

BOOKS *in* PIECES Magazine

Interviews with Bestselling & New Authors • Stories • Pro -Self-Publishing Tips

APRIL 2019

YOUR WORK NEEDS EDITING

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Ellen Michelle Can Help You!



Also In This Issue:

Gareth L. Powell

Award-Winning Science Fiction Author

"Embers of War", "Fleet of Knives"

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FROM THE PUBLISHER

by William Gensburger

Welcome to our April edition, conveniently skipping past April Fool's Day, and focusing on new interviews with bestselling, and published authors.

In this issue you can enjoy two short stories, four interviews, two novel chapter previews, a new feature: quick thoughts on a pre-selected question by a wide range of authors. Jill Hedgecock's book review offers her thoughts on a book you may wish to read; in fact this review features Alan Brennert's new novel "The Daughter of Moloka'i"—you'll remember Alan featured in the last issue with Game of Thrones' author, George R.R. Martin. Have you tried out our Brain Games? A new one is included in this issue—see how well you do! We've also started a list of authors you should follow, letters to the editor that we have received, and our bookstore where you can find your next read.

And finally, please check out our advertisers' books.

Enjoy this issue, and do let me know what you think.

Regards,



INTERVIEW: ELLEN MICHELLE

Editor & more...



Ellen Michelle is more than just an editor. Her entrepreneurial spirit started at a young age. As she explains from her Website: “The worst punishment my parents ever gave me was taking away my books, but it was the only thing that worked. My teachers in grade school were often shocked at the level of books I was reading—they told me I couldn’t read *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* in my first grade reading time, but I did anyway.

As I grew up and I started to learn the rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation I began to be annoyed at the number of errors I would find in published books—to the point that I would furiously circle them and send pictures to friends with capitalized messages explaining my frustration. When I decided I wanted to edit books for a living, nobody was surprised.”

This she has done well, establishing her own company, always participating in workshops and seminars, as well as offering hope for the writers she works with.

Q: You've stated that "My love of books began at an early age. The worst punishment my parents ever gave me was taking away my books, but it was the only thing that worked." As a result you developed a love of reading and of the grammatical rules that make up the foundation of the English language.

A: That's definitely part of it! I have always loved books, so it was a natural progression that I would make them my career. I think I love working with authors more than I love grammatical rules specifically. I love diving into an author's style and figuring out how they write so I can match my editing to that style. It's a new, fun challenge with every new client!



Q: What's the worst—common—mistake that most writers make?

A: Improper dialogue tags. A lot of writers—especially new writers—use incorrect punctuation with their dialogue and action tags. It's a simple fix, but it's not one that can easily be done through a universal find and replace, so it can take an editor a significant amount of time to fix the punctuation on every piece of dialogue in a novel. The author pays for the editor's time on that, so if they can get the punctuation right in dialogue it can be a huge money saver!

Q: How do you reconcile the differences between American spelling and grammar, versus British, Canadian or Australian? If an American author writes a story set in Australia, which version of the spelling should they use?

A: Typically, the spelling and style should be catered to the market where the book will be sold. So, if an American is writing a novel for an Australian market, they should use Australian spelling and style. If a British author is writing a novel for an American market, they should use American spelling and style. When international rights are sold either through a publishing house or an agent, the novel will have different

versions for different markets for this reason. The only real difference in this that I've seen is that many Canadian publishers will use American spelling and style so they can use the same version of the novel in the US and Canada. The Canadian market doesn't mind American spelling as much as the American market minds Canadian spelling, so it's easier and cheaper to produce an American version for both markets.

That being said, authors don't necessarily need to hire an editor that lives and works in the intended market. Most editors are trained and able to work in different styles and different versions of English—just make sure a style guide and dictionary are established at the beginning of the project.

Q: With the evident decline in general education in many countries, and with the reading audience seemingly less able to handle complicated grammatical constructs, how important is it that formal rules are still followed (ie: colons and semi-colons)?

A: I think this entirely depends on the target market for the book. Colons aren't often seen in fiction, and semi-colons are becoming rare as well. Most people favor the em dash over semi-colons these days, and I think that works a lot better in fiction. (Although I do love a good semi-colon!) But no matter what you're writing, you have to write to your target market. This question is part of what style and version of English you choose to use for your book. Some of the first few items that go on a style guide are what version of English we're using, whether or not we're using the Oxford or serial comma, and whether the author prefers semi-colons or em dashes. So the answer is: know your intended market, and write to what they want and know. If you're writing to an academic audience, you can use more complicated sentence structures. If you're writing to a general audience—like for trade fiction—then you want to use a simpler style to ensure your writing is accessible to more people. That being said, variance in sentence structure is necessary, so even if you are writing to a general audience, don't be afraid to use structures that are a bit more complicated if they help get the point across. Readers can get a lot of meaning from surrounding context and the variance in sentence structure will keep them engaged and interested.



Q: How complicated is it to edit a manuscript, yet retain the voice of the author?

A: This is actually one of my favorite parts of editing! I have taken professional editing courses, so I've been trained to be able to do this well. I always start by reading a good chunk of the manuscript before I touch anything—this allows me to get a good feel for the author's style and the voice they're going for, which makes it easier to edit to their style. This is the most exciting part of my job though, because I get to work in different styles all the time and really get to know my authors in an intimate, personal way. It's really important that I know and understand their style so they still feel like it's their work when they get the edited version back.

Q: Authors have the hardest time eliminating some phrasing they have a fondness for, yet perhaps crucial in tightening a manuscript. What's your process when an author disagrees with your edits?

A: I always tell my clients that the edits I make are suggestions. Ultimately, it's their work and they have final say on what changes are made—especially if they are self-publishing. However, I also note that I am a trained editor and I make certain suggestions for a reason. Authors are free to disagree with my edits, but I always hope that they at least consider it before rejecting. Every time I return an edited manuscript to a client, I tell

them to let me know if they have any questions or need clarification on any of the edits I've made, so the hope is that if they disagree with something, they'll ask me about it and I can tell them why I made that edit and they can make a decision knowing the full story behind it. I try to include comments in the manuscript about edits that I think might be confusing or that they might disagree with so they have that explanation right away, but too many of these comments can overload the manuscript and make the edit look more intense than it is. There's a fine balance between explaining the work that needs to be explained and not overwhelming the author!

Q: You offer quite a few services including interior layouts using InDesign, an industry standard software. Assuming that you do the layouts yourself, how did you develop the skills, and how important is it for authors to develop additional skills such as layouts?

A: Yes, I do layout design myself. When I first started doing this work, I was learning as I went along—as was necessary in the job I had at the time. So I was largely self-taught at the beginning. However, since then I have taken a few classes in design, specifically for working with InDesign, and have improved those self-taught skills. I'm just finishing my master's degree in publishing from Simon Fraser University, and that program included an 8-month design course! I definitely learned a lot from these courses, but it was easier to learn in the class setting because I already had a base knowledge of the software. For anyone looking to learn InDesign, I recommend starting with self-teaching through written and video tutorials online, and then moving into coursework—many universities and libraries offer one-day workshops on these topics—once you have that base knowledge and are ready for more complicated processes.

Q: Editing involves many aspects beyond just grammatical correction, spelling: services also include fact-checking, stylistic consistency, proper formatting, and more. What is your favorite, and least favorite aspect of being an editor?

A: My favorite part about being an editor is the author relations. I'm an extrovert—which is rare in my line of work—so I love communicating with authors and publishers. I often attend genre and writing conventions where I meet with various industry professionals—writers, editors, publishers, and agents—and those weekends are definitely my favorite

part of my job. I love the energy that everyone has at these events, and seeing everybody support each other's work. It's magical!

My favorite part about editing specifically is diving into an author's style and working with style consistency. Every author writes differently and has their own unique style, so working with a lot of different authors is really interesting to me. I learn just as much from my clients as they learn from me, which makes the exchange and the author-editor relationship just that much more fun!

Q: Does your love of reading extend in the direction of writing at all? If so, what types of writing.

A: I specialize in editing fiction, but I don't write fiction myself. I've tried—and I have a few ideas I would love to work on with a co-author—but I can't turn my editor brain off long enough to finish a full draft of something. I always tell my clients not to self-edit before they finish a draft or they'll get stuck editing and re-editing one scene over and over until it's perfect, but I can't seem to follow my own advice on that front.

I do write nonfiction though. I'm a writer for PubHub, a new Canadian website that publishes articles on publishing topics and news. I'm also finalizing my project report for my master's degree, and I hope to continue with academic research and writing on the publishing industry as well.



Q: You founded **Constellate Publishing**, an outlet for Canadian authors, that includes an e-zine accepting short stories. What made you decide to go that route, and how do you structure author pay-rates for accepted submissions?

A: I've had the idea for the *Constellate E-zine* for almost three years now, so it's exciting that it finally exists! I knew I wanted to start my own publishing company that focused on supporting and promoting Canadian

creators, but without a lot of capital behind the endeavor I decided to start with an online short fiction project that would be easier to manage logistically and financially. I plan to publish novels and series down the road, but I don't want to commit to those projects and authors until I know I can do it well and do it right. The e-zine's pay structure is by royalty. The publication is run on **Patreon**, so they take approximately 10% of subscriber payments, and the remaining 90% is split evenly between the author, the artist, and Constellate—and I've been putting Constellate's amount back into marketing the project so the royalty amounts for the author and artist contributors continue to increase. I haven't made any profits with this project yet, but that's perfectly fine with me because it's meant to be a platform to support and promote Canadian creators. As long as I'm doing that well, I'm happy, and I'll continue to grow the company as the audience grows so I can start publishing more projects soon.

Q: What are your future plans, both for your profession and your publication?

A: I have so many answers to this question! I plan to expand Constellate's publication list to novels and series, as well as some more interactive narrative projects. I'm really interested in the line between books and games when it comes to digital publications, so I've been playing around with some ideas on that front. I intend to continue doing freelance editing work as well, because I love working with authors and this work brings a great deal of satisfaction to me personally. I also love to teach. I've been a teaching assistant at Simon Fraser University for two semesters now, and I absolutely love it. I hope to expand my teaching work to writing and editing workshops, and hopefully one day teach in the master's program I'm just about to graduate from. I'm also really interested in research work involving the publishing industry, specifically genre fiction publishing in Canada, so I'd like to build an academic writing portfolio on top of everything else. I like to keep busy, and I'm open to almost any kind of project that involves this industry.

I'd like to note that I also do a lot of volunteer work in the industry as well. I'm on the executive committee for two non-profit organizations: Editors BC (the provincial branch of Editors Association of Canada), for which I am the professional development co-chair, and West Coast Science Fiction Association, for which I am the publications chair so I organize, manage, and edit the fundraiser anthologies and I put together the publishing and writing related programming for their genre events.

I also just launched a podcast called **Rave About the Page**, sponsored by **Creative Edge Publicity** on the **Authors on the Air** network, on which I interview authors about their writing processes and styles.

Our thanks to Ellen for a comprehensive interview, which goes to show you that success takes many forms, often wearing many hats.

Be sure to check out Ellen's Website: <https://ellenmichelle.com>

SHORT STORY: THE KINGDOM

by Ellen Denton

“It’s right there Amos, behind my garbage can.”

Isabel was referring to a small, clean, metal trash bin, which someone had once left outside a local thrift store as a donation. She took it for herself and since used it to store things, including salvaged food from the dumpster behind the fast-food place down the block.

She’d been disappointed with what was there today. The few chicken bones that still had any meat on them smelled several days old; she decided against taking them.

There was a plastic carton with a few streaks of mashed potatoes in it which wasn’t worth transporting back here.

She wiped the whole container clean with one swipe of her finger, eating the cold potatoes on the spot.



She was about to get down from the wooden crate that elevated her enough to see and pull things up out of the dumpster, when she spotted a bunched-up ball of bloody napkins. Curious, she maneuvered it closer with her cane, then worked it up the dumpster's metal side until it was close enough to the top to grab hold of. She felt something stiff and rubbery inside.

Still standing on the crate, she partially unfolded the napkins, and when she saw what was inside, swayed and had to grab onto the edge of the dumpster to keep from falling backwards.

After wrapping it up again, she placed it into one of the empty plastic bags she was carrying and stashed it behind her can when she returned to the off-alley courtyard she and Amos lived in.

"Be careful with it Amos!"

Her husband was reaching behind the can with one hand as he waved her away impatiently with the other.

He sat down on the ground, placing the small, bloodstained bundle on his lap. After unwrapping it, he stared hard at what was inside.

"What in the name of God is *this*?"

"What do you mean 'what is this?' What does it look like? It's a human ear."

"I can see that, Isabel, but.....why did you bring it here? What are you going to do with it?" He looked up at her and smiled. "Not eat it I hope?"

"Amos, this isn't the time for jokes, and keep your voice down."

They had, up till now, been talking barely above whispers, because several other homeless people used this back-building space, one of whom was sleeping at the far end of it right now. Isabel flicked her eyes in that direction, then gave her husband a cautioning look.

"There could be money in this, lots of it. Don't you remember the notice on the wall?"

He stared up at her with puzzled blankness on his face. She hated it when he looked stupid like that.

She took the bundle from him and put it back behind the trash can.

"Get up; I'll show you."

She walked him over to a nearby brick wall, where faded, torn up posters, messages, and paper signs were taped. She tapped one with her cane. "This one." She was referring to a piece of paper with a photograph on it of a pretty young woman that had been put up the previous week. It was the kind of picture you might see in a collage yearbook.

"Oh. You don't think..."

"Yes, I do think. Why would something like that even be in a dumpster except for in circumstances like that? Per that poster, she was last seen in this general area, and the reward for information that leads to her whereabouts is 50,000 dollars. I'm thinking there could be DNA or fingerprints on the flesh that could point to someone, since the person who cut off that ear would have probably had to grab hold of it before starting to slice it away from the head."

"So what do you plan to do?"

"Take it to the police I guess. They can test it."

Amos thought about it for a few moments, then looked up at her with this flinty thing in his eyes, the way they used to get when he was a big-shot exec many years ago – calculating, conniving, determined.

"Isabel, you do that, you'll never see a dime of that money. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. What were the odds of you coming across that ear?"

If it does belong to the missing girl, and it leads someone to her, someone else will claim that reward and there won't be a damn thing you can do about it. Who will believe or even listen to the likes of us? The cops will claim it, or they'll arrange for a friend to say they found it. There's a dozen ways we can be chiseled out of that reward."

“We can have them sign some document saying we were the ones who turned it in, so we have proof. We can--”

“Isabel, don’t be stupid. They can just say they followed some other lead that led them to the girl. We need to work out a better plan.”

He lapsed into thought, again looking the way he would long ago when working on a knotty problem, then briefly looked at the poster once more.

“The reward money is being offered by the girl’s family. We need to go to them directly with this.”

“And do what? Show them a putrid smelling, bloody ear and say ‘We think it may belong to your missing daughter. Can you get it tested? We need the reward money’. How do you think God would look upon you for inflicting that kind of horror on this grieving, desperate family?”

“Isabel, I’m being both coldly practical AND religious. We used to have a lot, what people like us now would have considered a kingdom, but things went to shit and we’ve been living this barely hand-to-mouth, homeless existence for the past thirteen years, with no way I see to climb out of it, not at our age.

I’ve prayed for deliverance from it though; prayed to regain even a little of what we once had. Maybe that ear was a conduit and God finally heard. Maybe he put it in our path by design, not accident.”

Isabel and Amos sat on the ground by her storage trash can. She had placed the bloody napkins in a separate plastic bag of their own, as they too might have forensic value. The ear had been rewrapped in a spotlessly clean towel. She always kept three such towels in a knotted plastic bag in the can, the idea being that if either she or Amos sustained an injury that bled, there would be something hygienic to wrap it in.

The previous day, Amos had gone to a nearby mini mall because it had a phone booth with Yellow Pages in it. He checked the public service phone numbers for the one given on the “Missing” poster below the photo of the girl, and that confirmed his fears – it was the number for the police station, not to the home of the girl’s family. There was no choice but to take the ear into the local precinct, five blocks away.

Isabel felt that by bringing it in a clean towel, while also showing the police how she and Amos had prudently thought to save and turn in the bloody napkins as well, it would give them both more stature and credibility, and show they knew a thing or two.

They were now just waiting for one of four other people they knew

well, who also used this area, to show up.

Because they all kept what few possessions they had unsecured and outdoors in bins, shopping carts, or piled in heaps against walls, (in Amos and Isabel's case, things such as stored food, some blankets and coats, miscellany like scissors, towels, a few treasured photos, and such), they never left them unattended. If Isabel left, Amos would keep watch. When he went somewhere, she stayed. If they both left, they trusted one of the four other people they'd formed an alliance with to look out for their things, and Amos and Isabel did the same for them when those people had to go somewhere. No one wanted to risk what little they had getting stolen.

Accordingly, since the plan was that they both go to the police station with the ear, they needed to wait for one of their friends to show up before leaving.

"Isabel, if we get this reward money--"

"WHEN we get the reward, Amos, WHEN. We WILL get it."

"Yes, okay, when we get it, I think it would be nice if we do something for a few of the people here. Maybe buy them a warm coat, or a big supply of canned goods. Maybe even take them out to a nice dinner."

"I agree. Sharing our good fortune would be nice."

At that moment, they saw Tom Fairfield entering from the alley that led into the courtyard, probably returning from a morning of bumming loose change, as he was carrying a cup of coffee and a white donut bag. Amos stood up and waved a greeting at him.

"Tom, are you going to be around for awhile? Isabel and I want to both leave. Can you watch our things?"

"Sure. Where you folks heading?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe the kingdom of heaven." Amos winked at him.

Since yesterday, he himself had become mildly excited over the prospect of the reward and the reality that they really may receive it, but he didn't want to come across as looking overly eager about anything, even to his long-time friend, who might ask more questions. \$50,000 was a lot of money, and people had killed for far less.

"Right, Amos. Kingdom come, and I'm sure I'll be fucking a super-model right there in that alley any day now. Anyway, don't worry about your things. I'll keep an eye out till you get back."

"Thanks buddy."

With that, Amos helped Isabel up, and they left for the police station.

. . .

They walked along the city streets, then stopped to look at some three-story apartment buildings. They were old, but made of sturdy stone and had a tucked in, cozy look to them. Isabel and Amos were not looking at each other just then, but if they had, they would have seen almost identical expressions of longing on each others faces.

Isabel turned to resume walking. "It would be nice to live in a house again."

Amos nodded. "That it would."

They continued on, and after a while, she took his hand and held it, swinging their arms back and forth the way teenagers might. This surprised him, as she hadn't done that in a long time.

"You know, Amos, when we lost almost everything, and then things went from bad to worse and we ended up like we are now, do you know what I never stopped being grateful for? You. I love you so much. I never lost you and you never lost me. We've taken care of each other through everything. I guess when you have tragedy, you learn what's truly important.

Amos nodded and squeezed her hand. He didn't say anything, but Isabel could always tell when he was choked up about something.

They arrived at the police station and went up to the uniformed officer manning the front desk. Isabel removed the folded towel from the bag she carried and was the one to speak.

"Officer, we found something yesterday afternoon that's - well, it's not very pleasant to look at." She nodded at the towel in her hands. "But we believe it may be from- we think it could possibly be related to the missing girl - the one on the posters that have been put up around town offering the reward."

The policeman stared blankly at the towel for a few moments, blinked, and then his eyes widened in realization. He stood up and pointed, first to Isabel, then to Amos, then back at Isabel, as though trying to figure out who he should address, finally speaking to Amos. "By some chance did you find that in a dumpster?"

"Yes, we..."

"Sir, hold on one moment." He grabbed a phone and punched an extension onto the key pad. Amos and Isabel turned to each other, raised their eyebrows, and shared a small private smile, suppressing their excitement.

The officer spoke into the phone. "Captain, I have here- hang on a sec – sir, ma'am, what are your names?"

