

# AN INTERVIEW WITH

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## Martha Powers, author of *Conspiracy of Silence*

### **Start to finish, how long did it take you to write *Conspiracy of Silence*?**

It took me about six months with a few additional months for doing the Minnesota research.

### **Where did you get the idea for the story?**

Several years ago I was in the library waiting to go to meeting. I was sitting next to a young woman who was reading a yearbook. There was a stack of yearbooks beside her. All of a sudden I heard her gasp and asked her if she was all right. She held the book out and asked if I thought she looked like the woman in the class picture. I said she did. It turned out the young girl was getting married in several months and she had been adopted as a baby. She was searching for her mother's identity so that she could learn if there were any health issues she should know about. She knew her mother had gone to high school in one of the northern suburbs of Chicago and she was looking through yearbooks to see if any of the pictures looked like her. If they did she hoped to be able to contact the person. I had to go to the meeting and I wondered if she had in fact found her mother. Several months later I read in the newspaper that the young girl had indeed found her mother and had invited her to the wedding. The idea for *Conspiracy of Silence* came out of that.

### **Are any of the characters based on people you know or have encountered?**

I chose characteristics for some of my fictional characters from people I know but I don't base them on those people. When you build a character, you need to give them characteristics that will help them to do what you want them to do within the story. People you know will act according to who they are and sometimes that works against what you want them to do. I do often use names of people I know and like within the body of the story, but they won't be major players.

### **How is the process of writing a mystery/thriller similar/dissimilar to the process of writing a romance?**

In both cases you're telling a story. You still need a beginning, middle and end. The trick is to know the kind of story that your reader is looking for. There's a need to make the story interesting and to build three-dimensional characters. In some cases it's more difficult to write a good romance because you only have two main characters to really focus on, and keeping the story interesting can be a real challenge. When you're writing a mystery, you have to spend more time working out the logistics of your story. You need a tight story line so that the reader doesn't lose interest.

### **Why did you choose Grand Rapids, Minnesota as the setting of the book?**

I wrote the first three thrillers with a setting in Wisconsin. Living in Chicago, we spent a lot of vacation time in Wisconsin and I loved writing about the state. For a change of scenery we went to Minnesota and rented a house in Grand Rapids for several months. I found the iron range area fascinating — -- lots of lakes and strange red stone mountains. The people were especially friendly and we had a great time touring the mines and other tourist places. When I started writing *Conspiracy of Silence* I tried to show some of the beauty of the area.

### **What do you think drives Clare?**

Clare wants to know who she is. She had a sense of not fitting in when she was growing up and now realizes that she must have sensed that her whole life was a lie. She feels that if she can learn more about her parents, she'll have a better idea of the kind of person she was meant to be.

### **What do you admire most about Clare?**

I admire Clare's determination to search for the truth no matter what she finds. She is not quick to condemn her parents when she learns facts about their lives. I suspect if it were me, I would be more angry and more judgmental than Clare is.

**Did writing the book require you to do any special research, and if so, what?**

I did lots of research about Minnesota and the town of Grand Rapids. I'd already done a lot of research on adoptees, so I just tried to work it through as if I were the person searching for identity.

**How does having an adopted son impact your writing?**

Our own son had issues about his identity, and we could see how hurtful it was to him not to be able to know what his parents were like and how his life might have been different if he had not been adopted. Luckily he could get some answers from his extended birth family but there was still a hunger to know more about his heredity.

**What do you hope readers will take away from the book?**

I want readers to be caught up in Clare's search and to be excited with the progress of her journey. Mostly, I'd like them to be entertained.

**How much of the book do you have in your mind before you start writing? Did you encounter any surprises as you were writing the book?**

I usually have a clear synopsis of the story before I start. I don't know the characters yet. They come to life on the page as the story progresses. My favorite surprise was when Waldo wandered into the story. He was not in the synopsis, and it surprised me as much as it surprised Clare when she opened the door to the lovable, smelly dog. Even then I had no clue that he would play a prominent role in the book. The story would be totally different without Waldo.

**What is your favorite part of the writing process?**

My favorite part is going from the draft version to the finished version. Then you have the time to add sensory details and visuals that really flesh out the story line. It's like decorating a new house. Each detail makes the story more memorable.

**What is your least favorite part of the writing process?**

Breathing life into a character is the hardest part. I agonize over the background of my characters so that when they do something it seems natural and well motivated. Without the motivation behind their actions, they are nothing but flat characters, lifeless and uninteresting.

**What's next for Martha Powers?**

I'm working on a new thriller. I'm back in Wisconsin again. There's always another story around the corner.