

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Patricia Gussin, author of *Shadow of Death*

As someone who was in Detroit during the riots, was it difficult for you to revisit this time?

Yes, because the riots were so devastating. More than forty people dead, hundreds injured, and thousands who lost their homes and businesses. Racial tension was palpable and the fabric of the city seemed rent in two.

What is your most vivid recollection of being in Detroit during this time?

I can still smell the fires as they raged for days. Smell is such a powerful sense, one that lingers in the recesses of your brain forever.

Was the process of writing *Shadow of Death* cathartic for you?

Yes, very much so. The impact of the physical destruction and the social upheaval of this cataclysmic historical event has always haunted me, and to use it as a powerful setting in *Shadow of Death* has allowed me to finally let it go, get it out of my system.

How did the event change you?

Being in the midst of an event like the Detroit riots has made me so much more aware of the hopelessness facing those born into poverty. I believe that entrapment, particularly of children, in urban pockets of poverty, gangs, drugs and crime is the most crucial issue facing society today.

What prompted you to write *Shadow of Death*?

I must have been thinking about my medical school days back in Detroit more than I consciously realized. Not only the terror of the times, but the unending demands of a three year old and three month old, horrendous on-call schedules, and dangerous lack of sleep. It wasn't until years after when my life had settled down that I was able to reflect and then I asked myself the question, "What if..." And that's what started the story, followed by a long line of "what if's..." leading to twists and turns of what could have happened.

How long – start to finish – did it take you to write the book?

A total of ten years. When I started I was the worldwide vice president of a major pharmaceutical company and I had seven kids in various stages of college or grad school. Then once I started, I had to make the transition from scientific writing to fiction. It took several drafts to get the pacing that I wanted and to integrate the parallel story lines. I number my drafts alphabetically and *Shadow of Death* is "Draft L."

What was the most difficult part of writing this book?

I actually started writing *Shadow of Death* on long plane rides back and forth to Japan and China. I started on an empty pad of paper. About two years and many trips later, I had a huge stack of notepads, all crammed with barely decipherable scribble. Taking that stack of notepads and going to the word processor was the most daunting challenge. The lowest moment: faulty knowledge of "save" and "delete." Lesson learned: go straight to the computer next time.

What was the easiest part of writing the book?

Actually conceptualizing the story and getting into the heads of the characters. For me, definitely the easiest part and the most fun.

Is Laura Nelson autobiographical in any way?

Yes and no. Laura, like me, started medical school in Detroit, in 1967, with two small children. Grounding the story this realistically gave me a solid jumping-off point. Laura, like me, had two more pregnancies in medical school, a scenario quite unusual in those days. But from there, the autobiographical elements stop and fiction starts. As for me: no rape, no murder, no Dr. Monroe.

What do you admire most about Laura? Least?

I admire Laura's steadfast dedication to her children and her perseverance as she refuses to abandon her passion to become a doctor even when faced with horrible consequences. But in Laura's case this passion to succeed, leads to major ethical compromises. What I admire least is her inability to trust, forcing her to needlessly face terrifying challenges alone.

The book's title, *Shadow of Death*, is borrowed from the 23rd Psalm. Interestingly, the line, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" is immediately followed by "I will fear no evil," but in many respects, Laura's choices are rooted in fear. What commentary do you want to make about fear? About faith?

Fear is indeed a powerful motivator in *Shadow of Death*. Every death casts a shadow over the survivors, particularly when violence is involved. In Laura's case, most of her destructive choices emanate from fear, primarily the fear of losing her children, the most intrinsic and primitive of fears for a mother. For Laura, her faith is not able to overcome that fear when it comes to the choices she makes. Her lack of trust permeates even her trust in God as she "walks through the valley".

Ultimately, do you think that Laura Nelson is a victim or a vigilante?

Tough question. At first she's a victim. Perhaps self-defense makes her a vigilante, as does her determination to handle all consequences on her own.

In *Shadow of Death*, a female doctor is openly criticized for having a "man's job" – an attitude not unheard of nearly 30 years ago. Were you ever similarly criticized for choosing a career in medicine?

No, I always felt supported by classmates and professors. I was always careful, though to keep my personal life separate from my professional life: all discussion about medicine, nothing about kids and personal life.

***Shadow of Death* also examines race relations. How did you get the idea to weave the black and white family together and superimpose them on the privileged world? Was the meant to be a social statement?**

The interaction among these three worlds was based on realism from my perspective. The media proclaimed the 1967 Detroit riots as "race riots," but they were not. They were rooted in the desperation of urban poverty. Using these troubled times as a setting does offer an opportunity to explore important social issues – character, race, poverty, consequences and choices. So I was quite pleased when a leading university selected *Shadow of Death* as a text to facilitate discussion of these tough issues, issues still relevant forty years later.

At its heart, *Shadow of Death* is a book about conflict – both on a national scale and on an intensely personal scale.

What do you think defines a person or society – the conflict itself or the response?

Conflict will always exist in society and between people, so it's the response to conflict that defines both a society and an individual person. Conflict is at the heart of every novel and it's the resolution that makes each story different.

***Shadow of Death* tackles issues that are black and white, yet much of the book explores in the gray areas in between.**

Why?

The characters in *Shadow of Death* may have black or white skin, they may be rich or poor, they may be educated or not, but I hope that they are multidimensional, not black, not white, but gray. They are not all good or not all bad, but complex blends of flaws and dreams. After all, isn't that real life?

How do you think the riots of 1967 have changed the city of Detroit?

The riots scarred not only the landscape of Detroit, but a generation of Metro Detroiters who can still remember exactly where they were when the riots broke out. Detroit took a long time to recover, perhaps bottoming out in the mid-1980s. But now there's a new generation, one not bearing the mental scars of their parents. The city still has serious problems, but development is on the upswing. Hosting the Super Bowl in 2006 went a long way to enhance Detroit's image and more importantly to create an atmosphere of cooperation.

What do you hope readers will take away from *Shadow of Death*?

While enjoying the suspense and the interlacing plots, I hope the reader takes away a better appreciation of social issues that still haunt our cities. And I hope that the ending comes as a surprise.