Amos answered for both of them. "Mr. and Mrs. Amos and Isabel Truscott."

"I have here a Mr. and Mrs. Truscott. They found something in a dumpster." He looked down at the towel for a moment. "Yep, from the smell, apparently so." He listened to whatever was being said on the other end of the line. "Hang on, I'll check." He looked back and forth at Amos and Isabel again. "Where exactly was this dumpster located?"

Isabel answered this time. "On Salsway and fifth, behind the chicken place."

The officer turned back to the phone. "This one is from the dumpster in the alley behind that "Poultry Piñata" fast food joint on Salsway."

Another pause.

"Yes, Captain. Good. I'll tell them."

"Thank you for finding that and bringing it in. Someone will be out in a moment to take it from you and to get any other information you may have about it. Would you like some coffee?"

Before they could even answer, a man came out, along with a woman who was wearing what looked like hospital scrubs. The woman took the plastic bag with the napkins in it, and then the towel with the ear, lifting the cloth just enough to see what was in it. She nodded, thanked them, and left. Then the man introduced himself as Detective Howards and took them to an office to get whatever details they could provide.

He got them settled with cups of coffee, and after getting some initial information, asked Isabel, "When did you find it?"

"Yesterday, around 10:00 Am."

"That makes sense, and that makes three now."

"Three what?"

"Yesterday and now with you today, that makes three different body parts found in dumpsters, all on different streets. The results of the DNA tests we're running on them aren't in yet, but we know now that they likely all belong to the victim; one of the parts found was a foot which had a scar on it positively identified as identical to one on the foot of the missing girl. The psychopath who did this apparently chopped up her body and dumped the pieces of it all over the city. We've got a task force out right now checking all the dumpsters in a certain radius, including the ones where body parts were already found."

Amos and Isabel gazed at each other, sharing a look that was a little ironic, a little sad.

The detective asked them a few more questions, and then thanked them for coming forward.

“We really appreciate your help in getting this to us, and it was very nice meeting both of you, and pleasant. There’s obviously nothing funny about this situation, but the first person to come in yesterday, who did bring us that foot, acted so irrationally happy about finding it, that we at first thought he was on drugs, or that HE was connected to the crime somehow. He was acting that crazy. Anyway, we’ve already isolated trace evidence from what he brought in, and with a little luck, it will lead us to the killer.”

Amos muttered something about the other two people from yesterday beating him to the punch, then smiled at the detective, stood up, and shook his hand.

“Nice meeting you too, detective. Hope you catch the killer soon.” They all said their goodbyes and Amos and Isabel left the precinct.

They walked in silence for a long time. They made a point to not look at the apartment buildings they’d stopped at previously.

Shortly after passing them, Isabel suddenly stopped and pulled on his shirt sleeve to get him to stop walking too. He did, but didn’t look at her. His jaw was clenched, and she could see lines dug deep into his face – lines of age, of hardship, of disappointment.

She hooked her cane over her arm and took both his hands in hers and squeezed them. He finally raised his eyes and looked at her.

Before they started walking again, she leaned in close toward his ear and whispered, “Love is the Kingdom.”

About the Author

Ellen Denton is a freelance writer living in the Rocky Mountains with her husband and cats. Extended families of wildlife sometimes appear outside the windows of her house and exchange a meaningful look with her before moving on. Her writing has been published in over a hundred magazines and anthologies.

INTERVIEW: EMILY GALLO

Teaching, Writing , and Teaching Writing to the Homeless

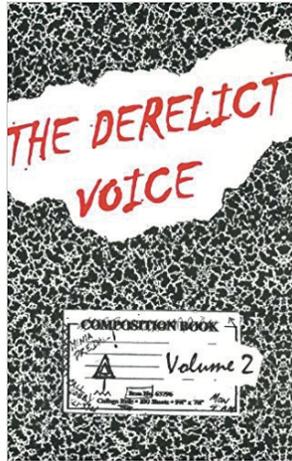


Emily Gallo grew up in Manhattan in the fifties and sixties. She went to Clark University in Worcester, Mass and lived in San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles and Seattle doing the hippie/peace/love/protest thing in the sixties and seventies before living in Northampton, Mass. and Davis, California.

As a wife, mother of two, and elementary school teacher in the eighties, nineties and early 2000s, Emily married David Gallo, a professor emeritus of economics, and moved to Chico, California. She retired from teaching in 2006 to write full-time, starting with writing screenplays and for television, before moving into novels. Her family now divides their time between two

and a half acres of gardens, orchards, and cats and a 750 square foot condo on the beach in Carpinteria, California.

More importantly, since 2009 Emily has been teaching writing to the homeless and publishing their work in two editions of **The Derelict Voice**.



<https://amzn.to/2HP3ump>

Q: You've written a lot for the Huffington Post. "#3 Rethink truck testicles. There is nothing more to say, really." from a 2015 Huffpost article. You are an out-of-the-box writer and your personality comes through in this way, as well. Would you say that you approach life seeing the beauty, the humor, the pain, the irony or a mix of all these?

A: I approach life as a mix of beauty, humor, pain and irony. What you have control over is how you approach it since you can't control much else. Life is a combination of beauty and pain and it is humor and irony that moves us forward. Something happened. Now you get to decide what happens next.

I have a wall full of sayings that inspire me. Some of my favorites are:

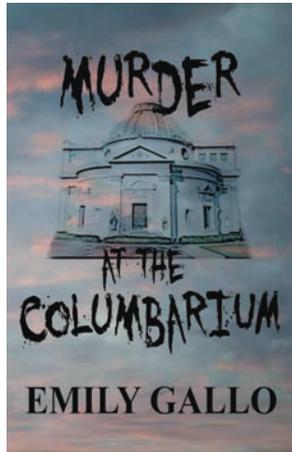
- Life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it.
- The greatest part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions, and not on our circumstances.
- You miss 100% of the shots you don't take.
- Without confusion, no clarity will emerge. Confusion is the mother of change.

- If you don't question, you will have no quest.
- The wisest men follow their own direction.
- To be happy drop the words "if only" and substitute instead the words "next time."



Q: At Monca (Museum of Northern California Art), you brought a writing workshop for the homeless. This is unusual. Could you explain your thinking behind that and also the response to the workshop?

A: I had taught a writing workshop at the local homeless shelter since 2009 and we had published two volumes of their work. The response to that and the quality of the writing was amazing. And I got to know the homeless population of my hometown and wanted to continue to work with them. When Monca approached me about applying for a grant to teach art and writing together to the homeless, I jumped at the opportunity. We created a Saturday morning workshop of breakfast and a thematic joining of art and writing at the museum. The response was not as overwhelming as we had hoped because of the location of the museum, even though we had a bus bring them from the shelter. Getting places on time and a little off their beaten path is not easy for the homeless. Next time I would continue to use the shelter as the location.



<https://anzn.to/2CNI#VW>

Q: You are the author of five books so far: VENICE BEACH, THE COLUMBARIUM, KATE & RUBY, ROADS NOT TAKEN, MURDER AT THE COLUMBARIUM. What's your writing process like, and do you find it easy or a challenge to create these stories?

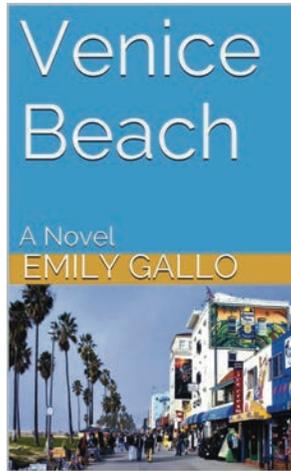
A: My writing process is not structural or outlined. My characters are precious to me and most important. Once I have the characters in place in my mind and I know the theme, the reason I am writing the book, then I create the plot. In fact, my characters are such a part of me, that I decided early on that I would not necessarily write sequels or a series, but I would use some of the same characters in each book as well as introducing new ones. My stories are also usually created for the next book, during the writing of the previous one. It is easy for me as it all comes together naturally as I write.



<https://amzn.to/2HNSir3>

Q: You've also dabbled in screenplays, with six written, script-versions of your novels. How different a process do you find screenwriting, and also how satisfying in contrast to a novel?

A: I wrote the screenplays for my first three novels, as well as a couple of others, before writing the novels. I had *THE COLUMBARIUM* optioned by a Hollywood management company and felt confident that I was on the road to writing for film. But Hollywood is Hollywood! Things happen for no explicable reason – many films are even made and then sit in a vault and are never distributed. Mine was budgeted, director and unit producer assigned, and then I heard nothing. I later found out that this is not unusual. It was then that I decided I didn't want to have to rely on other people's whims to get my work out there so I switched to novels. It was a little difficult to get used to having to be descriptive. In screenplays, you don't have to describe a character or a scene because they are right in front of you. My strength has always been dialogue and it made my novel-writing stronger, I think. It is what many people comment on as making my novels quick and easy reads – people feel like they get to know the characters so well. I enjoy writing both screenplays and novels. In fact, once again I have a producer interested in doing a series on *VENICE BEACH* so I am writing the pilot for a series based on the novel. It will be slightly different from my original screenplay of *VENICE BEACH*.



<https://amzn.to/2HUGm7d>

Q: Bacon and eggs or chocolate and wine, both or none?

A: I'm a vegetarian and have never been a chocolate lover but I'll certainly take wine and chocolate over bacon and eggs.

Q: You also draw. The sketches on your Website are quite good. A developed talent or just a natural gift?

A: Totally a developed talent! I just decided one day I wanted to learn how to draw so I took some classes and worked at it. I'd rather spend my time writing and doing music so after I felt satisfied that I had learned the craft of drawing, I stopped. I may take it up again sometime.

Q: You retired from teaching in 2006. How did your teaching experiences shape your writing goals, and how did that affect your worldview?

A: I retired from teaching when I met my husband and he offered me the chance to write instead of work! I had always wanted to be a writer but earning a living and raising my children had taken priority. I did, however partake in the U.C. Davis Writing Project during summers and was the writing coach for my school district, giving workshops to other teachers. And writing was a strong component of my classroom lesson plans. I had lost both my parents at a young age and experienced the deaths of my first husband and three of my best friends and found writing to be the best way to get through the grief.

My worldview has always been upbeat and optimistic and I attribute some of that to being able to write throughout the tough times.

Q: Pen and paper, computer, other? Set hours, fluidic schedule?

A: I use a computer and although I like to write in the morning, I don't have set hours. I like to write in cafes even though I have an office and a studio at my house. I guess I'm not a solitary person!

Q: What's the worst part of writing? And how do you overcome it?

A: Marketing my books and selling myself. I overcame it by finally hiring an assistant to do my PR.

Q: Please share a bit about your novels and if there is a common thread between them.

A: There is a definite common thread between all the novels because there are some of the same characters. Although they don't have to be read in order, it helps because they do follow a time sequence. There is also a common theme of using one's past to shape one's future, but not being a prisoner to it.

My characters are quirky and fascinating. They are misfits with unusual pasts. My books are also timely in their use of present day issues. But I also like to include something of historical and educational interest. For example, Jed is a Jonestown survivor and any reader under the age of about fifty is not familiar with Jonestown other than hearing about the KoolAid.

Q: Future plans? And anything else you would like to share.

A: Keep writing! I truly do see my books as television series so I hope that this comes to fruition for me.

You can read Emily Gallo at:

Her Website: <https://www.emilygallo.com>

Her books on Amazon: <https://amzn.to/2FCYDIH>

Huffington Post: <https://www.huffpost.com/author/emily-gallo>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TheEmilyGallo/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/TheEmilyGallo>

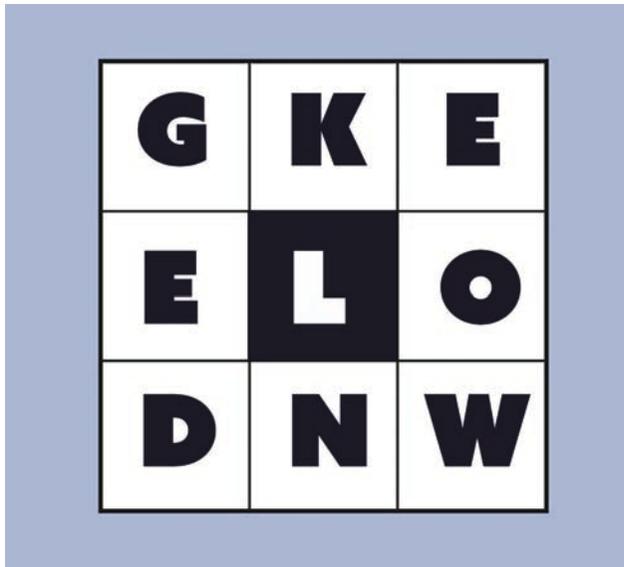
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/emily-gallo-40b409a/>

Pinterest: <https://za.pinterest.com/ecegallo/?eq=Emil&etslf=4181>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/theemilygallo/>

BRAIN GAME #3

Enjoy this issue's puzzle. There is one 9-letter word and 41 other words to find. Answers are in the back of this issue.

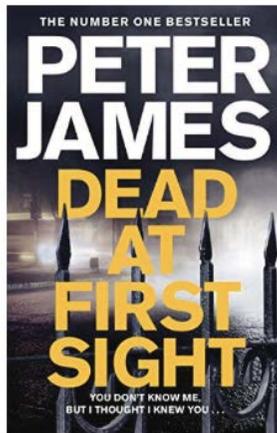


AUTHORS QUESTIONS ON THE RUN

“ Each issue authors are invited to offer their responses to select questions related to writing. Answers and links to the author will be included.

Question # 1: What is your favorite writing tool?”

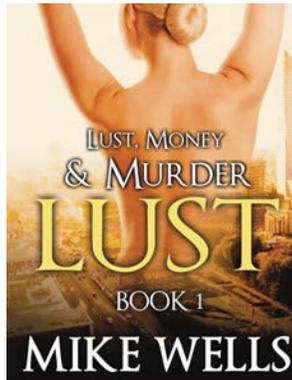
[Note: Author responses are in the order received.]



Pre-order (May 2019) <https://amzn.to/2WAqrOI>

It is my Mac PowerBook, because ever since I started writing on laptops I've been liberated to write absolutely anywhere—the back of a taxi, a restaurant, hotel lobby - and I've actually finished two Roy Grace novels on long-haul flights thanks to it - away from all usual distractions!”

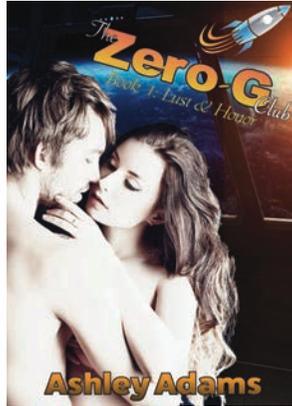
-**Peter James**, International Bestselling crime author. <https://amzn.to/2U4N5Sp> | www.PeterJames.com



<https://amzn.to/2U6e1RD>

“My favorite writing tool is a template which I use that helps you write a short, two sentence synopsis of your story. This is something I picked up in Hollywood and is a fantastic tool to help crystallize the plot and character arcs, very simple to use but really makes you think. I wrote a blog post about it a while back. Once you have it done, it serves as a compass that you can use as a reference when you're in the middle of the book, weeks or months later, and get lost, which often happens to me. I also use it when I'm done with the first draft to see if I arrived at the same place I thought I would, and usually it has to be tweaked (or my story does!)”

- **Mike Wells**, Bestselling author. <https://amzn.to/2YAyLzv> | <http://mikewellsblog.blogspot.com>



<https://amzn.to/2CMVgII>

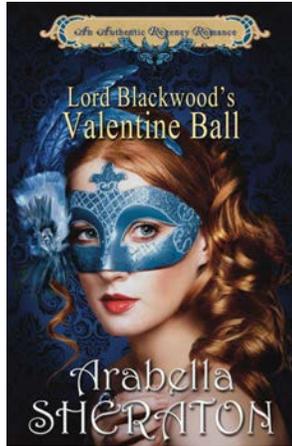
“Pen, notebook and a large coffee. Always.”

- Ashley Adams <https://amzn.to/2CMVgII> |



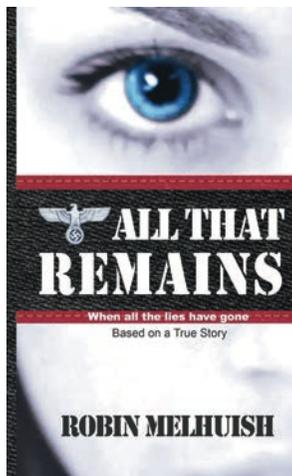
<https://amzn.to/2UryZKk>

“Awesome! I would say my favorite writing tool is taking long drives, chilling out in the steam room, and spending time at the beach. This helps me to relax and prepare my mind to write.” - **Megan Hatfield**, Bestselling author <https://amzn.to/2YALd2i> | www.MeganHatfield.com



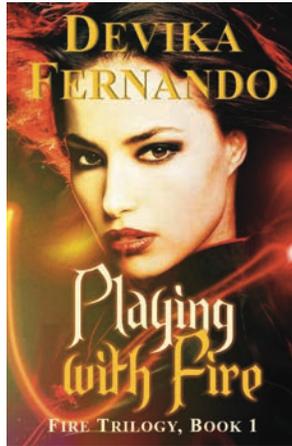
<https://amzn.to/2CM29tA>

“Alas I don't use Scrivener or any fancy programs to 'help' me write. I am in favour of one's own slogging efforts. However, I must say that real books when doing research are paramount. Readers of historical or any fact-based fiction usually know the genre they are interested in and many know when the facts are wrong. So, a good book/books when doing research is my favourite writing tool.” - **Arabella Sheraton**, Bestselling Regency Romance author <https://amzn.to/2FH2huP>



<https://amzn.to/2TOln7e>

“My favourite implement is a gold Schaefer fountain pen. A bit impractical these days. To do the the day to day novel writing it's a trusty old laptop and MS word. I tried Scrivener, but my head just doesn't go there. (Too dumb I guess) Hope you're okay. New book being proofed and edited. Once done will send for perusal.” - **Robin Melhuish**, Bestselling author
<https://amzn.to/2TOln7e>



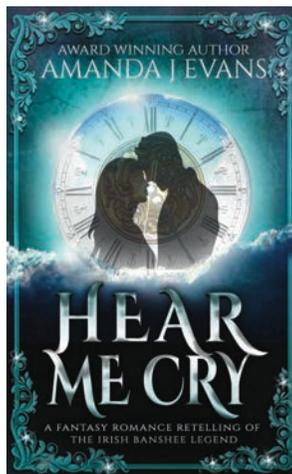
<https://amzn.to/2HPt5fW>

“My favourite writing tool, if you can call it such, is the Internet. It gives me inspiration in the form of photos, writing prompts, news or even just interaction. It offers me an opportunity to connect with like-minded people, see what my readers like, network with other authors, and self-publish my books. And last but not least, it provides a wealth of information for writing research purposes. I focus on international romance novels and collect all my data on the country I've chosen as a setting online.” - **Devika Fernando**, Bestselling romance author
<https://amzn.to/2FEHMil>
| <https://www.devikafernando.com>



<https://amzn.to/2UnYImE>

“Scrivener by far. I love how I can sync the app on my phone to my laptop, how I can dictate directly into scrivener and how I can plan how many words are needed/day to hit a certain deadline.” - **Steena Holmes**, Best-selling author <https://amzn.to/2HQmPEC> | www.steenaholmes.com



<https://amzn.to/2I34IAk>

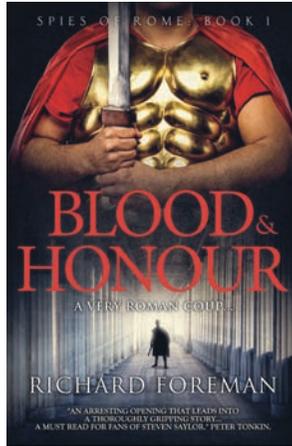
“My favourite writing tool is pen and paper. All my first drafts are hand-written and then typed.” - **Amanda J Evans**, Award-winning author para-

normal and fantasy. <https://amzn.to/2WyFxnJ> |
<https://amandajevans.com>



<https://amzn.to/2JUM7U1>

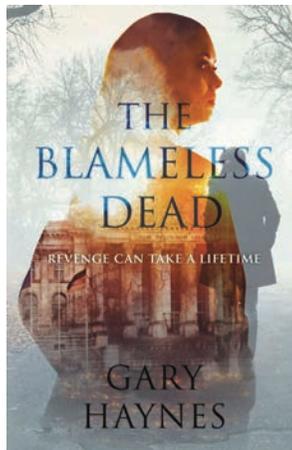
“My computer is everything. I wrote longhand as a kid, and then on a typewriter, but it was only with my first computer that my ham-handed, two-finger typing exactly matched the speed of words forming in my head. Marriage made in digital heaven, baby...” **Ken Stark**, Award-winning author. <https://amzn.to/2JSlajL> | www.kenstark.ca



<https://amzn.to/2WH3jhx>

“I suppose my library is my greatest writing tool. Other books are a source of inspiration and information for writing historical fiction.

