite essay from the collection, but I can say that each essay was significant to write because each one voiced a story I had previously kept silent for most of my life. This collection explores how the injustice and violence of girlhood lead women to accept small spaces and stories, so there are essays about disordered eating, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and misogyny woven throughout the collection. Because of this, writing was an act of reclamation and agency.

*PR: Speaking of these topics, what was it like to experiment with perspective and find which one best suited the essay?*

SFM: I love playing with point of view because it is a way to position both the reader and the writer around different kinds of stories. That's why some of these essays utilize first person in order to position myself intimately with stories about queer identity or female friendship, while

others utilize second person to provide myself a bit of distance while also positioning the reader closer to painful stories about violence and abuse. Because many of the themes of this collection are about shared girlhood experiences, I also utilize the collective first person in quite a few of the essays, using the “we” to write about the group of girls I grew up with and the communal culture of girlhood.

*PR: Now I have to ask, in the essay “Abbreviate,” you discuss the significance of names, what inspired this intriguing idea, and how you went about creating the piece?*

SFM: I’ve always been fascinated by names and the ways they convey identities and experiences, as well as marking time, place, and expectations. The title essay of this collection explores growing up in a time and educational setting where many of us had the same first name. Boys with the same first name were frequently referred to by their last names, much like teachers or parents, granting them power and privilege that we girls did not receive. Instead, girls with the same first name were referred to by their initials, thereby abbreviating us, reducing us in size and power, and erasure we carried into other aspects of our lives.

*PR: How did Abbreviate evolve to the version we see now during its development?*

SFM: I always tend to overwrite when I’m working on a book, so every book I’ve published has quite a bit of material that doesn’t make it into the final version. But this is typically because it isn’t meant for that book. For example, *Abbreviate* originally began as a hybrid collection that also featured poetry. Ultimately, however, I decided that a flash collection felt more cohesive,

and I pulled all of the poems out of the book. This doesn't mean they won't end up somewhere else, though. I typically write a few books at a time, so many of these poems have ended up in a different project altogether.

*PR: Now that *Abbreviate* is out in the wild, how has it made you develop not only as an author but as a person overall?*

SFM: I am much more confident, vocal, and assertive than the young girl in many of these essays. Much of this book explores the way the world tells young girls and women to shrink themselves smaller in order to be accepted, but as an adult I have expanded my sense of self to take up all the space that I want in the world. I'm no longer someone who is afraid to speak up—in fact, as a writer, I make my living by speaking up! I am also no longer someone who stays silent around abuse and injustice. At the same time, however, in some ways I am also still essentially the same person I was as a young girl, but instead of feeling the shame and insecurity I felt growing up, I've embraced the qualities about myself that I once tried to hide.

*PR: As an author, how do you reflect on your past publications?*

SFM: I always think of my work as a snapshot in time. Each of my books is a time capsule of the particular moment I am writing about, but also a time capsule of who I was when I wrote it. As a nonfiction writer, I'm always writing about the past, but by the time a book is finished and

published, my perspective has usually changed from the one that I had when I wrote the book. The very act of writing is an act of transformation, and so there are layers of time and perspective layered into each of my books, which makes the act of revisiting them an interesting way of understanding myself.

*PR: Most importantly, do you still hug your mad?*

SFM: I'm proud to say I don't! As a girl, I was taught to keep uncomfortable feelings quiet for the comfort of others. I was taught to smile in order to hide pain or shame or anger, even if that was damaging to myself. But over the years, I've learned not only to voice my emotions, but also to derive power from vocalizing the things others might find uncomfortable. Keeping it in is dangerous to yourself, and so I've learned to share these stories not only in my everyday life, but also through my writing.