

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Deborah Shlian and Linda Reid, authors of *Dead Air*

Start to finish, how long did it take to write *Dead Air*?

Dead Air took about a year to write. We both had careers in medicine, and writing was our “second shift.”

How did you get the idea for *Dead Air*?

We started developing *Dead Air* while we were both doctors at UCLA Student Health Services. We both saw first-hand the economic challenges universities were facing and how partnerships with industry were being sought to sponsor academic research and educational programs. We wondered about the impact of these collaborations on the accuracy and sanctity of medical research, and whether “bottom-line” business pressures would begin to influence scientists and researchers. UCLA was renowned for its clinical research programs. Could universities under financial pressures put study participants at risk—especially if those volunteers might be vulnerable young students like the ones we saw every day at the office?

Do any of the characters in *Dead Air* have an autobiographical component? If so, which character, and what is the similarity?

Sammy Greene has elements of both of us, spiced with a lot more chutzpah! There are, however, elements of family members in the characters. (Gus Pappajohn is based on Linda’s father and her second cousin from Boston. Eleni is based on Linda’s Aunt Effie in Somerville, Massachusetts. Finally, Reed Wyndham resonates of Deborah’s beloved husband Joel in his medical student days.)

How did the two of you come to write together?

Deborah Shlian: We wanted to write together after some productive lunchtime discussions during the very early development of *Rabbit in the Moon*. I was just starting to outline the plot of that award-winning thriller, and Linda had taken a few weeks off of UCLA doctor duty to serve as a staff writer for the TV series *Family Medical Center*. We thought that the synergy of two experienced writers would lead to an exciting, gripping, page-turner thriller—*Dead Air*.

Which part of the writing process did you enjoy most?

We loved making the characters come to life. We’d assign scenes to each other, then eagerly look forward to reading what our writing partner had created—in some ways, during this process, we were not only writers of *Dead Air*, but also its fervent readers.

Which part of the writing process did you find most challenging?

We have a lot in common, but we are different personalities. Trying to merge both our writing styles into a common voice and our contributions into a common lead character (Sammy) was a worthwhile challenge. Sammy taught us that 1 plus 1 makes 100!

How did the writing process work with the two of you living in different parts of the country?

Thank heaven for technology. We’d brainstorm by phone about our next scenes, then communicate back and forth by e-mail with attachments that held our latest outlines and writing. We’d usually talk every 1-2 weeks by phone, and e-mail every few days. And, we’d call each other whenever we “got stuck,” or trade scenes if we found ourselves stumbling. Finally, we’d each review and edit each other’s work to help promote a unified voice and style.

As writers, do you feel you each have different strengths? If so, what are your individual strengths, and how did this help shape the novel?

Linda Reid: Deborah's experience as a published author as well as her background in medical research and technical writing was a real plus. Before we started *Dead Air*, she insisted on an outline including complete back-stories for the characters- especially the two main characters, Sammy Greene and Gus Pappajohn. Even though we didn't use all of those elements in the first book, this helped us fully understand Sammy and Gus – their personalities, their feelings and attitudes. That way, no matter who wrote a particular scene, we knew exactly how the character would behave and speak.

Deborah Shlian: In terms of individual writing, Linda loves to play with dialogue more than description, which I really enjoy. Because she is still working with students at a university and has teenagers at home, she is a little more tuned into current lingo than I am. Of course, because *Dead Air* takes place in the '90s, we had to make sure the language was consistent with that time.

What do you think is protagonist Sammy Greene's best quality?

Her tenacity and determination to promote truth, justice, and good, as well as her inability to understand the word "no." However, Sammy's inability to understand the word "no" and determination and tenacity get her in trouble and risk her life.

As she works to solve the mystery in *Dead Air*, Sammy Greene has to confront her past—in particular, her mother's suicide. What was your reasoning for including this aspect of Sammy's past in the book?