Whenever I start a new novel, set in ancient Rome, I always re-read the likes of Suetonius and Plutarch. Whilst writing the Spies of Rome series I've also re-visited le Carre and Graham Greene.” - **Richard Foreman** (also Sharpe Books, UK), Author and publicist <https://amzn.to/2HOBhNp> | <http://richardforemanauthor.com>

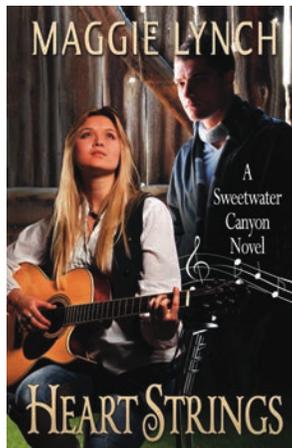


<https://amzn.to/2HQT3K>

"I write historical fiction as well as crime and thrillers. Having a simple tool to gauge if a word was in use at a particular time in history is invaluable. The dictionary in Google search does this job admirably, with a use over time graph after the definition and origin sections."

- **Gary Haynes**, Bestselling thriller & crime author, <https://amzn.to/2JVneYv> | <https://amzn.to/2JVneYv>

"It's simple. My notebook and a pen. These tools follow me everywhere I go. You never know when a new idea happens for an outline." I'm working on a Spec Fict and Fantasy Romance. The working title to the fourth manuscript is, "Sedated Blood" from my series, "The Enforcers of Olympia." - **Jen Hanson** www.twitter.com/jeenforcers



<https://amzn.to/2HZp1cg>

"My first inclination is to say my computer because it serves as the hub for everything. However, that is likely what every modern author would choose. Instead, I'll offer up a specific app that is unvaluable to my daily work. That is BB EDIT.

It's a HTML and text editing tool for MAC OS. I keep open while writing and doing business work. I can create files on the fly, go back to add to files already existing, and all of it is without formatting. That is key

because it means I can copy and paste anywhere I want without worrying about background code screwing things up.

For writing it's like the ultimate easy digital scratchpad. I stuff questions in there, scenes I'm considering, ideas, research links I want to return to. For my publishing business, I copy my book blurbs into their own files, keywords, categories, vendor buy links my ebook, print book, and audiobook as each title is released. It's great because things are saved without formatting, which means I can easily copy and paste to wherever they need to go: my website, a vendor website, a social media post, even a piece of HTML or CSS coding." - **Maggie Lynch**, Author and founder of Windtree Press. <https://amzn.to/2HORFNX> | <https://maggielynch.com>



<https://amzn.to/2Ujg8ky>

"I can't choose my laptop, can I? I type much faster than I write by hand, but I still do enjoy writing by hand. And I literally don't write with anything but the Paper Mate Write Bros ballpoint pen, medium point. I've been using these pens for everything since high school. It's great, because they last forever, and they're only \$5 for 10! Black ink, always. Blue just feels wrong. And pencils? Shudder." - Kathrin Hutson, | I can't choose my laptop, can I? I type much faster than I write by hand, but I still do enjoy writing by hand. And I literally don't write with anything but the Paper Mate Write Bros ballpoint pen, medium point. I've been using these pens for everything since high school. It's great, because they last forever, and they're only \$5 for 10! Black ink, always. Blue just feels wrong. And

pencils? Shudder. - Kathrin Hutson, Author, <https://amzn.to/2FDbTXp> |
<https://www.kathrinhutsonfiction.com>

Author Questions on the Run is a new regular feature for Books 'N Pieces Magazine. If you are a published author and would like to participate, please email william@booksnpieces.com and I will add you to our questions mailing list. My thanks to the authors who participated, and encourage our readers to check out their books and Websites.

SHORT STORY: THE ASS-WHUPPIN'

by Mike Todd

Jerry Stephens had a chip on his shoulder, but who didn't? Both of our chips were placed there by our fathers. Mine wanted me to be a saint, and his wanted him to be a demon. Although we both failed to match our fathers' expectations in full, he came much closer than I did.

We had the kind of relationship that could exist only in childhood and grade-B spy movies: he was my old friend and archenemy. When the chips were down, we knew we could count on each other. Otherwise, we would fight.

Our statures and strength were about equal. That should have made our fights competitive, but it didn't. I always won. Even though Jerry was a dirty fighter, I was a passionate one, and that made all the difference.

Still, Jerry was always ready to fight me, always trying to start something. I learned to ignore him up to a point, but once he crossed a certain line, I would hesitate just long enough to assure myself I was justified in what I was about to do. Then I would thrash him.

Our second-to-last fight went along these lines. The four of us were crossing a field on the way to the lake when Jerry stopped and tapped Paul on the chest with the back of his hand to get his attention. He had a shit-eating grin on his face that told us Bobby was going to do something stupid and that we should get ready to humiliate him. He was not pointing at Bobby, though; he was pointing at Hank, who had stopped to hike his leg. I could not figure out what Jerry was expecting to happen as I watched my dog give a backwards salute to a fence pole, but Jerry said,

"He's about to do it," so I kept watching. I realized too late it was an electric fence, and before I could stop him, Hank hit a strand with his stream of urine. He howled suddenly and jumped forward a couple of feet. I ran to comfort my dog as he shook and whimpered pitifully, looking back with confusion and fear for an invisible enemy.

We were all in pain. Hank was obviously hurting, and I was, too, out of sympathy. Paul and Bobby were hurting psychologically, giggling nervously, crossing their legs. But Jerry was hurting from laughing too hard.

"That . . . is the . . . stupidest . . . dog . . . I ever seen," he belted, catching his breath between words and guffaws.

I gritted my teeth. Feeling the skin tighten on my face, I told myself to calm down. *Don't listen to that jerk. Stay down here and help Hank.*

"Gawd, that was funny. Where'd you get such a dumb dog?" came out of his grinning red face. He held his belly with one hand and wiped a tear off his cheek with the back of another.

"Shut up," I warned him through my teeth.

Recognizing the challenge, he switched his tone. Staring at me coldly, he said, "It's not my fault your dog's so damn stupid." He had always hated Hank, partly because he hated most everything and partly because Hank was my best friend. All Jerry had were a couple of mutts in his backyard which could not be called pets.

"You better shut up," I said. The absence of emotion in my voice told everybody trouble was near. The other guys stepped back a little to give us room. Jerry egged it on.

"Why don't you make me?" he challenged. "You think you're man enough?"

I ignored him. It was Hank's honor I would defend, not my own. I would fight him for letting Hank hurt himself, for enjoying it. Sensing this, Jerry reverted to his original approach by saying, "Your damn dog is stupid as hell."

That was all I needed. The next thing I knew I was straddling Jerry's ribs, pounding him in the head as he desperately tried to defend himself against my blows. I do not know what happened before that. I am sure I pounced on him after his last insult, that we struggled, that he stuck me a few times before I eventually got him down. All this had to have happened, but my memory had its own perspective. One moment I was on my knees petting Hank, and the next I was on my knees pounding Jerry.

Jerry's sobbing, Bobby's whining--"Don't you think he's had enough? Let him up, okay?"--Hank's standing beside me tilting his head inquisi-

tively, my hands' hurting all helped me to fill in the blank spots. *Bobby's right. I probably should let him up. He's had enough.*

I stopped swinging my fists and sat upright for a few seconds, catching my breath. Beneath me, Jerry sobbed and waited for me to get off him. My last brutish act was to use his chest as the base for my hands as I pushed myself up. Jerry jumped to his feet as soon as he was free, looked at me with surprising defiance, and said, "Next time I'll whup your ass." Then he turned and jogged away, wounded and silent.

We did not see Jerry again until the next morning at school. He looked bad. On his face were many small cuts, scrapes, scratches, and bruises. But these minor injuries were mere satellites of the true monument to Jerry's beating: his right eye was blackened perfectly.

"Where'd you get that shiner?" I greeted him with cockiness. He was quiet.

"When'd you give him that?" Paul asked me, admiring the work. "You must have really whopped him one time when I wasn't looking." I could not remember that particular blow, either. Bobby just stared, grimacing.

"Somebody beat the hell out of you? Huh, Jerry?" I goaded grinning.

Jerry straightened his back and stared silently, warning me he would let me beat him up again if I kept insulting him. Bobby slumped his shoulders and sighed, preparing to whine if something was to start. I didn't take it any farther, though. I just wanted to degrade him a little.

There was an awkward silence for a moment. Neither Jerry nor I wanted to break it, fearing that doing so might set the stage for another fight. We all stood tensely until Bobby decided to try and divert everybody's attention. "Did you guys read the history assignment last night? Wasn't it kind of neat how that Mexican guy--what was his name?"

"Montezuma," I said.

"Yeah, Montezuma. How he--hey, have you guys ever heard of 'Montezuma's revenge'? What is that, anyway?"

"The trots," said Paul.

"Huh?" asked Bobby.

"You know. The runs," Paul tried again. Bobby still looked confused.

"Damn, dumbass, it's dia-fucking-rrhea. The shits, you idiot," Jerry clarified.

"Oh, I get it," Bobby responded with an enlightened expression. "It's like when they say not to drink the water in Mexico because it'll make you sick. It's like a joke about how he got revenge on those Spanish guys. Right?"

"And the doctors said you were hopelessly stupid," Paul said playfully.

"Anyway, like I was saying, wasn't it neat how he let Corvex--"

"Kotex," Paul pretended to correct with a snicker.

"Cortez, you idiot," Jerry said to Bobby. We were taken aback slightly by Jerry's revelation that he had actually done his homework. I reasoned he had read it because of the gore and violence.

"Cortez. Cortez," Bobby repeated so that he might commit the name to memory. "Anyway, wasn't it weird how Montezuma just let him beat him because he thought that it should be like that? I mean, he could've really creamed Cortez."

"He could've been a contender. He could've been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what he is," Paul slurred in a husky voice. None of us got it because we had not seen the movie. Bobby's parents had taken the four of us to the theater over the summer so that we could see *Reptilicus*. Paul did not want to watch it, saying that only morons would like something so ridiculous. He was right. Jerry, Bobby, and I enjoyed *Reptilicus* while Paul sat next door with Bobby's parents and watched an "old, boring" movie called *On The Waterfront*. He must have liked it because he had been doing bad Brandos ever since.

"You don't believe that bullshit, do you? Just because it's printed in some stupid history book don't make it so," Jerry said. "He wouldn't just roll over and let Cortez kick his ass because he thought it was the right thing to do."

"Oh, I don't know, though," Paul said, joining the debate. "If you really believe that something should happen a certain way--even if you don't like it--you might go along with it and let it happen. You might even *help* it happen, even if it goes against what you think make sense."

"Yeah, but that *really* didn't make sense," I argued. "Why would anybody think that they should just let somebody else whup him?"

Bobby sighed with relief. Although he had been ostracized, he accomplished what he had set out to do. Jerry and I had reestablished an alliance. The tension was over. We would have peace for the moment.

Now feeling better about Jerry, I wanted to officially recognize the continuation of our relationship with a friendly gesture: the trading of baseball cards. "You still have that Mickey Mantle, Jerry? You said you'd give it up for a Koufax and a Drysdale, didn't you?"

Koufax and Drysdale were great pitchers, but I would never give up a Mickey Mantle for them. Jerry, however, hated the Yankees: they were successful and they were from New York. Of course, he was not really a Dodgers fan, either. After all, they were successful, too, and they started out in New York before moving to a place Jerry considered almost as bad.

Furthermore, they brought Jackie Robinson into the big leagues, so he had an extra incentive to hate them. Jerry did love good pitchers, though, and Koufax and Drysdale were good enough that he could forgive their alliances. Had they played for St. Louis, I'm sure he would have loved them enough to give up even more than a Mickey Mantle. Just like almost everybody else in northern Arkansas, Jerry loved the Cardinals.



"Yeah," he said, his eyebrows raised with interest. "You finally want to trade? Why do you want to get rid of them cards? Drysdale won the Cy Young Award last year. And I bet Koufax gets it this year." Jerry was right, as he usually was when it came to sports. Koufax won the Cy Young Award and was named the National League's MVP. Drysdale's and Koufax's Dodgers beat my Yankees in the World Series a month later, and both of them eventually joined Mantle in the Hall of Fame.

"I'll come over after school and we can swap them then," I said as Bobby nodded in support of these peace talks.

"Okay. I'll have that Mantle ready. As far as I'm concerned, you can have all my 'Damn Yankees' if you got something to give for them." The way he said this, I understood that their mascot had something to do with his feelings. Had they been called the "Rebels" or the "Confederates," Jerry might have been a diehard fan.

As I looked in through the screen door waiting for somebody to answer my knock, I realized that I had never been in Jerry's house. *That's pretty strange. Jerry's been in my house lots of times. We all have been in each other's*

houses. Mom has even gone out of her way to make sure Jerry feels welcome. I wonder if Bobby and Paul have been in there.

I cupped my hands over my face and leaned into the screen, acting like I was looking for somebody to answer the door, but really surveying the place. The light was bad inside, and staring through the fine mesh of the screen, I could not focus on any one object. However, the disarray and dreariness of the room as a whole was clear, and I was reminded--not for the first time--that Jerry was below the rest of us on the socioeconomic scale.

Unpleasant odors mixed inside the house and floated through the screen. It smelled like a musty basement, a public restroom, and a foreign restaurant all rolled into one. I thought I heard Jerry's little sister in one of the back rooms, so I knocked again harder.

"What the hell do you want? Who is it?" came from one corner of the living room.

"Uh . . . I . . . uh . . . came to see Jerry, sir," I answered nervously as shadows moved around on what I assumed was their couch. Mr. Stephens had been awakened from a nap and was angry.

"Dammit," I heard him whisper before bellowing for his son.

Almost immediately, Jerry appeared in a doorway on the far side of the room and asked apprehensively, "Yes, sir?"

Mr. Stephens did not reply. I saw the shadow move again and knew he was pointing at me. Jerry answered, "Yes, sir," then walked quickly across the room toward the door.

"What the hell do you think y'all are going to do?" his father asked from the shadows.

Jerry froze with his hand on the screen door and answered, "We're just going to trade some baseball cards, sir."

"Well, that's a damn fine thing to do with your time and money. You watch yourself trading with that Jew-boy. They'll take your shirt if you give them a chance."

"No, sir. You're thinking of our other friend, Bobby Joseph," I corrected without thinking. "He's not Jewish, though. He's Catholic."

"What's the damn difference?" Mr. Stephens asked slowly in a deeper voice, suggesting that he knew what he was talking about and that I had better not challenge him. I did not.

Jerry stood quietly and wide-eyed witnessing this exchange. When he heard his father's voice take this new tone, he walked through the door and led me briskly off the porch. We walked to the base of a big oak tree in his front yard and sat on the ground in its shade.

As I pulled Koufax and Drysdale out of my shirt pocket and Jerry presented Mickey Mantle, we heard the screen door slam shut. Mr. Stephens was now standing on the porch holding a can of beer and staring at us. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Jerry's back straighten as he tensed.

For a moment, I could not take my eyes off Mr. Stephens. I had never seen him before and had always assumed he looked like all the other fathers I knew. Instead, he had a three-day growth of beard, wore dirty boots, dirty pants, a big dirty belt, and a dirty tee-shirt, and had vacant eyes like he was sleepy or drunk. What really caught my attention was his height--he lacked it. Even at this age, my father still towered almost a foot over me, but Mr. Stephens was barely taller than Jerry and me. He seemed to be trying to compensate for his smallness by standing bigger, pushing his chest out, letting his arms float out from his sides as if his biceps were too big to allow them to hang normally. Instead of looking like a big man, though, this exaggerated stance made him look like a cocky little son-of-a-bitch. I was already old enough to know that this made him much more dangerous than most big men.

"What the hell you staring at, boy?" he asked me.

I quickly dropped my head and pretended to study my baseball cards intently. I rolled my eyes upward to see if my act of submission placated him. He was still staring our way with the same far-away and mean look that he had been wearing since he came outside. As he took a drink from his can, I turned back to Jerry so I could finish my business, then leave.

"Okay, Jerry. Where's that Mantle? Here are my two--"

"I know you're not that Jew-boy friend of Jerry's. You're that scrawny little smart ass who keeps whupping his scrawny little butt. You're lucky Jerry's such a sissy, or there probably wouldn't be anybody you could whup. Maybe some girls. Probably not, though." he said, then laughed.

I tried to ignore his attacks on both of us and said to Jerry, "So you want to trade or not? It's two for one."

Before he could answer, Mr. Stephens began again. "I don't know why Jerry can't ever whup your ass. I used to whup your daddy's all the time. It's true. You ought to ask him some time. We were in the same grade, just like you two boys. Except we weren't friends; we was enemies. Yeah, I hated your daddy. And he feared me." He paused to see if he had stirred me. He had, but not enough that I was willing to fight an adult.

"You know why I hated your daddy? Because he weren't nothing but a hypocrite. He always tried to pass himself off as someone respectable. But he weren't nothing but a back-stabber and double-crosser. He thought he

was better than others, but he weren't. Still ain't. Your daddy ain't nothing but a two-bit hypocritical son-of-a-bitch."

He had finally crossed the line, as he was hoping to do. Before I knew what I was doing, I was up and running towards Mr. Stephens, screaming with rage. I had a good bead on him and was sure that my momentum would have carried him down, but suddenly my legs were tangled and I fell prone on the dirt in front of his feet. Jerry rolled me over, climbed on top of my chest, and whispered, "Don't be such a dumb ass."

"You ought to thank Jerry, boy. I was just about to knock the hell out of you, but he went and tackled your scrawny ass," he said coldly. I knew it was true because I had seen him ball up his left fist as I was running toward him. It was also true Jerry had saved me, but at the moment I was so angry that I saw this as an act of betrayal. I forgot about his dad for the moment and directed my anger towards Jerry. Heaving my chest violently, aided by adrenaline, I rolled him over to one side until I was on top and began swinging my fists at his face. I swung as fast as I could, convinced I only had a few seconds before his father would pull me off and break up the fight.

"What's Jerry doing, Daddy?" I heard his little sister ask. Her question brought me back for a moment and I paused and tried to make sense of the whole situation. Maggie had apparently come out when she heard the commotion.

Her father ignored her, devoting his attention to the fight. He looked down at Jerry and asked coldly, "When are you ever going be a man?"

Shocked, I looked at Jerry to see what his reaction would be. After all the blows that I landed on his face, I had never seen him flinch like this. What made it seem even worse was that this was obviously par for the course; they had had this conversation before.

"I tell you what, boy, if you don't whup his ass," Mr. Stephens said to his son, "I'll whup yours."

