



## Practice Dying

by Rachel Stolzman Gullo

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Jamila and David, estranged twins, are on seemingly opposite paths—she is pathologically self-destructive while he is quite possibly an enlightened bodhisattva. When heart-broken Jamila lands in the hospital after a failed love affair, David is drawn back home to New York City ostensibly to be of service to his sister. But his true reasons for leaving the mountains of Tibet lie in his spiritual struggle, his delusions and the challenge of an assignment from his revered teacher, the Dalai Lama. As the siblings reconnect and help each other through their individual hardships, the line between David's enlightenment and Jamila's pathology begins to blur and they realize their paths may be more similar than they ever suspected.

### From the author

The book started with a concept I was contemplating; that psychological pathology and enlightenment are opposites on a spectrum. I'd had a job working with schizophrenics for five years, and so many of them were highly intelligent, genius in some way, and also had a deep spiritual side, which often showed itself to be deep wisdom, even enlightenment. I started imagining this spectrum and instead of one person encompassing it all, I thought of a pair of twins, who existed on opposite sides of the spectrum, one suffering, one enlightened. But, I felt there's an inherent falsehood in this spectrum, and that each contains part of the other; pathology is part enlightenment and enlightenment is part pathology. The twin characters started taking shape in my mind, and I thought of a crisscross structure for the novel, where David, the enlightened twin would have his own descent into confusion and turmoil and his twin sister, Jamila, the suffering twin would find her own strength and help pull him out of trouble.

### Discussion Questions

1. What gets David to leave Tibet and return to New York City for the first time in years?
2. What does the wolf symbolize to Jamila and what effect does its appearance have on her?
3. What event happened in their childhood that caused David and Jamila to go separate ways for the first time and caused David to seek out the Dalai Lama and his mentorship?
5. What are the three different types of bodhisattvas? What type does David believe he is? What type does the Dalai Lama want him to be? What difference does it make to the story?
6. What major Tibetan tradition does the Dalai Lama plan on changing?

### About the author

Rachel Stolzman Gullo is the author of *The Sign for Drowning* (Trumpeter, 2008). Her poetry and fiction have appeared in various publications. *Practice Dying* was a semi-finalist for Best Novel in the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Literary Competition, received a fellowship from Summer Literary Seminars, and was a finalist for the Inkubate Literary Blockbuster Challenge.