

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Margaret Fenton, author of *Little Lamb Lost*

Start to finish, how long did it take to write *Little Lamb Lost*?

Oh, I think about eight months. I'd written a book set on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and was trying to get an agent about the time Hurricane Katrina hit. Needless to say, that did not go well. My setting had washed into the sea. So I started over, and wrote *Little Lamb Lost*.

As a lifelong mystery fan, what finally prompted you to take up writing?

Anne George. She was a cozy mystery writer from Birmingham, author of the Southern Sisters series. I met her at one of her signings, and we became friends. One day she asked why, if I loved mysteries so much, I didn't try to write one? I didn't have a good answer. So I gave it a shot, and discovered I love to write fiction. Anne died in 2001, and I miss her every day.

What is your process for writing a book? Do you outline?

I pretty much sit down, type "Chapter One," and go from there. I don't outline very much. I do scribble little reminders on sticky notes and stick them to my monitor, to prompt me to go back and tie up loose ends and red herrings, but that's about it. I have ideas in my head about where the mystery needs to go, how the characters need to develop, and so forth.

What part of the writing process was most challenging for you?

That's a good question. As I grow as a writer, I hope my use of language will continue to get better. There are writers I really admire for their ability to describe things so beautifully. I read their work and think, "Wow, I hope someday I'm that good."

What part of the writing process was easiest for you?

I love to write dialogue. I find that part the easiest. I guess it comes from being a therapist and talking to people all day long.

How did you get the idea for *Little Lamb Lost*?

I knew I wanted to have a child welfare social worker as the protagonist, but it took me a while to get up the courage to write this novel. I've heard some people say that crimes against children turn readers off. I had to get to a place where I could just write the book and not worry about all that. Yes, the victim in this book is a young boy, but all the violence is off-screen and the story really evolves as a result of his death.

How did you get the idea for the characters in *Little Lamb Lost*?

I suppose some parts of them are based on people I've known through the years, but none of the characters is based on one person in particular. Most of the time they just show up in my head as I'm writing.

Do any of the characters in *Little Lamb Lost* have an autobiographical component? If so, who, and how are you and the character similar?

Claire and I have similar characteristics, I think. Of course, she's younger and prettier! She has a fierce desire to make the world a better place, one child at a time. She gets that from her parents, especially her father. That's very similar to me and my family of origin. And I'm married to a computer scientist, who is in many ways like the character of Grant. I love using technology in the books to help solve the crime, and Grant helps me do that.

How did your own career as a social worker influence your writing?

I've been a child and family therapist for fifteen years. For ten years, I was contracted to the Jefferson County Department of Human Resources, first as an in-home therapist for parents who were at risk of losing custody of their children. Then I moved on to outpatient therapy at the DHR office and eventually worked as the Mental Health Liaison. Although I've never been a caseworker like Claire, I was housed in the DHR building and around the caseworkers every day. I got a really good idea of the triumphs and struggles they go through.

Do you think the novel presents an accurate portrayal of the difficulty in being a social worker?

I think every social worker in America lives in fear of losing a client. That happens to Claire, and it is very difficult for her to deal with. She blames herself, and feels a lot of guilt. So I think it is realistic. At least I hope so.

Why did you choose Birmingham as the setting of *Little Lamb Lost*?

I love Birmingham. I really do. The people here are wonderful, and the area is beautiful. I wanted to show readers a little bit about my amazing home. Plus, Birmingham is a fairly big city. It has an interesting, and at times tragic, history. We still struggle with civil rights and racism, as well as other problems like poverty and drug use. I think the urban setting makes my novel a bit edgier than something set in a small town.

What do you think is protagonist Claire Conover's most admirable quality? Least admirable quality?

She works hard. Really hard. She's very dedicated and willing to do whatever she needs to do to help her clients. And she can't lie. She's really bad at it, and sometimes that gets her into trouble. Least admirable? I think Claire's job makes it difficult for her to trust people. She puts up walls which can sometimes lead to problems in her personal life. And, although she loves her job, sometimes she has difficulty putting it aside to enjoy the other things in life that are important.

What do you think makes Claire unique?

Claire is the daughter of activists who worked with the Civil Rights movement in Birmingham in the sixties. They were two of the many who were instrumental in making so much change during that decade. It's fascinating to examine how the values of her parents translate into the twenty-first century through her character. Claire is a second-generation activist, really.

Which do you think serves Claire best – her optimism or her pessimism?

Her optimism, no doubt. I don't think anyone can be a child welfare social worker for any length of time and not be an optimist. Pessimism is something to be overcome.

All of the characters in *Little Lamb Lost* are extremely relatable. What's your secret to creating "real" characters?

Deep down, I think most people want the same things. We all want to be loved, recognized, and admired. We want to feel confident. We want to make enough money to be comfortable, raise successful children, and feel as though we have accomplished something during our lives. As a writer, I use that as the basis for all my characters—even, to a certain extent, the evil ones.

Without giving too much of the plot away, you tackle an incredibly difficult subject in *Little Lamb Lost*. What were the biggest challenges of taking on such a tough topic?

It is emotionally difficult to write about crimes against children. However, the subject I've chosen is realistic. As I write this, in the fall of 2008, the Caylee Anthony case is dominating the news. Several years ago, it was JonBenet Ramsay, Rilya Wilson, and the Elizabeth Smart abduction. Some realism in a novel is important to me, and of course crimes do happen to children. I just love creating characters that have to ability to mitigate them.

Social issues play a role in your book. Do you think it's an author's responsibility to educate his or her readers? Why or why not?

Personally, I love to read a mystery that teaches me something. Too much education can feel preachy, so of course I try to avoid that. I also hope readers will come away from *Little Lamb Lost* with a better idea of what a child welfare social worker really does, and with an understanding about the challenges facing children and families today.

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What do you hope readers will take away from *Little Lamb Lost*?

I want my characters to feel like friends. I want them to care about Claire, and those in her circle, and want to find out more about them. I hope readers will escape and be entertained, too.

Who were the major influences on your writing?

My parents read a lot—mysteries, mostly, but a lot of other genres, too. I credit them and my grandparents for encouraging reading as a hobby, and starting my crime fiction obsession. I had some great teachers growing up, and in college, who helped me appreciate the art of good writing. I'm in an amazing writer's group. As the coordinator of Murder in the Magic City, I've met many other authors who were very encouraging. I've got lots of favorite authors, each of whom have different strengths, and I try to pay attention to those to educate myself. I love Dick Francis, Anne Perry, Sue Grafton, Mary Daheim...there's just too many to name. I collect mysteries and love finding a new author to admire.

Will any of the characters in *Little Lamb Lost* return?

You bet. Claire will be back in the sequel, tentatively titled *Little Girl Gone*. Her friends will be back, too, and the men in her life. We'll have to see what happens with them. That will be an interesting question.

What's next for Margaret Fenton? Do you have other books in the works?

I'm working on the sequel to *Little Lamb Lost*, of course. I'd love, someday, to write a cozy. I read some cozies, and I think one would be fun to write. In a cozy you are free to put in a little more humor, which would be fun. But for now, I'm writing Claire Conover's little mysteries, and I love her world, so I'm happy!