I looked at Jerry's face again and saw his eyes grow big with fear. He lurched with all he could muster but was too tired to roll me over. He tried again, this time a little harder, but I was anchored to his chest. Seeing the futility of the effort he began to sob, occasionally making meager attempts to roll me over, but these seemed more like convulsions accompanying his crying than anything else.

"Make him get off Jerry, Daddy," Maggie cried. I looked up just in time to see Mr. Stephens knock her to the ground.

"Shut up and get your ass back in that house," he said to the seven-year-old girl. As Maggie jumped back to her feet and ran to the screen

door screaming, he turned to Jerry and said, "You about ready for your second ass-whupping, boy?"

I was suddenly overcome with pity. I felt sorry for Maggie, for Jerry, for anybody associated with this man. My pity for Jerry did not subside in the least when he rolled me over, climbed back on top of my chest, and began to pound me repeatedly in the face.

My beating seemed to last forever, but while it was happening, I did not feel any physical pain. The pain I felt went much deeper; it was empathy for a former friend.

Eventually, it was over. Jerry got up and stood over me catching his breath. I stared up at his face through my tears and saw someone I did not know. Jerry's face was distorted by his exhaustion and pain, and by his conflicting emotions of sorrow and pride.

"I might be able to make you a man yet," was all that his father said before turning toward the door. Jerry, still standing over me and staring down, finally decided to give me a hand up. Mr. Stephens turned just in time to see this and said, "Don't help him, boy. He's not worth the effort." Jerry pulled back his hand, then turned away, following his father.

I slept hard that night, but woke up still feeling exhausted. Through my window, I could see the sun burning high in the morning sky. I got out of bed and found Mom in the kitchen.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"It's a little bit after ten."

Mild panic set in as I told her, "I'm late for school. Why didn't you get me up?"

"Because I wanted you to stay home and rest today. You look much better, but you still look pretty rough. Just take it easy today so you can go back tomorrow, okay?"

I thanked her. She was right. I needed to take a day to recuperate physically and emotionally.

"How bad was Jerry hurt?" she suddenly asked, surprising me.

"I don't know. About like always, I guess."

Thinking about Jerry and the fight opened a floodgate of emotions. As was usually the case whenever some ethical dilemma confronted me, I ended up secretly blaming my father for the painful outcome. It was his fault I had empathy for my foe in the heat of battle, that I ever tried to do what I knew was right. He seemed to be so perfectly moral, and a "proud of you, son" was so precious that I always felt manipulated into being a

good person. This time, though, I had even more reason to blame him; I had taken his beating, though it was administered by Jerry instead of his father. Without even understanding the feelings Mr. Stephens had for my father, I took a beating and lost a friend. I felt silly for it at the time, but I did not think I could keep from crying. Not wanting Mom to see me, I turned away and headed for the front door so I could sit on the porch swing alone.

As I stepped outside bare-footed, I felt something on the porch's wooden floor. Looking down to my right foot, I saw Mickey Mantle's head staring up at me over my toes like Kilroy. I bit my bottom lip to stem the flow of tears as I bent down to pick up the card. I couldn't contain them any longer when I found Koufax and Drysdale underneath.

About the Author:



*Mike Todd's literary/mainstream writings have appeared in numerous publications including **Thema**, **Fiction on the Web**, **Front Porch Review**, **River Poets Journal**, **Page & Spine**, and **New Reader Magazine**. His first novel, **A Sparrow on the Housetop**, is currently being presented to publishers by his agent.*

He once held his breath for thirty-two non-consecutive seconds and he can bend a spoon using nothing but his mind and his hands. You can (and should) follow him at [facebook.com/ByMikeTodd](https://www.facebook.com/ByMikeTodd).

INTERVIEW: GARETH L. POWELL

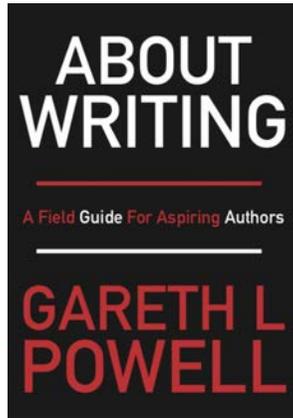
Award-Winning Sci-Fi Wizard



Q : The best quote I've read was the one on your Website from the New York Journal of Books that said: "When you have an imagination like Gareth Powell's, you must write or paint or otherwise vent that imagination through art so your head won't explode." That seems to sum up good writers in all genres; that what's inside must find a way to surface. Would you say that imagination is the key to a good story, or just one aspect?

A: Imagination is vital when writing SF. You need to dream up and populate entire worlds. Sometimes entire universes. You need to show

your readers something they haven't seen before—something that sparks that good old sense of wonder.



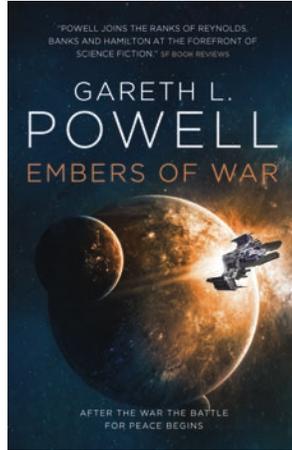
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Q: You offer creative writing workshops. Do your students get the most of these or do you, as a writer, find these to also be an excellent way to process your own material—writer to writer?

A: I don't process my own material in workshops. I'm more concerned with giving my students as much practical help as I can.

Q: Science fiction as had moments of mainstream glory over the past few decades, usually tied to films that generate new readership. Science fiction also has a nasty habit of becoming science fact. Based on that premise, how positive are you about the future of mankind when viewed through an SF lens? And is that an exciting prospect?

A: At the moment, we're at a crossroads. One path leads to a technological dystopia, and we're beginning to see the seeds of that in China, where people without 'social credit' are forbidden from buying train tickets, and the state monitors everything online. The second path leads to extinction via war, climate change, or accident. And the third leads to the most unlikely of all futures—a future where technology, food and medicine are evenly distributed and the human race strives to better itself. From this perspective, any SF story set more than a few decades hence is an act of extraordinary optimism.



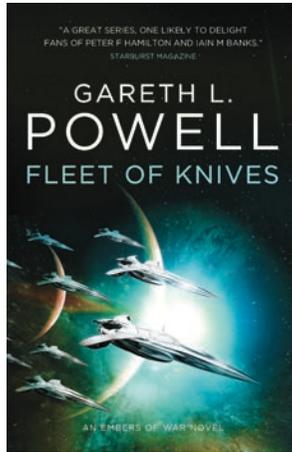
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Q: What made you choose science fiction as a genre?

A: Some of my earliest memories are of the Apollo missions and Skylab. I watched Star Trek on our old black and white TV. And then Star Wars came out when I was six years old. Sf chose me from an early age.

Q: What's your writing process like from conception to manuscript? Pen and paper or strictly computer? Revisions along the way or after the writing is completed? Are you a strictly disciplined writer?

A: I write everything in MS Word and revise as I go. I'm not very disciplined, but when I have the scent, I can write reasonably quickly. Usually, I'll start with an idea or a character, and build a world around them. This will involve typing up several different plot documents. Each will be around 3k in length, and simply be a recounting of the events of the story. They're how I find out what's going to happen, and each one refines the plot until I get to a point where I'm happy enough to start writing—at which point the characters will pretty much instantly derail my outline and go off in their own directions.



<https://amzn.to/2JSr2K1>

Q: What is the worst expectation you find from your creative writing students and what is the best piece of advice you offer them?

A: The worst expectation is that anyone's going to be interested in the derivative eight-novel fantasy series they are writing, which comes with a companion volume of short stories delving into each character's past, and in which nothing of any particular note happens until book six. No publisher's going to invest that much time and money in an unproven author unless the idea is electrifyingly original. Instead, concentrate on writing the first book. Make it the best it can be. Make it original and engaging, and able to stand alone if necessary (you can always mention the other books in the series if the first one is a success).

Q: You've also written a book "About Writing: A Field Guide For Aspiring Writers". Could you share the evolution of this book?

A: The book had its genesis in the notes I made for workshops and guest lectures, and in blog posts I wrote for my website. Those posts were written as I discovered things, as a way of sharing my journey with others who were also on the same path. Now I've collected them together, updated them where needed, and they form a handy pocket guide for aspiring writers, covering topics not always included in other writing guides.

• • •

Q: You are now working on a screenplay. Is this an original script or conversion from a novel? What made you try this new format and how has your experience been?

A: I'm about 40 pages into a screenplay and I'm learning as I go. I don't think this one will every come to anything, as it's very much a learning exercise, but I think it's important to experiment in as many ways of writing as you can. And maybe one day, someone will commission me to write one...

Q: As a writer, what is your worst habit? Best quality?

A: Worst habit: Getting distracted by social media.

Best quality: I try to be honest about my characters. They all have flaws as well as good characteristics. They are all human beings.



Q: Is there a difference between British and American science fiction and if so, what?

A: I don't know. Maybe there once was, when the British New Wave was at its height. These days, I'm not so sure. The writers I most identify with — Adrian Tchaikovsky, Iain M Banks, Peter Hamilton, Emma Newman, Ann Leckie, Becky Chambers, Aliette de Bodard, James SA Corey — are fairly evenly split between the UK and US.

Q: In "Embers of War" you have a sentient spaceship as your protagonist

in what India's "Factor Daily" calls a "good space opera," while pointing out your greatest strength, in their view, as your "very human and emotional handling of the characters." When you read comments like this, do you believe that your writing has made the impact you had hoped?

A: Absolutely. My goal is to write about 'real' people in fantastical situations. I see no reason why the characters in a space opera can't be as deep and nuanced as those in a literary novel. Regardless of genre, good writing is good writing.

Q: What's next for you?

A: The third Embers of War book, *Light of Impossible Stars*, comes out in Feb next year. After that, I'm planning a new space opera series.

Our thanks to Gareth for taking the time to answer our questions. Be sure to follow him at the links below.

Gareth's books on Amazon: <https://amzn.to/2UkagHr>

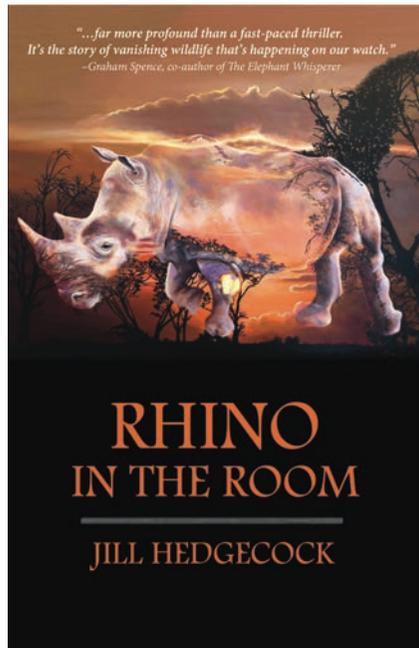
Twitter: @garethpowell

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CHAPTER PREVIEW: RHINO IN THE ROOM

by Jill Hedgecock



Chapter One

Why do shortened school days seem to take the longest? Not that I'm anxious to get home after what went down last night. It seems like Mr. Garcia has been droning on forever about some philosophical topic unrelated to U.S. history. But I guess that's better than memorizing Civil War dates. Still, this whole class is a waste of time. Learning about the past isn't going to help me become a better fashion designer.

"Okay, now that I've laid the groundwork, let's have a debate," Mr. Garcia says then smooths his thick, black mustache with his thumb and forefinger. "There's no going back. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?"

I shrink down in my seat, hoping he won't call on me. My parent's fight has left my emotions jumbled. Trying to sift through feelings that seem to change moment by moment has left me exhausted. I gaze around the orderly lines of desks. A few of my fellow high school seniors text on phones held under their tan, plastic desktops to shield what they're doing from the teacher. Others smirk. Danny seems to have nodded off. My classmates' expressions suggest they are as bored as I am.

Then I glance toward the back of the classroom. My heart sinks a little deeper in my chest when I see my best friend's blanched face. She knows better than anyone that you can't turn back the clock. Her eyes are closed. Her hunched shoulders cause her body to curl in upon itself. Is she having a relapse? Mr. Garcia's words must have reminded Sylvia of her new reality. She'll have to suffer through the flu-like symptoms of malaria on and off for the rest of her life.

"Claire," Mr. Garcia says. "What do you think?"

I startle and turn to face the teacher. My cheeks flame as my mind goes blank. I have no idea what the question is. Lots of students take notes on their computers, but I still use a pad and paper. That way I can doodle fashion designs if inspiration hits. But I haven't written anything down.

Then I think of Sylvia and remember. Can you go back? Once something happens, is history set in stone? I'm not sure. Certainly, I can erase parts of my fashion design when I'm sketching. But what about Sylvia? She can't go back to a healthy life.

Mr. Garcia frowns at me as if he's getting impatient.

"Maybe?" I say, raising my eyebrows and offering a half-smile.

“Continue,” he says.

My mind latches onto the hurtful words I overheard Dad shout last night. My father couldn’t have meant what he said.

“Well,” I say, “people say things they don’t mean all the time, especially when they’re angry. Isn’t an apology a way of going back?”

“Can you give me an example illustrating the opposing viewpoint?” His smile of encouragement helps my thoughts kick into gear.

I remember what happened in the Parkland and Sandy Hook shootings. The kids who saw their classmates gunned down must be permanently affected by the tragedy.

“I don’t think there’s any going back for the high school kids at Parkland,” I say. “Some of those students started the #NeverAgain movement and others became public advocates for gun control.”

“That’s a very interesting example,” Mr. Garcia says. “What about—”

I’m saved from further discussion by the sound of

the bell. A flurry of activity erupts. No one waits for our teacher to dismiss us. Some kids have already bolted out the door. I walk three desks back to where Sylvia sits. She’s stuffing her history book into her backpack with more force than necessary.

“Hey,” I say, bending over to put my arms around her, “Let’s get out of here.”

When I let go, she unfolds her tall frame from the seat, slinging her brown book bag over her shoulder. She’s wearing the blue-gray turtleneck sweater and distressed jeans that we ordered online last week when she’d been too ill to go to the mall. Sylvia used to be so energetic that I couldn’t keep up with her. Now, she shuffles around like she needs a walker. Kids impatient to get out of the classroom jostle us as we make our way outside. The crisp air is a welcome relief after the stuffy classroom.

“That was cool what you said,” Sylvia says. “Danny even woke up.”

“Stop it,” I say, staring at a hairline fracture in the concrete walkway.

“It’s true,” she insists. “You’re smart and people respect you.”

“Seriously,” I say, bumping my shoulder against hers. “Stop it.”

As we reach the school parking lot, I scan the area for my mother’s car. She always parks across the street so she doesn’t have to slog through the line of cars in the pick-up lane. But our white Volvo isn’t in the usual spot.

Now I’m worried. Mom’s never failed to show, never been late. Even after one of hers and Dad’s many arguments. But their midnight fight had been worse than normal.

My mind replays my parents’ words. Usually they kept their voices

down, but last night I heard more than I should have. After my mother called my father a bastard, he screamed how he never would have married her if she hadn't been pregnant. I chew on my lower lip, hoping that what I'd said to Mr. Garcia was true. People say things they don't mean when they are angry.

"What would you do differently if you could go back in time?" Sylvia says, unlocking her car with the press of a button. One of Sylvia's thin hands tugs on the door handle until it opens.

"I know what you'd do," I say, deflecting her question.

I punch in my mom's cell number. I had intended to remind Mom about early dismissal this morning, but she hadn't come down to breakfast. The phone rings and rings. It's a hollow sound that feels like an affirmation she's not coming.

Had her fight with Dad sent her over the edge? Had she left him? And in doing so, had she left me too?

"Yeah, mine's a no brainer," Sylvia says, "If I could go back in time, I'd take those stupid malaria pills the way I was supposed to. I'd probably even take extra just to be sure. Hell, if I could do it over again, I wouldn't go to Peru at all."

I nod. Sylvia eases herself into the driver's seat. I try my mom's cell again. No answer.

I probably shouldn't ask. Sylvia's not supposed to drive other teens yet. But what am I supposed to do?

"Hey, can you take me home? My mom's not here, and I can't reach her."

Sylvia glances around. I know she's thinking about getting caught, but if we take the back streets, the chances of being pulled over are slim.

"Get in," she says.

I clamber into the passenger side. Sylvia's frail fingers grip the steering wheel. Stress isn't good for her. Having her drive me home really isn't a good idea.

A couple of kids honk and squeal their tires in celebration of their extra hours of freedom, but Sylvia is careful to avoid any scrutiny and turns slowly out into the main road.

I try Mom's cell once more. But there's no answer. Until now I've managed to brush off my father's outburst as something he said out of anger. But Mom's disappearance has rocked my world once again. Had Mom gotten pregnant to trap my father?

"Crap," Sylvia grumbles, as the traffic light turns red.

What if I'd been a mistake? The air in the car compresses, and I can't take a breath. I suddenly feel as if I'm about to break into a million pieces. I sense Sylvia turn to study me, so I examine my fingernail polish, hoping she thinks that I'm upset about a chipped nail. But my eyes won't focus and keep darting around as if the answer to this horrific question lies within the car's interior.

"Claire?" she says. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head. Afraid that if I say anything, I'll burst into tears.

"Come on. What is it?"

"Nothing," my voice quivers and gives me away.

"You're scaring me," she says.

I take a deep breath. There's no way around it now.

"My mom and dad got in a big fight last night," I whisper then choke out the words that threaten to tear me apart. "And my dad said... he said... he only married my mom because she was pregnant with me. I wasn't... wanted."

"Oh, Claire," Sylvia says. "I'm so sorry."

I can't do this. I can't dump on Sylvia. I need to pull it together. I sit up straight then shrug like it doesn't matter.

"He didn't mean it," I say with a surprising strength of conviction in my voice.

Sylvia reaches out her hand and squeezes mine. I smile and nod. I'm overreacting. Mom forgot about early release day and I'm blowing things all out of proportion.

The light changes, and the car accelerates through the intersection. Sylvia shifts in her seat and puts her hands back in perfect four and eight position. I can tell she doesn't know what else to say, just like I often can't find the right words when she's suffering another bout of sickness.

I shift in my seat. I want out of this car. I don't want to fall apart in front of Sylvia.

I spot the radio and punch the on button. An old Beatles song is playing. One that Sylvia loves, so I turn up the volume. Ugh. I'll probably be falling asleep with "Yellow Submarine" lyrics stuck in my head. But she smiles, and a bit of pink colors her cheeks. I swallow hard then start to sing. My voice cracks at first, but soon I'm singing the hurt and anger from my soul. Sylvia chimes in too, and we both laugh. Ten minutes later, she pulls into my driveway, and I'm feeling more like myself.

"Thanks again for the ride," I say to Sylvia as I get out of the car.

"It's going to be okay, Claire," Sylvia says.

"Yeah," I say, but my voice rattles. "See you tomorrow."

I pull my sweater close against the chill in the air. The garage door is down, so I can't tell if Mom's car is there.

Our two-story house casts a shadow over me as I make my way to the porch, shuffling through the autumn leaves that clutter the front lawn. Behind me, the scrape of metal against concrete announces that Sylvia's rear bumper hit the curb as she backed out into the street. I turn and wave before stepping inside and closing the door behind me.

As I toss my house key on the console table, I notice my father's briefcase on the floor next to it. A sense of unease flickers through me.

"Dad?" I call out in the direction of the kitchen. "Mom?"

The only response is the tick, tick, tick of Grandma's old cuckoo clock from down the hallway. The noise that usually comforts me now seems more like a warning. Mom was a realtor before she married and she swears every house has an energy fueled by the people who have lived there. I understand what she means. These days my home feels feral, as if it's been neglected for far too long.