Sammy is a "tough cookie." She's not only bright and spunky, but she's a lot more serious, mature, and capable than many college students. Her life experiences have led her beyond the "party-hearty" mentality typical of young adults away from home for the first time—she experienced immense, unspeakable losses, and her life was changed forever as a child. Her father's leaving the family, her mother's suicide, the difficult emotional and economic circumstances of being raised by her flinty grandmother all have led Sammy to hide her unresolved emotions and vulnerability under a hardened exterior. Sammy knows that life often brings sorrow as well as joy—and her own sadness has triggered her passion to make the world a better place for others. Her losses have, however, deeply scarred her heart and are keeping her from fulfilling a closer relationship with her cross-cultural soul-mate, Reed.

You describe the blending of religion and politics in this book. Why did you choose to include this in the book?

Linda Reid: In the late 1970s, I caught the 700 Club on TV and was amazed to see the impact Pat Robertson had on his audience. I recall wondering if the host would move into the political sphere one day. Within 10 years, the Robertsons, Fallwells, Oral Roberts, and others had blended religion and politics and launched the influential national movement that is today called Christianity.

How does Sammy Greene's career in talk radio mirror that of female talk show hosts in the early 90s?

After years of being tokens in broadcasting, women had become a strong presence in radio by the early 90s, both as deejays and newscasters. However, talk radio was still more of a man's medium when Sammy was in college. Sammy brought Woodward and Bernstein journalism to the fluffy world of female hosts. Her career paralleled the growth of female pundits and talk show hosts such as Randi Rhodes, Rachel Maddow, Laura Ingraham, and the late Barbara Olson.

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How does Sammy's take on relationships reflect the trends for college women today?

There is a range of relationship styles for college women in the '90s and today. Some women opt for purity rings and waiting until marriage. Others "play the field" and "hook up" casually. In between, many women engage in "serial monogamy," with one boyfriend, then the next, etc. And some women avoid emotional commitment until they're ready but engage in physical relationships with male friends, known as "friends with benefits." Sammy doesn't feel any urgency to "settle down" or marry—in fact, her experiences have made her shy away from those options. On the other hand, she is savvy enough to avoid multiple partners and casual relationships and enjoys the intelligent, caring company of someone like Reed, who is a kind and respectful equal.

Why did you choose a university setting for *Dead Air*?

Our English teachers always told us to "write about what you know." And we know universities, having spent much of our lives in them as students, doctors, and administrators. A university setting was perfect for our story because it represents a critical juncture in most families' lives. Teens are moving into adulthood, while their parents are struggling with the joys and fears of letting their children go. Universities promise to watch over students "in loco parentis" (in place of parents). However, in our novel, university scientists and administrators renege on that responsibility. While our story is pure fiction, its premise is frighteningly plausible. *Dead Air* becomes a cautionary tale for us all.

How did your backgrounds as physicians influence *Dead Air*?

Dead Air is a medical thriller—our experiences as physicians form a critical core of the book's theme. We have both worked in medical centers, on research studies, and with patients, for many years in student health centers similar to Ellsford's. We have seen how medicine saves lives—and how bad medicine can destroy them. We bring these experiences, both positive and negative, to the pages of *Dead Air*.

What do you hope readers will take away from *Dead Air*?

First and foremost, we hope readers will get a few hours of enjoyment and pleasure. Then, an understanding of how the betrayal of the values of ethical scientific research leads to the destruction of reputations, careers, and lives. Additionally, there is a caution about the integration of religion and politics that could allow religious tenets to be manipulated for political power and control.

What's next for Sammy Greene?

We've already completed the second in the Sammy Greene series: *Devil Wind*. Sammy graduates from college on the five-year plan and snags a job as a producer with CNN in Washington DC, far from Boston where Reed has moved to complete his medical residency. Unfortunately, Sammy's investigations get her into political hot water, and she's soon pounding the pavement again, ending up as a talk show host on a small progressive radio station in Los Angeles in the middle of a hellish fire season fueled by the blazing Santa Ana winds. Sammy copes with two men from her past who are now in LA—her father, married to his glamorous third wife, and her old love Reed, doing a cardiology fellowship at LA Medical. Chasing down a story on a young celebrity who has overdosed—again!—at LA Medical Center, Sammy and Reed stumble on what may be the corpse of Gus Pappajohn's daughter, a high society escort working for the famous Madam Kaye. Sammy notifies the former police chief and labors at his side to find the truth about his daughter, and uncovers a frightening conspiracy of terror that could result in the deaths of thousands, including her father and Reed.