I kick off my sandals. As I shove my shoes under the waist-high table, dust poofs into the air. The stairs in front of me are covered in golden dog fur. Mom used to be so meticulous about house cleaning. Now I rarely see the stripes on the living room carpet that prove she's bothered to vacuum. Dishes in the sink are the norm.

Buster woofs to come inside. Proof that Mom definitely isn't home. She always puts our dog out when she leaves the house. I chew on my lower lip as my eyes return to the briefcase. Something feels wrong.

It occurs to me that maybe Dad came home because of the fight. Mom's been depressed about something, but she won't say what's going on. Once, after she'd drunk too much wine, she confessed that she tried to take her own life before she got pregnant with me. Maybe Mom put Buster out for a whole different reason? What if she's taken too many pills? What if she called Dad threatening suicide, and he rushed home but it was too late? Panic hits. I rush upstairs.

I hear a groan. I imagine Dad sitting on the bed grieving over Mom's dead body. My hand rests on the cold, metal doorknob. My mind screams at me to walk downstairs and out the door, but I twist the handle and push on the door anyway.

The blinds are at half-mast. The afternoon sun streams through the bottom portion of the window and illuminates the lagoon-blue glass vase on the dresser that Mom bought in Italy during their honeymoon. My

head turns in slow motion toward the center of the room. I'm confused. The bed is moving.

I blink as I take in thick calves and feet with bulbous toes pointing skyward as if they are trees sprouting from the mattress. My father's dark head of hair, his swimmer's shoulders, the mole on his back about the size of a quarter. His hips pump away. Oh god. I've walked in on my parents having make-up sex.

I take a step back and grip the knob to make a quick exit when it dawns on me that these stubby legs aren't my mother's long and slender legs.

Air rushes from my lungs. The walls compress around me as reality slams into me: Dad's screwing another woman. She's. In. The. Bed. That. He. Shares. With. My. Mother. In. My. House. The vile taste of rotten eggs fills my mouth.

I want to flee, but I can't move.

The woman moans, which breaks my paralysis. I try to sneak backward out of the room, but my heel bangs against the doorframe. I suppress a yelp, but the woman hears the thud. Her eyes widen when she spots me. I don't recognize this blotchy-faced woman. It looks like she's been crying. Her bulbous nose and thin lips makes me think of Elmer Fudd. She's not even pretty.

"Jackson," she screeches as she pushes my father off.

Dad's head swivels.

"Oh, crap," he says.

He tries to pull the sheet over himself as he rolls off of her, but my eyes don't flick away quickly enough. I've seen a part of my Dad that no daughter should.

I stumble backward as the walls close in on me like a coffin. The air feels as if it has been sucked from the room. My chest constricts. I clutch my throat. I can't breathe. I have to get out. Somehow my legs do my bidding and I manage to turn and run.

"Claire. Sweetheart. Please. I'm sorry," Dad yells after me.

I plunge down the stairs, two at a time. My head feels as if it's submerged underwater, but I can still hear Dad's pleas for forgiveness. Buster barks and claws at the back door, desperate to get inside, but all I want to do is get out.

I kick Dad's briefcase over when I reach the foyer, jerk open the front door, and slam it behind me. I can't catch my breath. I close my eyes. But it's too late. The image has been seared into my mind.

In this case, Mr. Garcia got it right. There is no going back.



Rhino in the Room was selected as 2018 New Apple Winner. Our congratulations to Jill Hedgecock on that award.

Learn more about the book and buy it at <https://amzn.to/2Ujduet>

And visit Jill's Website at: <http://www.jillhedgecock.com>

INTERVIEW: KATHRIN HUTSON



Born and raised in Colorado, adopted by South Carolina, and at home in Vermont. Kathrin Hutson has been writing fiction for eighteen years, editing for eight, and plunging in and out of reality since she first became aware of the concept. Kathrin specializes in Fantasy and Sci-fi, with a splattering of short stories that weave in and out of literary fiction.

In addition to writing exquisitely dark fiction, Kathrin runs her own independent editing company, KLH CreateWorks, for fiction novels of all genres. She also serves as Fiction Co-Editor for Burlington, Vermont's Mud Season Review literary magazine.

. . .

Q: What started you writing?

A: I've been an avid reader since before I started grade school, and I'd always really enjoyed the creative writing process. I only started writing on my own, for fun and without prompting at school, when I was ten. I wanted to change the ending of my favorite movie at the time, which left me completely unsatisfied. I didn't actually end up re-writing that movie's ending, but I *did* spend the next two years writing what became 135 single-spaced pages of... well, a ten-year-old's fantasy story. Even then, though, it was dark—betrayal, death, hopelessness, sacrifice. No one will ever see this first manuscript. Not while I'm still alive, anyway.

Q: You've been writing over 18 years, and seem to be solidly into the sci-fi and fantasy genres. Why that?

A: As a kid, I was always drawn to fantasy—my way to escape and live someone else's dream-world life, if only for a few hours at a time. My short stories actually tend to fall inside contemporary fiction, and I'll be the first to admit that my comfort and skill with writing shorter works is definitely not up to par with my ability and love for writing novels. The two are very different animals, and I prefer crafting stories on a much larger scale.

I read *so many* fantasy book. I remember one day, when I was in high school, stepping into the Barnes & Noble my dad had taken me to every day after school for years and to my horror discovering that nothing looked new or interesting in the fantasy section. So I expanded my reading repertoire to stretch beyond just fantasy.

I think writing my first novel, which later became my Dark Fantasy duology Gyenona's Children—*Daughter of the Drackan* and *Mother of the Drackan*—was both an emotional outlet for me in high school and a reflection of the type of story I hadn't yet seen and to which I craved exposure. At the time, of course, I just wrote it because it was an awesome story. And I still think it is.

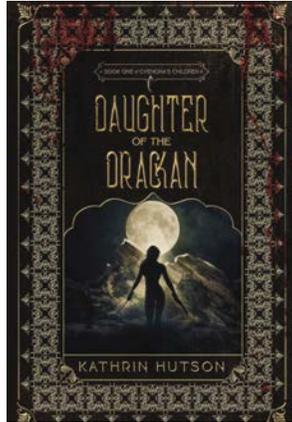
Primarily, though, I write fantasy, sci-fi, and other speculative genres because I love being able to build the worlds however I like and still be bound by the elements of writing and craft necessary for a good story. I already know the "real world" fairly well. I haven't been here too long in the scheme of things, but I've definitely seen and experienced a lot in that amount of time.



Q: What is it about science fiction/fantasy that you enjoy?

A: What interests me most about writing in fantasy and sci-fi is watching how those worlds unfold—solving the puzzle of how to make different magical or otherworldly details fit both the story and the believability of the characters. Putting my characters into strange, exotic, and fantastical places we may or may not ever see in our lifetimes is incredibly exciting.

More than that, though, I enjoy bringing that element of rawness and reality into the impossible. For a character who uses magic on a regular basis or has grown up around certain creatures all their life, the “fantasy” aspects may be fully normal and natural to them. But the core emotions of what makes a person a person—drive, desire, guilt, loss, confusion, anger, pride, excitement, fear, triumph, regret, bliss—are the same across the board, for everyone, no matter the world or the century or the speculative elements therein. It’s such a fun and enlightening challenge to bring those two things together to discover how people and places and situations end up working themselves out in the end. And I have never ended a novel with exactly what I anticipated when I first started writing it.



Q: What's your typical writing day poem and are you a more disciplined writer?

A: I wake up at 3:30 a.m. every single day, even on the weekends, to get a head start with my writing. Mostly, that's because I have a two-year-old. It's also turned out to be because I absolutely love getting up that early and having that time to myself without being interrupted by anyone. Nobody calls me, my husband and daughter are still asleep—I wake up even before the dogs.

I actually write full time now about fifty hours a week, so the two and a half to three hours I get for writing every morning adds up to quite a lot. I take a break for about an hour or so when my daughter wakes up, and then I have another four-hour block of writing time. Then I stop to put the kid down for a nap and usually get another two to two and a half hours of writing. Sometimes three, if I'm lucky.

Recently, it's pretty rare that I'm spending all those hours actually *writing*. There's always emails and messages to reply to, updates to my author platform, live videos and giveaways and newsletters. Marketing is a real thing I never thought I'd have to do as an author. What a silly assumption. And I do also spend some time still on editing and consulting work with clients, though I've scaled that down quite a bit since I started writing fiction full time and getting paid for my dream job.

It actually took me *years* to develop anything of a real discipline to my writing. When I was in high school, I actually wrote a lot, every day. I'll admit that a good portion of that was done during class. "Oh, look. Here's Kathrin, scribbling away in her notebook. She's such a good student and takes *so many* notes!" No, mostly I was working on my book. It still amazes

me that I managed to not only pass my senior exams but test out of my entire first year of college, seeing how much attention I *didn't* pay to my schoolwork or studying.



Q: Do you consider yourself a disciplined writer?

A: I am most definitely a disciplined writer now. I've become a morning person, obviously, and I really dove into that one when I decided to wake up so early every day. Before my daughter was born, I wrote whenever I felt like it and didn't write when I didn't feel "inspired". I had the not-yet-a-mother luxury of time back then. But I've always worked best on tight deadlines, and every single day is a tight deadline with a toddler, if I want to get my writing in. I started writing every day as a personal and professional goal in January of 2018, and I've probably not written anything in a day for a total of maybe two weeks in all that time. It's so amazing what a commitment to a daily habit can do for strengthening any discipline, even writing. Honestly, these days, I get irritable, anxious, and a little itchy if I don't write anything in a twenty-four-hour period, so in addition to being my profession and bringing in a consistent income, writing has apparently also become another item on the long list of things I need to keep me sane.



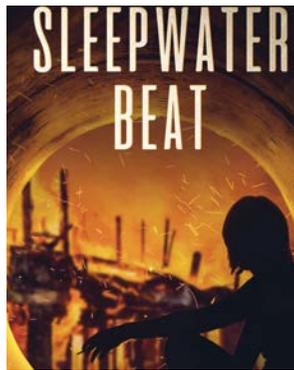
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Q: What's your worst writing moment?

A: The first thing that comes to mind is a four-year period where I didn't write anything at all. Nothing. This happened between college and moving from Colorado to South Carolina with my husband, and it was really, really rough. I'd gone through some life-altering experiences during that time that left me feeling rather ashamed of myself and like I didn't *deserve* to keep writing anymore. Even when I knew I still loved it more than almost anything and literally thought about writing every day. I wouldn't let myself sit down and write, though, mainly out of disappointment and embarrassment and a still undiscovered sense of self. A big part of that was also fear—that after having walked the path down which my life had taken me for those four years, I wouldn't be able to write anything at all. What a great self-fulfilling prophecy, right? And I was so, so wrong. It took a lot of courage, forgiveness, and self-compassion to finally get back into the swing of things. Then the world opened up, and I could laugh at myself and shake my head for taking myself way too seriously.

A more specific worst writing moment, though, is when I submitted a short story to my creative writing class—full of all these other students who'd been accepted into the Creative Writing Fiction program as their major, just like I was. I'd definitely delivered some decent pieces before this that had gotten a lot of great feedback, so I think I was just being lazy and overconfident. The story was awful. I knew it was awful. It touched on a lot of deep, potentially powerful topics without ever actually exploring them, and it became this shallow, boring thing that didn't say anything at

all. The other students ripped it to shreds. I don't think any of them had a single positive thing to say about it, and honestly, neither did I. It was my worst writing moment in that I didn't actually try and submitted something I knew was complete trash. On the other hand, it was one of the best learning experiences I've had in my career, because up to that point, I'd never experienced the complete bombing, with very little sympathy or sugar-coating, of something I'd created. It made me realize that not everything I wrote turned into gold on the printed page, and that blow to my ego was exactly the right force and size. I still don't always write gold. But I've definitely found that balance between hard work, dedication, and skill.



Q: You also formed an editing company with services focused for indie writers. How did that come about and does that detract from your writing time?

A: I started my editing and writing services company in 2015, six months before I published *Daughter of the Drackan*, my first book. To tell you the truth, it was my husband's idea. I'd edited a research proposal and finalized research paper for one of our friends. I'd offered it freely, as my weirdly eclectic resume of jobs up to that point (including being a personal assistant, handling all the administrative work for a computer networking company, becoming the sole person in the medical records department of a personal injury law firm, and serving "tables" at a movie theater/restaurant) had given me such a wide range of experience with editing documents beyond what I'd learned in college with fiction. I didn't go easy on our friend's paper, but he accepted all my changes for major revisions with more excitement than I'd expected. Then he ended up receiving the Second Best Presentation award at the William V. Moore Research Confer-

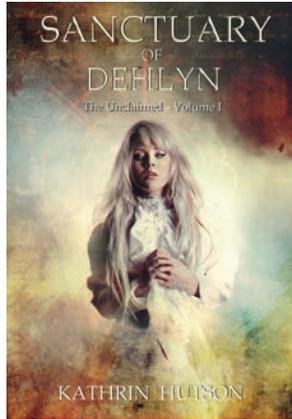
ence that year. My husband, ever the capitalist, said, “You need to start charging people for this.” So I did.

Q: You also offer editing services and more to authors. How did that develop?

A: The fiction editing and author consulting side of my business sprang from my recognition of a pretty unfortunate truth in the writing industry, especially among Indie Authors and Publishers: great-quality editing is really hard to find if you don’t have a lot of money to spend on it. My love of fiction and good storytelling, combined with my acute empathy for writers with not a lot of extra cash to throw around, fueled my decision to offer editing services at the time for half the industry standard rates.

It felt incredible, and before I knew it, I was busier than I’d ever thought I’d be, working for myself. I was helping authors improve, polish, and finalize their brilliant stories—whether they decided to go Indie or the traditional route—and I was sending none of them into an early grave by emptying their bank accounts. This was more fulfilling than I’d ever anticipated, both emotionally and financially, and it really got me a foot in the door with the Indie Publishing community before I published my first book.

I have raised my prices since then, simply because I’ve had to over the years in order to balance out my schedule. Especially since I’ve started writing full time. Yes, it cuts into my writing time, but I wouldn’t say it *detracts* from anything. Really, it keeps me humble, challenges my time-management skills, and I get a break from my own work every now and then to focus on someone else’s. Author mode and editing mode use two completely different parts of my brain (at least it feels like it), so I enjoy the occasional switch back and forth. And honestly, if I didn’t still work with clients, I’d be even more of a social hermit than I already am.



<https://amzn.to/2HNoXNv>

Q: Please tell us a bit about *Sanctuary of Dehlyn* and perhaps a hinting of your next book?

A: *Sanctuary of Dehlyn* surprised me at every single turn possible, which is how I prefer it when writing my novels. I'd actually written the first three chapters in high school, just as something to do, and I had absolutely no idea where it was going. So I dropped it.

In 2017, I queried my Speculative/LGBT Thriller *Sleepwater Beat* to traditional agents, just for fun. It got a full manuscript request, which was great, so while I was waiting on that, I focused on picking up *Sanctuary of Dehlyn* again. That was July, and the story just kind of exploded out of me then. I'd had a conversation with my cousin about some points of the story I was working on, and, as she tends to geek out about the writing process as much as I do, we really got into it. She told me it would be really cool if Dehlyn—the ancient, immortal woman-child who captures Kherron's heart and literally compels his vow to protect her—was actually cursed somehow. Instead, I heard "Dehlyn is a curse." That became this character serving as both punishment and redemption for all the creatures, mortal and immortal, living in this world, and now the story revolved around the painful struggle of choosing which was best—to abide by a curse and keep everything safe, or to redeem a powerful force that would set things right and yet open all of existence to the dangers of the unknown. Boy, was that a fun process.

I'd actually expected *Sanctuary of Dehlyn* to be a standalone novel all on its own. When I wrote the third-to-last chapter, though, I realized I could not tell this story in what I thought would be 100,000 words. It was

suddenly much bigger. And while this book was now the shortest I'd ever written at close to 75,000 words, it turned into the first of a new trilogy, which I'd never done before either. So it was a lot of firsts for me.

Q: How do you treat your characters?

A: I put Kherron, *Sanctuary of Dehlyn's* main character, through more pain, despair, heartache, loss, confusion, and consuming rage than I've ever forced any of my other characters to endure. His journey is infuriating—both for him and to my readers, if I've done my job right—but it maintains a thread of hope and rawness throughout that balances all the impossible decisions he has to make and the excruciating circumstances he faces. Beyond not knowing who he is or why he has this inexplicable effect on inanimate objects around him—which he thinks at first are all trying to kill him—Kherron also starts his story as an institutionalized man who's spent his entire life working as a near slave in the forges of the Iron Pit. His first day as a free man brings him more mystery and confusion than he ever imagined, and he starts out with even less knowledge about the world than any of the other characters in it. That's not much to begin with in the first place.

The Unclaimed trilogy is about Kherron's journey into freedom, which is far less physical and more about freeing himself from the bonds of shame, helplessness, and ignorance in which he's always trapped himself. There's no true villain in this story; the antagonist is a combination of the entire world, all the creatures in it, the magic seeping back into everything when it's not supposed to, and Kherron's own limitations. Which is one of the reasons why I love it so much.

Q: What's your next book about and when can readers expect it?

A: My next book, *Imlach Fractured*, is the first book in the Vessel Broken series and will be out in September 2019. The entire series takes place in the same world as *Sanctuary of Dehlyn* and *The Unclaimed* trilogy, starting at the exact moment in which Kherron makes his final decision in book three, *Sacrament of Dehlyn*. But *Imlach Fractured* is much darker, much more graphic, and definitely not a coming-of-age story like Kherron's. There's very little overlap when it comes to the characters and the story line, which are all brand new, but fans of *The Unclaimed* will definitely notice the connections. I'm so excited to finally be exploring the deeper mysteries of this world through a female main character this time, who happens to be just another of my favorite type of anti-heroine—fierce, brutal, unstop-

pable, ambitious, deceptive, and about to have her world turned upside down.

Q: Did you self-publish under Exquisite Darkness Press and if so what was your reasoning versus traditional publishing?

A: Yes, Exquisite Darkness Press is my Indie Publishing imprint. I definitely tried to go the traditional publishing route with my first Dark Fantasy book, *Daughter of the Drackan*. I queried it to every agent who accepted Fantasy submissions, and I racked up a healthy file of 116 rejection letters for this book. At that point, it felt like I'd exhausted all my options in traditional publishing. Everyone who'd read *Daughter of the Drackan*—including three people who told me outright they don't like Fantasy but would give it a shot just for me, including my high school English teacher—absolutely loved it. I knew I had a great story, and I just wanted to put it out into the world for people to read and enjoy it as much as I did.

As it turned out, this first book with 116 rejection letters from traditional agents ended up being an Amazon Dark Fantasy bestseller in 2016, a year after I published it and a few months after I published its sequel, *Mother of the Drackan*. Though it's a lot of work to be an Indie Author and run the entire show myself, I absolutely love it. I'm at the helm in every aspect of the process, which for the most part I really enjoy.

Coincidentally, the only other book I queried to traditional agents, *Sleepwater Beat*—which also has its own file of rejection letters—became an Amazon Bestseller as well. That happened during the pre-order period. It stayed on that bestseller list for two months after its release, so I'm only more certain now that my choice to Indie publish was the best course for me to take. I hope to just keep improving my craft and my business every step of the way, which seems to be happening so far.

Q: You have to explain the single earring collection and why?

A: This is a great question! This little oddity of mine stems from my pretty visceral negative reaction to symmetry, let's just say. I never hang two picture frames on the wall lined up exactly next to or above/below each other, always staggered. I only have tattoos on one side of my body. For a long time in high school and college, I couldn't wear the same number of rings on both hands, and my outfits always clashed horrendously and on purpose, because I couldn't stand anything that "matched".

My single-earring collection started from the fact that I'd lost a few earrings in a few pairs, leaving me with only one of each. Then I'd find someone else's single lost earring on the ground or left on a table, and I picked them up. So I eventually had all these single earrings I could never find the match to, and I started mixing them together to create pairs that also didn't match. And it took me a long time to be able to wear two different earrings at the same time that were also the same length.

Odd quirk, I know. My husband will tell anyone that my fashion sense has improved dramatically over the years, which is probably just part of getting older, though I wouldn't exactly say it's "normal". I do wear matching earrings more often than not now. But I still can't line up posters, artwork, or framed photos on the wall without making sure they're entirely asymmetrical.

Q: Brucewillis?

A: No one has ever asked me this before, either! I fell in love with Bruce Willis the actor the first time I saw *Pulp Fiction* so many years ago. Come on, who doesn't love Bruce Willis? I enjoy naming random things sometimes, though it's only when inspiration hits. Like my car. I have a Nissan Altima that was quickly dubbed Altima Prime (yes, after Optimus Prime from Transformers). And I always wanted to name a dog Brucewillis, after the actor, of course. Our first dog Sadie was a rescue, so she already had her name (which I hated at first, but it grew on me). Originally, the goal was to find a Great Dane puppy and name him Brucewillis—one word, because that's also hilarious. When my husband and I were ready for a second dog, we couldn't find any Great Dane puppies, which was just as well. Our two 80-pound mixes are big enough as it is. We did have a friend with an accidental litter of puppies—German Shepherd/Black Lab and Pitbull mix—and we found our Brucewillis there.

I will say that this dog is the absolute opposite of the actor Bruce Willis. He's definitely not an alpha. He's startled by food dropping on the floor (we have no idea why), looks backward while he's running so he bashes his head against doors and walls, and the sound he makes when he can't get to someone he wants to see... well, it's the most pitiful, injured, heart-broken sound I've ever heard, but he does it for everything. If I go into the bathroom and close the door, he cries. When my husband comes home from work, he cries. When my daughter wakes up, he cries. He's got a

huge heart, and he's so cuddly and gentle with every person he's ever met. He thumps his tail in joy just when we say his name. Not the smartest tool in the shed, either, but we love him.

Q: What advice do you have for newer authors, things that you found made your life easier?

A: Boy, there's so many things I've found that make my life as an author easier. I'm still finding them and improving my process in every aspect, from writing that first draft to marketing the six books I have out right now (and planning for more).

The single most important thing I discovered, I think, is that writing every day is a total game changer. I used to brush off that common piece of advice, like, "Yeah, yeah. I don't have to do that. I just don't *feel* like writing today." Did that ever stagnate my creativity! I have been writing every single day (with about a total of two weeks in there where I was sick or committed myself to a getaway with family and zero technology) since January 1st, 2018. I went from being totally thrilled with 1,000 words a day to being disappointed if I don't get in a minimum of 5,000. To date, my record is just over 13,000 words in one day (over ten hours), and my next goal is to hit 8,000 words a day on a consistent basis. I'm fortunate enough to have come to the place where writing fiction is my full-time job, and I'm well aware of the fact that this isn't an option for everyone. But writing *something* every day is crucial to improving the process and beating what everybody likes to call "writer's block". It also definitely improves the act of writing itself and an author's own style and ability to forge on and complete a project.

Pick a minimum daily word count that's doable and sustainable, and do whatever you have to do to make that happen, even if it's writing for fifteen minutes at a time scattered throughout the day. Now, if I don't write anything in a day, I get irritable and anxious, so it's kind of a necessity for me at this point. And I absolutely love it.

Our thanks to Kathrin for a very detailed interview. Hopefully other writers will find comfort in the many traits and idiosyncrasies that all writers face.

Be sure to follow Kathrin on these sites:

Kathrin's books on Amazon: <https://amzn.to/2Wyzhwf>

Website: www.kathrinhutsonfiction.com

www.facebook.com/kathrinhutsonfiction

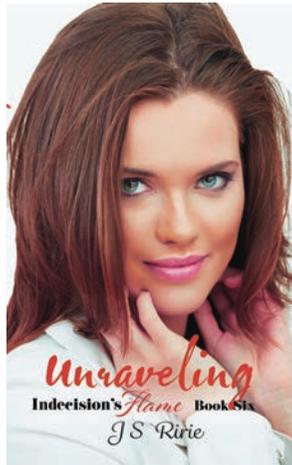
Website: www.klhcreateworks.com

www.facebook.com/klhcreateworks

Twitter: @KlhCreateWorks

CHAPTER PREVIEW: UNRAVELING

Indecision's Flame, Book 6 by JS Ririe



I rode like a lady crazed on the back of the black stallion, not caring what happened to me as the miles literally flew by beneath Thunder's powerful hoofs. My eyes scanned the horizon in front of me and on both sides. There was nothing but open grazing land between the ranch house and the base of the mountain from which the stream of water flowed

down through crags and recesses that hid so much, like the crocodile I'd killed when I'd gone looking for Jake.

It was impossible to tell if two people on foot had come this way. Animals, both domestic and wild, openly roamed the land in search of food and water, eating or crushing what little vegetation still existed after months of constant sun and no rain. I kept hoping I'd see a spot of colour somewhere, but a palate of tans and browns with a little dusty green was all that appeared before me as each moment brought me closer to a truth I might not be able to endure.

How could this be happening again? That cave had brought us nothing but misfortune since the day Jake had taken Trevor and me there to show us the lost treasures it contained, powerful drawings that told the story of the white man's coming to Australia as convicts nearly two-hundred years ago, sweeping aside the aborigines as if they were nothing more than insects to be destroyed so new dreams could be forged out of earth that did not belong to them.

And the specks of what might be gold in the cavities further back inside the chambers had indirectly caused John Sutter's death. He lived on the other side of the rugged peaks, and ruthless men had killed him when he wouldn't disclose the site where he'd found a golden nugget larger than any that had been found in the vicinity for generations.

It was a double tragedy because that nugget could have come from anywhere, but it was still the reason Jake had lain in that mountain enclosure for two days with a bullet in his side before I'd managed to find him and, with God's help, get him to safety. He'd felt so strongly about protecting the cave's drawings from intruders and possible destruction that he'd gone there alone when he should have been home with me.

That was my fault too, just like Trevor's disappearance now. Why hadn't I been told so much sooner what had happened to me as a baby, and why hadn't I relayed what I'd learned to anyone else? Asum never should have taken me away from my home as an infant to present to his tribe in that cave. My parents might have been far from nurturing and pretty messed up as a couple, but I was still their child.

And now, through my own neglect in fully understanding his culture, disappointing him and dishonoring the Rainbow Serpent and whatever other strange gods he worshipped, Asum had decided to disown me and find someone to take my place. My little brother, Trevor, had become that perfect replacement. He was still young enough to believe what adults told him, and he was looking for stability and acceptance - something none of us had been able to provide to the extent he needed. No wonder

Asum had been able to lead him away into a land of mythical superstition. We hadn't been aware enough of what was happening in his life to guide him away from it.

I pulled Thunder's reins to the right forcing him to move towards the towering heights of the mountains where the cave lay behind a waterfall close to its summit. Why had I felt so compelled to take a horse I had seldom ridden and who was far too powerful for me when given his lead? My own horse, Rupert, would have been a better choice.

Maybe it was his connection to Trevor. My little brother loved that horse because it had belonged to our father. Perhaps I was more superstitious than I wanted to believe. Subconsciously, I must have believed that Trevor would feel Thunder's presence and know that we were on our way to find him and take him home where he belonged.

I wanted to moan in agony, to scream out his name, to feel anything except the absolute terror that hung over me like a cloak of debilitating darkness making it difficult for me to breath. I should have caught up with them by now if they were on their way to the cave. What if he was trying to take Trevor into the North Country where the remainder of his tribe was supposed to be? That's where Uncle Ned had found them. My little brother would not make it that far, and even if they didn't leave the area, there were hundreds of acres on the ranch where no one had ever been, except perhaps Asum. He'd been wandering the land alone since childhood.

Oh, I had been so foolish thinking I knew anything about the strange little aborigine who had saved my life but who had also threatened me continually because I wouldn't always do as he asked. Moreover, I'd left the house totally ill prepared. What if something had happened and Trevor needed medical attention? I hadn't brought anything with me except for a canteen of water. I knew better than that. Survival depended on being prepared.

The outback was home to so many things that could harm or even kill. Billions of lizards, ants, centipedes, wasps, bees, spiders, frogs, snakes, scorpions, bearded dragons and chameleons roamed freely and hated to be disturbed, and while most of them were harmless, certain varieties could be deadly. Hadn't Trevor been terrified when we came across the Eastern Brown snake a year earlier with its fast-moving weaving and darting and sinister, forked tongue that sensed everything around it? It was only one of the many poisonous snakes that slithered through the undergrowth. There were Mulga snakes and Eastern and Western Taipans, Mainland tigers, Copperheads, adders and the less common small-eyed

and red-bellied snakes that could all cause painful deaths if not treated in time.

We'd been lucky when the brown had passed almost directly over the top of Trevor's boot that day we'd been out exploring before our father's death. But what if he got close to another one, and it decided to strike? Some of them were down right aggressive, and they didn't have to be cornered to defend themselves. Even with all his voodoo and herbal remedies, I doubted Asum would be able to save his life if the unthinkable happened.

And that was just the beginning of the dangers both adults and children might have to face in the outback. It was divine intervention alone that one of us had not been bitten by a Sydney funnel-web, a red-back, mouse, trapdoor, recluse, huntsman, garden orb weaver or even a tarantula when we'd been flushing the outhouse of spiders after the flood so it could be used until electricity was restored. There hadn't been anything on the ranch to offer relief except for some ibuprofen. Jake had been gone helping other survivors, and we'd been left on our own.

But just as dangerous and far more prolific than snakes and spiders were the species known as stingers, and not just the ones that lived in the ocean like the jellyfish and stingrays. The continent was covered with European wasps, bull ants, centipedes, and the most dangerous of all, the simple honeybee. They could easily cause paralysis and death. Many people claimed that Australia was just a downright dangerous place to live, and I was beginning to agree with them. Even the human populace seemed to have turned against us.

I wished it wasn't like that, especially now that Trevor was missing. I wished all people saw - whether visitors or originals - were the indigenous, fun animals like kangaroos and koala bears. Even the dingoes, the largest predators in the entire country, wouldn't hurt humans unless they were outwardly threatened. And the myriads of bird life that flew through the heavens and could be spotted in the top branches of mulga, wattle and gum trees were truly magnificent.

But none of that mattered right now, I decided as I reined Thunder in at the base of the mountain. It was impossible to see the cave or even the stream descending from this distance. But somewhere up among the rocks, trees, brush, wild flowers and animals it lay secluded behind the most beautiful waterfall I'd ever seen with stepping stones of fabulous hues leading right to its entrance.

"What do you think, Thunder?" I asked the horse I was riding, even though I knew he couldn't answer. I patted his strong, powerful neck. He

could handle just about anything. My father had trained him long and well. “Do you think Trevor’s up there with Asum, or should we look elsewhere?”

But where could we go if not up the mountain? The combined ranches were massive. It would take months to search every nook and cranny, and if I’d learned anything at all about Asum, it was that he knew how to disappear. I had to be content with the fact that this was the best lead I had and that everyone else would be scouring the valleys and hills below.

So I clicked my tongue and gave Thunder his lead. He moved forward and in a few minutes we were inching our way through prickly trees with heavy branches that hung low and brittle. Everything was so dry; especially the air, and I watched the insects swarm around his head as I tried to keep them away from mine. Since I had gone this way before when I’d been looking for Jake, I knew the basic direction and what I would find along the way. What I didn’t know was how long I dared ride Thunder up the partial trail I’d made, marking X’s on tree trunks and hoping they’d be able to lead me home.

Jake’s horse, General, had made it up to the cave not many weeks before, but he’d ended up winding his reins tightly around a tree, getting bitten by a crocodile and then being ridden down the mountain bareback in the dark to get help with me on his back. I couldn’t allow the same thing to happen to Thunder. My little brother would never forgive me if I did anything to harm his horse.

I looked for any sign that someone had been this way recently. Without moisture to help the vegetation spring back to life, it was easy to see where the branches and tall grass had been stomped down by something much larger than a human. It was quite likely that I’d run into something unsavory, but I couldn’t let that deter me. With the drought still plaguing our part of the country, most every living thing was moving to higher ground in search of food and relief from the constant heat.

By the time we came to the lower edge of the stream, Thunder was panting heavily. I slid from my saddle and led him to the edge of the water so he could drink. Then I uncapped the canteen I’d brought with me. The water inside was warm and had an unpleasant metallic taste. I wished I could drink from the stream too, but after my bout with a virus no one in the medical community had been able to identify with any degree of certainty, doing so would have been foolish.

I listened intently for any sound that might indicate human presence, but all was still except for the occasional chatter of cockatoos or corellas in the trees overhead. I felt a moment of panic when I heard a rustling in the

brush beside me because I hadn't even brought a gun along in case it might be needed. How utterly foolish I'd been disregarding everything I'd been told about leaving the house unprepared. I hadn't even stopped by Uncle Ned's to tell Jake what I was doing. But the sound I'd heard was only a lost sheep looking for the rest of its herd - one Asum must not have found when he'd gone looking for survivors after the dingo attack.

"I'm not worth a zack right now," I told the horse as he continued to drink the cool, clear water that sparkled in the tiny shafts of sunlight hitting it from above. "I should never have allowed myself to be lulled into a false sense of security just because Asum saved my life. He certainly warned me often enough about dishonoring the Rainbow Serpent and the catastrophes that would follow if I didn't mend my ways. But this is not the work of some mythical god. It's a crazy old man's way of trying to replace me with my little brother."

It was nearly impossible not to accept full blame for everything that happened around the ranch. My father's death and his bestowal of legacy, LeAnn's pregnancy and fragile state of mental health, and Jake deserting us because I couldn't accept him exactly the way he was had left me solely in charge with no one to turn to when times got rough, except for Uncle Ned who had troubles enough of his own. And this was by far the worst time we'd gone through yet. If I didn't return my little brother home safely to his mother ... Well, I couldn't think about that right now, or it would stop me from doing what had to be done.

The big, black horse lifted his head and snorted. The rest of the way up the mountain could be dangerous for him, but nothing more so than being left on his own tied to a tree without the ability to get away. So I propelled myself back into the saddle and headed him upwards as close to the edge of the stream as possible without actually getting into it. That might have been a safer course. I hadn't seen any rapids on either of my trips to the cave, but I was still skittish about the possibility of meeting another croc like the one I had killed.

Whatever had possessed Trevor to leave with Asum I mused as I rode along, trying to remain upright in the saddle as low-hanging branches threatened to take off my head or an appendage that got in the way. His ramblings and clipped sentences were almost impossible to understand, but my little brother must have felt safe with him, or he would never have left home without telling someone where he was going.

I was both emotionally and physically exhausted by the time the waterfall came into view. I wanted to start shouting for Trevor immediately, but something held me back. It wasn't exactly a premonition; it was more a

sense of apprehension that I might be disrupting some pagan ritual that had already begun – something I might not be able to stop. If I had learned anything about the secretive man I'd grown up with the past few weeks, it was that he danced to a different drummer and saw nothing wrong with taking what he wanted. He was not bound to the same laws of morality as the rest of us.

So I climbed down from Thunder's back and wrapped his reins loosely around a large tree trunk. He'd be able to get away easily if necessary, as long as he didn't become disoriented through fear, but I wouldn't be gone long enough for that to happen. I was just going inside the cave to get my little brother. I felt more certain than ever that was where he was, though how they had made it there without leaving a trace remained a complete mystery to me.

I made my way cautiously across the surfaces of the brightly coloured, but slippery, rocks in the stream's bed that led to the opening behind the falling water. Perhaps I should announce my presence, but once again something inside forced me to remain silent. The water cascading in front of the entrance was inviting after the heat of my ride. It misted over my body causing a certain amount of chilling. Everything was eerily silent like it had been the day Uncle Ned and I had discovered the loss of half a herd of sheep. If anything were happening within, I wouldn't know it until I got there.

One moment of dread engulfed me as I slipped behind the gossamer curtain and found myself in a layered kind of darkness. I could see fractured light coming from outside, but when I turned around there was nothing but cold, dank air and a cavalcade of ghostly shadows. It took a moment for me to adjust to my surroundings, but then I heard the sound of plaintive chanting. It made my skin crawl with its passion and intensity as if something long forgotten in my memory had been awakened. I'd heard that resonance before. But how could a mere infant remember something like that? I'd only been six months old when he'd stolen me away from my family like a thief in the night.

The murkiness that made anything of significance visible was almost debilitating, but I forced one foot in front of the other, wishing from the bottom of my soul that I'd brought a flashlight with me. The mantra was coming from the chamber with the paintings, and there was the smell of smoke in the air. Asum had built a fire for his ceremony. Didn't he know that was dangerous without any ventilation? But then he knew the cave better than anyone. There were likely crevices leading to the outside world that were too inconspicuous for the untrained eye to see.

It seemed a strange phenomenon that other senses were heightened to compensate for ones that were not functioning properly, but I was grateful that ability had been built into our genetic code. My eyes could see nothing with clarity, but my mind seemed to race back to the day I'd found Jake lying so near death giving me the confidence to move forward. But in my haste, I nearly tripped over the remains of his backpack. Animals had chewed completely through it and had dragged it to the center of the enclosure before leaving it behind. If anything valuable had been left inside it had to be gone now.

I contemplated searching for his pistol and the flashlight in the small chamber where he'd been fighting for his life, but I'd have to crawl on my stomach to retrieve them, and going on a scavenger hunt that might prove futile would waste valuable time. I wasn't certain how much of that I had left, and I'd never be able to use a gun on Asum even if I found it.

I chastised myself again for leaving the ranch house so ill prepared. All I had with which to defend myself were my two hands and what remained of my wit. Jake would censure me something awful when he found out, but that was the least of my worries right now. I had to rescue my little brother before something happened that could not be undone. Oh, how frightened he must be, even if he had gone with the demented little man voluntarily.

The chanting increased in its intensity as I moved closer to the opening in the formation that led to the room of drawings. At first, I could see nothing. The smoke and pungent odor coming from the fire was so intense it made my eyes and nostrils burn. How much worse Trevor must feel having been trapped in that cavern for who knew how long. He was much too timid to try to escape, even if the possibility arose.

And then I saw him huddled in one corner of the room, stripped to the waist with his shoes off. His head was down, and he had his arms wrapped around his knees in an attitude of surrender or at least partial acceptance. I was going to sprint across the enclosure and take him in my arms when I saw Asum in front of the fire with a knife in his hands. He was chanting and twirling in a sort of frenzied dance as the long blade glittered in the flames.

I stood transfixed by the scene in front of me. Nothing in my most wild imaginings had prepared me for this. Asum was like a madman cavorting with his spirits. I could almost picture them there, especially the Rainbow Serpent with its half rainbow/half snake body twisting and turning amongst the gold and red flames. It was both the giver and the taker of life, and blood had been spilt more than once on its behalf.

Trevor must have sensed my presence for he suddenly looked over at me, and through a flash of light from the fire I could see the terror and hopelessness in his eyes. I motioned for him to remain calm and to stay where he was until I could figure out what to do. I was bigger than Asum, but he had the knife and was much more agile. I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I just wanted him to let my little brother go.

I'm not sure how long I stood there transfixed watching the weird and somehow wonderful sight in front of me while I tried to figure out what to do. I was literally being propelled into another time and culture far more primeval than most mortals would ever see, except perhaps as reenactments on the cinema screen.

Fortunately, Asum had not seen me. He was much too involved gamboling around the fire with his gods. Perhaps I could somehow sneak around him and the fire to where my little brother was, grab his hand and pull him away with me. But I somehow knew that wasn't the answer. Asum might not have seen me yet, but any movement could break his concentration and bring him lunging at both of us with that horrible knife he held so deftly in his hand.

And then suddenly from the darkness behind me, I heard a voice bellow. "What in the bloody hell is going on here?"

It was Jake. He gotten the message I'd left with LeAnn and come looking for us straight away. We weren't alone any longer.

Asum stopped his cavorting and chanting and glared in our direction through the smoky haze as if he was not surprised to see us standing there. "You no wanted here," he shouted. "Go away before Rainbow Serpent bring whole mountain down."

Jake just laughed and pushed his way past me. "I'm not afraid of you, old man, or your spirits. You've kidnapped my nephew. I'd have every right to run that knife straight through your heart."

My hand shot out to stop him. "Don't Jake," I pleaded. "You have no idea what he might do."

"What he's going to do is give me that knife and hope like hell that I let him leave this bloody cave alive."

Asum just stood his ground beside the fire. I looked over at Trevor. He was clearly traumatized, never having been exposed to violence of any kind before.

"Please Jake! Do it for Trevor? He doesn't need to see this."

It was only then that I noticed that he had a gun in his hand. It was pointed at the wild little man in the loincloth, and unlike me, I knew he was not afraid to use it.

"I am doing this for Trevor. He could have been killed before we even got here."

"Asum wasn't going to kill him," I tried to explain, though I hadn't been so sure of that only moments before. Who knew what might have happened if I'd tried on my own to get my little brother away from him. He was angry enough with me to cause great physical harm.

I lightly touched Jake's arm. It was rock hard with muscle and tension. "He wanted Trevor to take my place in his family because I'd offended both him and his gods."

Asum snarled. "Best listen to Missy Hawk. She know what gods can do. They make her sick; they make her well. Gods can do anything."

"I don't believe in all that nonsense," Jake said, but the moment of greatest discord was over and a dialogue was taking place. That meant no one had to get hurt unless something sparked another onslaught of anger.

"Why don't you take Trevor outside and I'll talk to Asum," I suggested, but the little aborigine with sacred bird feathers poked into his hair wouldn't have it. He lunged through the flaming blaze towards us. I screamed, but Jake didn't fire his gun, he simply knocked the knife from Asum's hand with one swift movement and sent the smaller man flailing towards the ground.

"Some people are just incapable of seeing reason," he said, retrieving the knife before Asum even had a chance to stand up. Its tip was coated in blood.

I didn't wait around to see what would happen next. I simply ran past the two men to my little brother and pulled him to his feet and into my arms.

"I'm sorry," he wailed as he clung to me. "I thought it would be a great adventure. Asum said he'd show me all kinds of things, but he just brought me here and cut a hole in my foot. I don't understand why he would do that. I thought he was my friend."

With great tenderness, I brushed his hair away from his face. "Asum doesn't understand that we aren't like him. He wanted you to be part of his family. He never meant to hurt you."

Why was I defending this person when he should be in jail for what he had done? But the truth was that he had never been tamed, although he'd lived most of his life among white men. He was an aborigine whose tribal beliefs and traditions had never died, even when my mother exposed both him and Keida to Christianity. What he had done was decidedly wrong, but it was partially my fault for not understanding how deeply his mores ran.

"Come on, let's get you out of here," I said to Trevor. "It's cold and dark, and we can talk much better in the sunlight."

But he didn't move from the cold spot of earth in the darkness.

"I can't walk," he finally cried out. "My foot hurts too bad, and Asum said we had to share our blood if it was going to work."

I looked over at Jake who had Asum by the arm and was dragging him towards us. If he hadn't come when he had, I might not have been able to stop the next part of the ceremony – that of becoming blood brothers. I wondered if the same thing had happened to me.

"I'll carry Trevor," Jake said. "You take Asum. I'm not sure I trust myself to be alone with him right now."

"Why did you do it?" I asked the little man as I escorted him into the front part of the cave where the sun could be seen on the other side of the falling water. Jake had already carried Trevor outside and was looking after his foot.

"Me do what Rainbow Serpent say. Man need someone to carry on after he gone."

"But I would have been there for you, Asum. We've been friends my entire life."

"Not friends when you disobey gods. Rainbow Serpent need someone he can trust."

"But not Trevor," I said, shaking my head with disbelief. "He's just a little boy who doesn't understand your customs."

"He understand much! He know gods must be happy for rain to come."

"You told him it would rain if he went with you?"

His revelation shocked me. How could anyone use such a misguided tactic on a child? They believed adults, even when they shouldn't.

"He need something to believe in. Rainbow Serpent master of all creation. You believe, Missy Hawk. You saw what serpent can do when he angered."

It was no use arguing with him. He believed in superstitions and mythical creatures that couldn't possibly exist except in his dreamtime and imagination. They made colourful legends that spanned music and artwork, but when two cultures crashed into each other there could only be heartache and discord unless one – or both – was willing to bend.

"I don't know what to do," I told him. "You've broken a dozen white-man's laws by taking my little brother away from the ranch house without permission. By all rights you should be in jail. It's what happens when people decide to do as they please without considering the penalties."

It was only then that I saw the muscles of his face twitch. He knew he had done something against the law, but he'd chosen to do it anyway. He had just never intended on getting caught.

"Asum not meant to hurt Little Master. Would have brought him home."

"But you shouldn't have taken him in the first place. Do you have any idea how much trouble you've caused? How many people you've hurt? How many men are out looking for you right now? Things like this have consequences. I can't just look the other way. What if you decide to do it again?"

"Me no do it again. Have what need."

"Do you really think that by making a mark in someone's foot they belong to you? Love and commitment don't work that way. They have to be earned."

"Little Master say he want to be with old Asum; unhappy at home. No one listen to him."

Asum had a point, and my heart filled with regret for all the times Trevor had been left on his own to suffer in silence while the adults in his life came and went. None of us had been there for him like we should have been. If he'd felt safe and secure and wanted he never would have left with the unorthodox little man who believed in nothing short of supernatural witchcraft.

"Then what do you suggest we do?" I asked him.

He moved his bare foot through the dust on the cave's floor. Was it right to take away his freedom because he'd been trying to help a forsaken little boy? But what if he tried it again? We might not be so lucky a second time.

"Asum no bad man. Only try to help Master Jack son. Him tell me boy unhappy. Need change."

How could I appeal to his sense of moral values or lawful behavior when he refused to listen? He had always lived by his own set of rules, coming and going as he pleased, and doing exactly what he wanted during the interim. Isn't that why he'd sneaked me away under cover of night when he knew my father would not be home and my mother was too unwell to care for me? He understood that they would never agree to such barbaric behavior. He might believe he had talked to my father since his death, but I knew differently.

Perhaps trying another tactic might help. I didn't exactly disbelieve in his gods for they were very real to him; they just didn't exist in my realm of reality.

"Asum," I said. "I need you to think carefully and be very honest with me. You say that you talked to my father and he understood why you brought Trevor here."

The insolence in his eyes was apparent, even in the half-light of the most open room in the cave.

"But I'm not sure he would ever be that understanding. He loves his children dearly and wants them to be safe at home where they belong. Neither of my parents ever learned what you did to me when I was a baby. If they had, you can rest assured that you would have been incarcerated or worse. My father was very angry when he saw you and Keida bringing me back to the house. I can only imagine what he might have done if he had learned the truth."

I wanted desperately to identify with that part of my life, but Asum had never been forthcoming with any of the details, and he was the only one who knew what had really happened. Why should I expect him to be any different now, even when faced with the possibility of losing his personal freedom?

He looked at me with those little, black eyes that seemed to bore into my soul. "You unhappy baby. Cry all time unless Keida hold you. Mum sick. Father never home."

"And you thought that giving me a family who had time for me was the only thing that could make me happy?"

"Baby need family. We give you new life. You our baby, not theirs."

My eyes filled with unexpected tears. Asum and Keida might have a rather skewed sense of right and wrong, but they had only done what they had to give me a sense of belonging. And in an odd sort of way, it must have worked. I had accepted them as parent-figures when my own were unavailable. I'd gone to Keida with everything. She'd been my protector, my confidant and my friend, teaching me everything I knew about how to survive in the world.

Asum had been trying to give that same gift to Trevor. How could I condemn him to prison for caring? He'd seen what was missing in my little brother's life and had been willing to do something about it while the rest of us were oblivious to anything but our own concerns.

"You and Keida were a very important part of my life, and I know you were just trying to help, but Trevor's situation isn't like mine."

"Little Master unhappy. That all old Asum need to know."

Quite suddenly, I realised that I cared deeply about the little man in a loincloth with feathers in his hair, even if I couldn't understand him. His connection to every part of nature was undeniable, and he would wither

away and die if he lost his freedom. But some sort of penalty had to be paid so he would know we were serious about his unacceptable behavior.

"Will you wait here for a few minutes?" I asked him. "I need to talk to Trevor and Jake, but I promise that nothing bad is going to happen to you. We just need to decide how best to disarm this situation before it gets any worse."

The expression on his face didn't change. "Asum do nothing wrong. Only protect family."

"I know that, and I'll try to get everyone else to understand. But it might take a little time. Can you give that to me?"

"Asum understand," was all he said as he retraced his steps back to the chamber with the drawings. I was surprised that the fire was still burning. Someone would need to make sure it was completely out before we left.

Jake was sitting on the side of the stream with Trevor in his arms. They both looked over at me when I waked out from behind the falling water that shielded the cave from unsuspecting eyes. The sun was overhead, and I could hear birds singing in the trees, although I couldn't see them in the blinding glare coming from off the water.

"Where is he?" Jake asked as I sat down beside them. He had cleaned the blood from Trevor's foot, and the unbecoming mark was clearly visible in his heel. It was much larger than mine and must have hurt terribly having it cut so deeply and crudely without anything to dull the pain.

"He's waiting for me in the cave. I told him we had a few things to discuss."

"That's a bloody understatement," he said. "He needs to be put away where he can't hurt anyone else. I've been around aborigines all my life, but this is first time I've ever seen one of them so openly disrespect the law and the sanctity of life. What made him think he could get away with it?"

I reached over and put my hand on Trevor's arm. "I think there are a few things I need to tell both of you before we make a decision about Asum. He wasn't trying to hurt Trevor. He just wanted him to know that there was someone in his life who would always be there."

Jake frowned. "He has a family for that."

"A family who one-by-one keeps deserting him."

"Not without reason."

"Reason has nothing to do with it. From Asum's viewpoint, family is supposed to bring solidarity, strength and commitment. That can't be done if people keep running away."

"What we do is none of his damned business!"

"In a way, it is," I responded, looking towards the cave's entrance. We'd all be able to see him if he tried to leave. "I learned something a few weeks ago that I should have shared. It might have stopped this from happening."

"It wasn't your fault," Trevor sobbed, sliding off Jake's lap and into my arms. He was trembling, and I hugged him tightly to me. "I told Asum I would go with him. He said it would turn me into a man like father, and I'd get to be a real part of his tribe. I didn't know he was going to cut my foot or make me drink any of that awful smelling stuff."

"What stuff?" Jake asked.

"Berries, dried leaves and bark. He said it would help us commune with the spirits better."

Jake cleared his throat but didn't say anything. Trevor needed to feel safe enough to talk to us, and that wouldn't happen if he felt like we were trying to reprimand him.

"And did you talk to the spirits?" I asked him as his eyes looked deeply into mine. "I know it had to be very confusing."

"I was too scared to think about anything except what might happen next. I didn't know about the knife."

"No, I'm sure you didn't," I reassured him. "The same thing happened to me when I was a baby, only I didn't know about it until before I got sick, and then I met someone who'd had the same thing done to her."

He looked at me with bewilderment. I needed to give him some background if he was going to understand.

"I was born in the ranch house, right in the room where your mother and Jackie are sleeping. Asum worked for my parents, and so did his wife, Keida. My delivery was hard on my mother, and she could barely get out of bed for over a year. During that time, Keida took care of me. She'd lost her only child, a son, not long after I was born. You have to understand that my parents didn't have the kind of relationship yours did. Father was never home and my mother was sick all the time. That made Asum and Keida decide that they didn't love me the way a child should be loved, so they took me from my crib one night and carried me to this very cave where they performed a ritual that made me part of their tribe. I have the same mark on my heel that you do. They wanted me to know that I had a family who wasn't going to neglect me."

Trevor reached up and kissed my cheek. "I'm sorry they hurt you, Brylee."

His compassion after having gone through so much himself moved me

to tears, but I kept them at bay. "I was too young to know it even happened, but I always wondered how I'd gotten that little x-shaped scar on my heel."

"Can I see it?" Trevor asked.

"Certainly," I replied. "Although I think we should get you home first. Everyone has been so worried. They love you very much."

Tears formed in his eyes again. "I didn't mean to make anyone sad. I didn't think anyone would notice I was gone."

"Of course we noticed," I said, glancing over his head at Jake who looked just as shell-shocked as I felt. What we had done to Trevor was inexcusable. "And we're dreadfully sorry we didn't give you the time and attention you needed, but that's all going to change. I'm home now and so is Jake. We're going to make sure this family is okay."

"Promise?" Trevor pulled away from me until he could see my eyes again. "Asum was right about people leaving all the time. He said he talked to father about it. What's going to happen to him?"

"That's what we have to decide," Jake said. "You do know that what he did was wrong?"

"We all make mistakes," Trevor replied. "Can't he just come home with us? We're his family. He doesn't have anyone else."

I watched Jake's body stiffen. "That might not be for us to decide, sport. I understand about him being part of the family, but there are laws. People can't just take children away from home without their parent's permission."

"Mum will understand when I explain. I could have told him I didn't want to go. It was my fault as much as his."

Nothing could be determined on the mountain. There were other people who needed to be involved in deciding what happened to Asum. I didn't tell them that the wizened man waiting for me inside of the cave still believed he had done nothing wrong. There was plenty of fault to go around, but without remorse, he might try something just as reprehensible again.

"Why don't I go and get him," I suggested since our options were rapidly diminishing. "He could go home with us, and we could decide what's going to happen when we get there. That will give us a little more time to think and to talk."

Jake rose to his feet. "I'll go with you. My backpack is still in the cave, and I know there's a small first aid kit inside if the animals didn't tear it apart. We should probably get some antibiotics on Trevor's foot. There's no telling where that knife has been."

Trevor grabbed at my arm. "I don't want to be left alone," he said. "I'm scared."

I kissed the top of his head. He had every right to be afraid after the nightmare he'd been through.

"Why don't I stay with you until your Uncle Jake finds what he needs, and then I can go looking for Asum if necessary. Did you see who I brought with me?"

He looked up at me and smiled. "Uncle Jake let me pet him as soon as we came outside. He said I could ride Thunder down the mountain just like you rode General."

"It won't be quite the same," I assured him as Jake walked away. "It isn't night, and this isn't a race against time. I'm just glad things turned out the way they did, only I wish your foot hadn't been cut."

"I'm not," he said. "It hurts bad, but it gives us something else to share. We're both part of the same tribe now."

We waited in the sunshine for Jake to reemerge from the cave. It was taking him longer than I expected, and I was worried that he might have gone off on his own to find Asum. If he had, the little old man would not stand a chance unless he used some of his unearthly powers, which I was no longer so sure he couldn't summon on command. None the less, beliefs, even those outside the realm of probability, could be very powerful.

"Is that Uncle Jake's saddle?" Trevor asked, interrupting my thoughts as he squinted his eyes and peered at a fat rock in the distance where little more than a brown strip of leather could be seen laying on top.

"Most likely," I replied, not wanting him to become upset over something else now that the worst of his ordeal was over. "Do you want me to take a look?"

Trevor gave me an anxious look but relaxed his grip on my arm. "I guess that would be okay. He might want to take it home with him."

I doubted that would happen, but Trevor needed a diversion. So I left him sitting where he was, crossed the short distance to the rock and pushed the bramble bushes away. What met my eyes left me truly deflated. The horn of the saddle had been smashed and one of the side panels had been chewed until it was almost unrecognizable. The rest of the leather was dry and brittle with deep cracks running through it.

"Is something wrong with it?" Trevor asked as he leaned forward to get a better view without putting any weight on his injured limb.

"Afraid so, little brother," I responded, as my eyes took in the crawling

bull ants that appeared to have made their home underneath it. They had ferocious pinchers that could inflict a great deal of pain, and if one received more than just a few bites, the venom could paralyze and then supposedly kill even the strongest man. "It's pretty much destroyed. I should have thought about coming back for it sooner."

"Come back for what?" Jake asked as he emerged from behind the waterfall with what was left of his backpack slung over one shoulder. I hoped he knew what he was doing carrying it so close to his body. It had been in the cave for nearly three months where creatures I didn't even want to think about lived out their lives.

"It's your saddle, Uncle Jake. Brylee said it's ruined."

"Well, I suppose that couldn't be helped," he replied, kneeling down in front of us with nothing more than a cursory look at the remains of what had once been very important to him. I remembered him telling me that our father had given it to him to use when he first came to the ranch. "What's important is getting you off this mountain, sport. The fire's out, but Asum's gone."

I looked up at him as a tinge of guilt surfaced. "He said he'd wait for me. How did he get out of the cave? We've been here all along."

"Hell, if I know," he replied. "But I looked around the room of paintings and in all of the enclosures anywhere near it. I even crawled back into the hole where I nearly lost my life. I found this." He held up the revolver that had been left behind. "The bottle of whiskey was already empty. Maybe I should have brought it out as a souvenir but wasn't sure you'd appreciate it."

I looked down at the ground as I thought back to that night when I'd found him lying in a pool of blood, burning up with fever, and barely conscious. I'd foolishly poured a good portion of the whiskey into his nearly closed gunshot wound. How he had hated me for that. Wasting what little he had that could bring him even a few moments of relief.

"He might just be hiding," I said, not wanting to rehash the particulars of that night in front of my little brother. "It's dark inside the cave, he's stealthy, and he has a lot to lose if we take him back with us."

"Is there something you're not telling me, Brylee?" Jake asked, giving me a look that made my stomach lurch. "Did you purposefully give him a chance to get away?"

"Of course not," I replied, frowning at his apparent lack of trust when it came to my relationship with the unconventional little man he hadn't even met until today. "You've spent more time in that cave than I have. Did you find another way out?"

"No! But I didn't exactly have an opportunity to go looking for one. I just don't like the idea of not knowing where he is."

"Do you want me to take a second look? Maybe I'll see something you missed."

"And what are you going to use for light? This bloody flashlight is almost out of juice, and we need to get Trevor back before LeAnn has half the country out looking for him."

I felt lousy inside! It had crossed my mind that Asum might try to get away if I left him alone, but I doubted we'd ever see him again. We'd dishonored and rebuked him. That felt the same in any culture.

Jake applied ointment from a tube that had somehow managed to escape the teeth or claws of some animal or rodent onto the bottom of Trevor's foot, but we had nothing clean with which to cover it. "That should hold you until we got home," he said. "Why don't I carry you over to Thunder and put you on his back. I think he's been waiting patiently long enough."

I thought he might ignore me as he had always done in the past when he was angry and upset, but he didn't. He picked Trevor up and held him over his shoulder like he would have done had he been burping a baby. Then he pulled me to my feet.

"I'm sorry for being such a bloody, accusing bloke," he said. "You did what you thought was best, and in a way, I admire you for it. I've never been much good at giving second chances to anyone. You're helping me to change that."

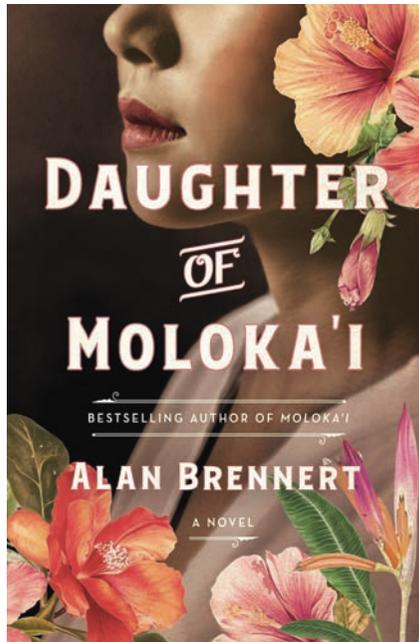
JS Ririe is offering Book 1 in the series FREE to readers interested. Email her at jan@janhillbooks.com

Read more at: <http://janhillbooks.com> and join her mailing list.

BOOK REVIEW: DAUGHTER OF MOLOKA'I

by Jill Hedgecock

Daughter of Moloka'i
by Alan Brennert



<https://amzn.to/2WyzuJ1>

“*Daughter of Moloka’I*” (2019, St. Martin's Press, hardcover, 308 pages, \$18.29) by Alan Brennert is the highly anticipated sequel to the national bestseller, *Moloka’i*. For those that haven’t read “*Moloka’i*”, the two-book series is on Amazon for \$24.98. However, *Daughter of Moloka’i* reads equally well as a stand-alone story.

In his new novel, Brennert tells the story of Rachel Kalama's daughter, Ruth. Rachel's story in a leper colony was the focus of “*Moloka’I*”. “*Daughter of Moloka’I*” launches with Ruth separated from her mother and living with nuns on Oahu, but readers soon journey to the south Sacramento area when Ruth is adopted by a kind Japanese family. Ruth's adopted mother and father, Etsuko and Taizo, decided to immigrate to California after Ruth's new father's brother, Jiro, asked for help with his struggling farm.

Ruth muddles her way through her teen years often experiencing racist comments and soldiering through adolescence with the added challenge of being mixed race. Her “*hapa*” heritage of half Hawaiian and half Japanese makes her feel like she doesn't fit anywhere. But amidst the Great Depression, Ruth's chance encounter while searching for employment after graduating High School leads to marriage.

However, her happiness with her husband, Frank, and two children is short-lived after the bombing of Pearl Harbor unleashes a wave of paranoia in the U.S. Government and American citizens alike. Practically overnight, Frank and Ruth are stripped of their belongings and are forced to sell their business at a loss when they are shipped off to an internment camp. After their release, Rachel and Ruth are reunited and the novel segues into an exploration of 1950s Hawaiian history and culture.

According to Brennert, “This new novel is the first novel that I have written that is not both the history of a person and a history of a place.”

Through Brennert's mastery of weaving story and historical accuracy, the unconscionable acts of our government that rushed to incarcerate law-abiding citizens on the basis of race is revealed. It is appropriate that the book was released on February 19th, 2019, 77 years to the day of President Roosevelt's Executive Order No. 9066 that initiated the exclusion and internment of all Japanese people living in America. “*Daughter of Moloka’I*” explores a dark time in American history, yet somehow the novel ultimately transforms into an uplifting read with a satisfying conclusion. The novel is more than a history lesson in racism and war, it is the story of love and of culture and coming to terms with unjust hardship. I cannot recommend it enough.

Alan Brennert is the author of the best-selling Hawaiian-based histor-

ical novels “*Moloka’I*” and “*Honolulu*”. He earned an Emmy Award in 1991 as a screenwriter on the television series “*L.A. Law*”. “*Daughter of Moloka’I*” is a #1 New York Times Bestseller and was named “A Best/Most Anticipated Book” by USA Today. Fans of historical fiction, especially Jamie Ford’s “*Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*” and “*Snow Falling on Cedars*” by David Guterson, will likely enjoy the book.

About Jill Hedgecock



*Jill Hedgecock is the award-winning author of **Rhino in the Room** . She is also the Program Coordinator for the Mount Diablo branch of the California Writers Club. Website: www.jillhedgecock.com*

“ **SPECIAL OFFER:** Jill (and Books 'N Pieces) have a **special offer** for writers who visit Jill’s Website.

1). Send your book cover and a short blurb about your novel or memoir to rhinorecord2019@gmail.com. A total of 30 books will be randomly selected and will be eligible. Books must be available in paperback or Kindle ebook, be 400 pages or less, and available for purchase priced under \$20. No erotica, self-help or religious/faith-based books.

2). Only winning authors will be notified. Each of the selected 30 books will be featured on columnist Jill Hedgecock's blog for 24 hours only. Jill will notify you the day that your book is featured. During that time, you will have an opportunity to recruit visitors to the website. Be creative: invite friends who are animal lovers, fellow authors, friends and family.

3). The author that recruits (or organically generates) the most interest

on the website on their "Featured Day" will have **Jill's review** of their book featured in the next issue of **Books 'N Pieces Magazine**.

4). Risk free: If your book is chosen, but Jill does not feel comfortable recommending or giving it a positive review after reading it, she will contact you and give you the option of not featuring your book.

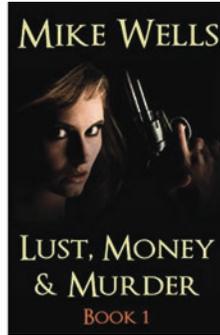
RE-COVERING BOOKS

Bestseller Mike Wells Ups his Game to Improve Sales

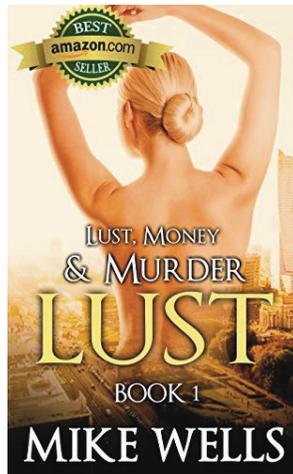


Bestselling author Mike Wells, with 30 years experience as a writer and more than 25 thriller and suspense novels with over 2,000 Amazon reviews, has re-covered the first three in each of his book series to help with identification, as well as to consolidate his brand identification.

“If you have read much of the series, you already know that the books are written in trilogies,” Mike told his readers. “What I’ve done is repackaged them to better reflect this, naming them after the part of the world where the significant action takes place.”



Old cover



New cover

The stark differences between the old and new covers are impressive. Despite the fact that Mike's books—in this case a 13-part series—all sold well with the original covers, the move to the new covers allows Mike to structure the books (as series) into trilogies.



The First Trilogy



The Russian Trilogy



The African Trilogy



The Greek Trilogy



The Japanese Trilogy

In addition, Mike's other series (and the additional books from the trilogies) are also well worth reading:

Baby Talk

Blind Scorpion

The Drive-By Wife

Forbidden

Lust, Money & Murder Series

The Mysterious Disappearance of Kurt Kramer

Passion, Power & Sin

Secrets of the Elusive Lover

With Mother's Approval

The Wrong Side of the Tracks

Wild Child

Be sure to visit Mike's Website that includes a wealth of information for writers, as well as a lot of FREE items.

And Mike is offering new readers to his books, the First Trilogy of *Lust, Money & Murder* FREE. Simply download them from his Website at <http://mikewellsblog.blogspot.com>

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

“ Dear Editor: I like the newer format. Your magazine fits nicely in my bookshelf. While the larger format was nice I had nowhere to put it. ~Nancy Grava (CA)

Dear Nancy, thank you. We like the new 6" x 9" print format as well. ~WG

“ Dear Editor: Peter James is one of my favourite author and I was happy to see him on the cover. ~ Jocelyn Vargas (UK)

Dear Nancy, Peter James is one of our favorite authors as well. He is also a very approachable and generous man. ~WG

“ Dear Editor: Could you please interview John Scalzi? ~Alexi Raddich (Australia)

Dear Alexi, I would love to interview John Scalzi [Old Man's War]. We have reached out in the past but have not heard back. I will try again. Thanks for asking.

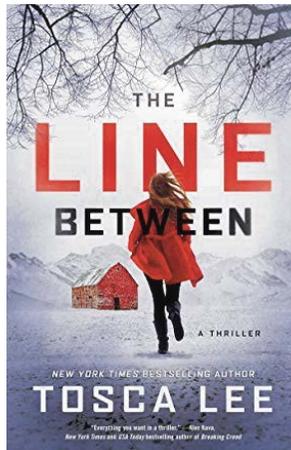
*Email your letters to Info@Booksnpieces.com and add **Letters to the Editor** in the subject line. Publication of letters is at the discretion of the editor.*

BOOKSTORE 'N PIECES

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TOSCA LEE: THE LINE BETWEEN:



Synopsis: In this frighteningly believable thriller from *New York Times* bestselling author Tosca Lee, an extinct disease re-emerges from the melting Alaskan permafrost to cause madness in its victims. For recent

apocalyptic cult escapee Wynter Roth, it's the end she'd always been told was coming.

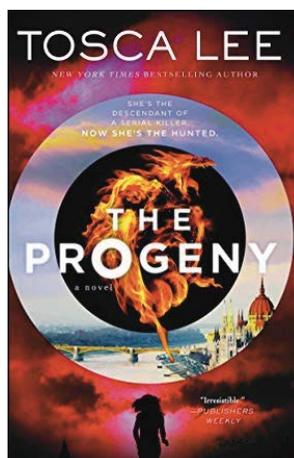
When Wynter Roth is turned out of New Earth, a self-contained doomsday cult on the American prairie, she emerges into a world poised on the brink of madness as a mysterious outbreak of rapid early onset dementia spreads across the nation.

As Wynter struggles to start over in a world she's been taught to regard as evil, she finds herself face-to-face with the apocalypse she's feared all her life—until the night her sister shows up at her doorstep with a set of medical samples. That night, Wynter learns there's something far more sinister at play and that these samples are key to understanding the disease.

Now, as the power grid fails and the nation descends into chaos, Wynter must find a way to get the samples to a lab in Colorado. Uncertain who to trust, she takes up with former military man Chase Miller, who has his own reasons for wanting to get close to the samples in her possession, and to Wynter herself.

Filled with action, conspiracy, romance, and questions of whom—and what—to believe, *The Line Between* is a high-octane story of survival and love in a world on the brink of madness.

TOSCA LEE: THE PROGENY:



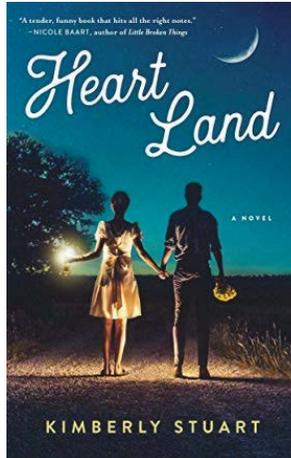
Synopsis: *New York Times* bestselling author Tosca Lee brings a modern twist to an ancient mystery surrounding Elizabeth Bathory, the most notorious female serial killer of all time.

Emily Jacobs is the descendant of a serial killer. Now, she's become the hunted.

She's on a quest that will take her to the secret underground of Europe and the inner circles of three ancient orders—one determined to kill her, one devoted to keeping her alive, and one she must ultimately save.

Filled with adrenaline, romance, and reversals, *The Progeny* is the present-day saga of a 400-year-old war between the uncanny descendants of "Blood Countess" Elizabeth Bathory, the most prolific female serial killer of all time, and a secret society dedicated to erasing every one of her descendants. It is a story about the search for self filled with centuries-old intrigues against the backdrop of atrocity and hope.

KIMBERLY STUART: HEARTLAND



Synopsis: A story of reconnection, lost love, and the power of faith, *Heart Land* follows a struggling fashion designer back to her small Iowa hometown as she tries to follow her dreams of success and finding true love.

Grace Klaren has finally made her dream of living in the Big Apple and

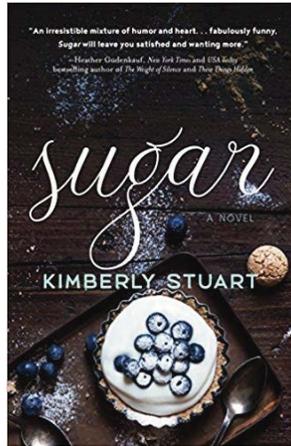
working in the fashion industry a reality. But when she's unexpectedly fired and can't afford the next month's rent, Grace does something she never thought she'd do: she moves back home.

Back in Silver Creek, Iowa, Grace is determined to hate it. She rails against the quiet of her small town, where everything closes early, where there's no nightlife, where everyone knows each other. She's saving her pennies and plotting her return to New York when she almost runs over a man who's not paying attention at a crosswalk. It turns out to be Tucker, her high school sweetheart whose heart she broke when she left ten years ago. They reconnect, and Grace remembers why she fell for him in the first place.

And her career begins to turn around when she finds a gorgeous but tattered vintage dress at a flea market. She buys it, rips it apart seam by seam, and re-creates it with new fabric, updating the look with some of her own design ideas. She snaps a picture and lists the dress online, and within a day, it sells for nearly \$200. Suddenly, Grace has her ticket out of here.

But Grace can't fight her growing feelings for Tucker. Sometimes when they're together, Tucker paints a picture of what their future could be like, and it feels so real. And when she finally gains the funding to move her new business back to New York, Grace must decide where home really is—will she chase her long-held New York dream, or find a new dream here in the heartland?

KIMBERLY STUART: SUGAR



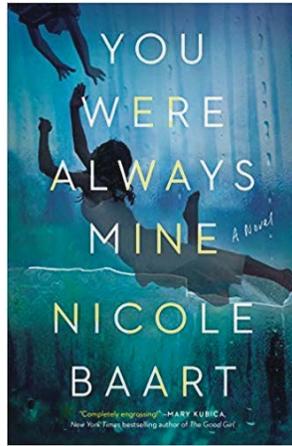
Synopsis: After realizing her coworkers at L’Ombre, a high-profile restaurant in NYC, will never appreciate or respect her, Charlie Garrett allows her ex-boyfriend, Avery Michaels, to convince her to work for him as executive pastry chef at his new Seattle hotspot, Thrill. She’ll have her own kitchen, her own staff—everything she ever wanted professionally.

When she arrives at Thrill, however, she realizes that Avery wanted more than a pastry chef for his restaurant—he wanted a costar for the reality show they’re filming about the restaurant and its staff. Charlie is uncomfortable with the idea at first, but she soon realizes that this is her chance to show the world what women in the kitchen are capable of. She sets some ground rules with the film crew, signs a non-disclosure agreement, and promptly meets the man of her dreams, Kai, off-camera.

The show, and her demanding work schedule as head of the pastry kitchen, makes it nearly impossible for Charlie and Kai to spend time together. Drama on and off the set soon take a toll on Charlie’s well-being, forcing her to choose if life in front of the camera is worth sacrificing life behind the scenes.

Sugar is a contemporary romance, set in the high-pressure commercial kitchens of New York and Seattle. A funny and clever story of how a female chef learns to thrive in the ruthless world of premier restaurants.

NICOLE BAART: YOU WERE ALWAYS MINE:

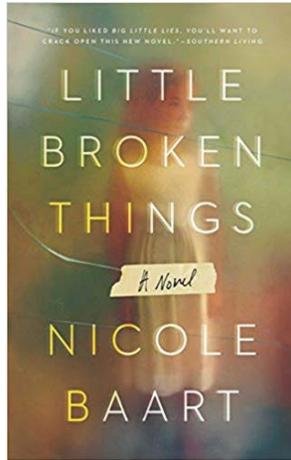


Synopsis: The acclaimed author of *Little Broken Things* returns with another “race-to-the-finish family drama” (*People*) about a single mother who becomes embroiled in a mystery that threatens to tear apart what’s left of her family.

Jessica Chamberlain, newly separated and living with her two sons in a small Iowa town, can’t believe that a tragedy in another state could have anything to do with her. But when her phone rings one quiet morning, her world is shattered. As she tries to pick up the pieces and make sense of what went wrong, Jess begins to realize that a tragic death is just the beginning. Soon she is caught in a web of lies and half-truths—and she’s horrified to learn that everything leads back to her seven-year-old adopted son, Gabriel.

Years ago, Gabe’s birth mother requested a closed adoption and Jessica was more than happy to comply. But when her house is broken into and she discovers a clue that suggests her estranged husband was in close contact with Gabe’s biological mother, she vows to uncover the truth at any cost. A harrowing story of tenacious love and heartbreaking betrayal, *You Were Always Mine* is about the wars we wage to keep the ones we love close, perfect for fans of Liane Moriarty and Jodi Picoult.

NICOLE BAART: LITTLE BROKEN THINGS:



Synopsis: “If you liked *Big Little Lies*, you’ll want to crack open this new novel by Nicole Baart.” —*Southern Living*

“Steeped in menace, Baart’s latest is a race-to-the-finish family drama.”
—*People*

An engrossing and suspenseful novel for fans of Liane Moriarty and Amy Hatvany about an affluent suburban family whose carefully constructed facade starts to come apart with the unexpected arrival of an endangered young girl.

I have something for you. When Quinn Cruz receives that cryptic text message from her older sister Nora, she doesn’t think much of it. They haven’t seen each other in nearly a year and thanks to Nora’s fierce aloofness, their relationship consists mostly of infrequent phone calls and an occasional email or text. But when a haunted Nora shows up at the lake near Quinn’s house just hours later, a chain reaction is set into motion that will change both of their lives forever.

Nora’s “something” is more shocking than Quinn could have ever imagined: a little girl, cowering, wide-eyed, and tight-lipped. Nora hands

her over to Quinn with instructions to keep her safe, and not to utter a word about the child to anyone, especially not their buttoned-up mother who seems determined to pretend everything is perfect. But before Quinn can ask even one of the million questions swirling around her head, Nora disappears, and Quinn finds herself the unlikely caretaker of a girl introduced simply as Lucy.

While Quinn struggles to honor her sister's desperate request and care for the lost, scared Lucy, she fears that Nora may have gotten involved in something way over her head—something that will threaten them all. But Quinn's worries are nothing compared to the firestorm that Nora is facing. It's a matter of life and death, of family and freedom, and ultimately, about the lengths a woman will go to protect the ones she loves.

BRAIN GAME - PUZZLE ANSWERS

9-letter word: Knowledge

dongle	geld
glowed	glee
golden	glen
legend	glow
longed	gold
dowel	keel
glede	koel
klong	leek
kneel	lend
ledge	leno
leone	lewd
loden	lode
lodge	loge
longe	lone
lowed	long
newel	noel
ogled	ogle
olden	olde
dele	weld
dole	wold
enol	

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I hope you have enjoyed this issue of Books 'N Pieces Magazine. We are happy that you can read it **FREE of charge** Online. **Print editions** are available through Amazon. Unlike the full-color Online version, the print edition has a black and white interior so that we can keep costs down and price it affordably.

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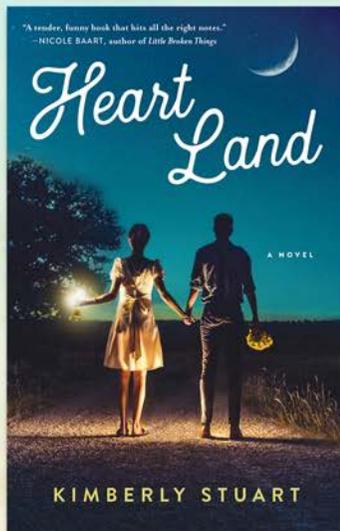
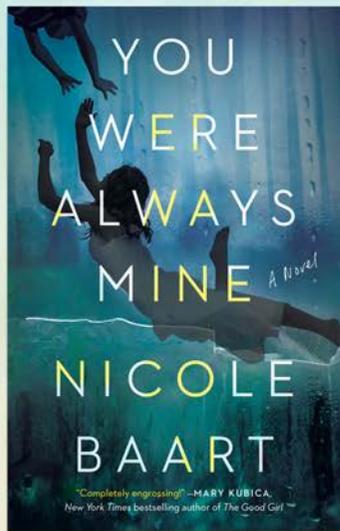
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Our next issue will be out MAY 5th!

THE TRAVELING PENS!

Nicole Baart - Tosca Lee - Kimberly Stuart



CREATIVE EDGE

The Traveling Pens

<https://www.creative-edge.services>

