

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Patricia Gussin, author of *Twisted Justice*

How did you get the idea for *Twisted Justice*?

The disappearance of a child or, in the case of *Twisted Justice*, the separation from her children has to be the most basic of fears for a mother. I wanted to explore this powerful, instinctual emotion and intensify it with the indignity of betrayal to create a family on a course to disaster.

When you wrote your debut novel, *Shadow of Death*, did you envision protagonist Laura Nelson returning for a second book?

I envisioned *Shadow of Death* as a stand-alone novel. But once completed, I was thinking about Laura Nelson and her new life. So I fast-forwarded seven years when everything had changed. She's a different person, in a different place, with a different a different job and a 'different' husband. I consider *Twisted Justice* more as a stand-alone novel than a sequel.

In many ways, Detroit, the setting of *Shadow of Death*, is an integral part of the story. Why did you choose Tampa as the setting of *Twisted Justice*?

Choosing Tampa was simply an autobiographical choice. After I left medical school in Detroit, I moved with my four kids to Tampa to do an internship and pediatric residency. And my fifth child was born there. So Tampa is a city and a medical community that I knew well. But Detroit plays a role again in *Twisted Justice* as the final conflict explodes.

In *Shadow of Death*, Laura's husband Steve seemed to almost exist in her shadow (pun unintentional). But in *Twisted Justice*, Steve has really come into his own. What was your reasoning in "leveling the playing field" between Steve and Laura?

In *Twisted Justice*, Steve is certainly not the old Steve. His high profile career puts him in the limelight and infuses him with a confident arrogance. Even though Laura inadvertently facilitated Steve's career, their individual accomplishments do level the playing field in *Twisted Justice*.

Do you think Laura is resentful of Steve's success? Do you think Steve is resentful of Laura's success?

I think that Laura is relieved at Steve's career success. And I think Steve is proud of Laura's successes. The resentfulness comes only when their careers are threatened. On another level, two successful careers and five kids ... what time have they made for each other?

I've read that while Laura Nelson does have some things in common with you, she is in no way autobiographical. How were you able to create such a real character in Laura?

In *Shadow of Death*, I drew heavily on autobiographical material. Laura's background was very much like mine as I was a medical student with two kids in Detroit during the Detroit riots. But from there the autobiography stopped and fiction began. And in *Twisted Justice*, the autobiographical connection grows more tentative as Laura's life as a thoracic surgeon and my life in primary care medicine and clinical pharmacology diverge.

What do you think is Laura's primary strength? Weakness?

Laura's love and support of her family cannot be denied and she's a talented, committed surgeon. But Laura lives under a shadow, unable to face her past, and her refusal to confront past mistakes is a weakness.

What do you think is most likeable about Laura? Least likeable?

Laura genuinely cares for her children and her patients and is well liked and respected by all. Least likeable about Laura is how she continues to ignore her own guilt, creating a double standard.

Do you think readers will be sympathetic to Steve? Why or why not?

In *Twisted Justice* I do not think that readers will be at all sympathetic to Steve even though he's endured his share of trauma. In *Shadow of Death*, Steve had supporters and detractors, but with *Twisted Justice*, early readers have had a much more negative reaction to Steve.

With regards to Steve and Kim's relationship, who do you think is the pursuer and who is the pursued?

Even though the circumstances in their relationship come off as spontaneous, I think that Steve is the pursuer -- maybe because he needs her for his career, or maybe just sexual impulse. For Steve, it's a betrayal. For Kim, Steve's just a circumstantial convenience.

How do you hope readers will react to Kim – do you think they'll find her sympathetic or despicable? How do you feel about her?

I think readers will be sympathetic. Kim is no pretense. She's a talented, ambitious professional. She's overcome substance abuse, and now Kim's is in deep trouble because of her dangerous relationship.

In many instances, Laura seems to view things – particularly with regards to her marriage – in black and white, yet her own moral code seems to have some gray areas (for instance, she has been keeping a big secret from Steve.) Is she guilty of having a different “code” for herself and for others?

Yes, Laura does appear to have a different “code” for herself. She is ‘proven’ guilty of a grave moral breach, which she refuses to even acknowledge. Yet she reacts with indignity to Steve's transgression. Laura is a complex person, not the perfect mother, or perfect doctor as she seems.

Do you think there is more than one victim in *Twisted Justice*?

Yes, Kim is a victim. Laura is a victim. Even Steve. And yes, the kids, especially Patrick.

While *Twisted Justice* is filled with unforgettable action, the unraveling of Steve and Laura's marriage really propels the plot forward. What commentary are you making on “for better, for worse...till death do us part”?

No one ever knows what goes on within another's marriage. The Nelsons seem to have the perfect marriage, the perfect careers, and the perfect kids. But the secrets, the deception, and the lies that are buried under the surface will impact “...till death do we part.”

What motivates Laura? What motivates Steve? Do you think their differences create a rift in the fabric of their marriage, or are they victims of circumstances?

Laura is motivated by her children and her surgical career. There isn't much else she's interested in. Steve is motivated by his children, and the ego-aspects of his job. So their values are not that incongruous, but they have drifted apart allowing circumstances of just one night to tear the marriage in two.

It has been said that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, but in *Twisted Justice*, it seems that hell hath no fury like Steve Nelson scorned. What was your reasoning in having Steve take the types of drastic action he takes?

Steve's ego could not take Laura's rejection when compounded by losing his job. In a desperate move, he takes what is closest to her, her children. The first time was motivated by spite; the second, compounded by fear.

Laura Nelson, in some ways, is an everywoman – you masterfully showcase her strengths and her foibles – but she seems to get caught up in extraordinary circumstances. Do you think these circumstances are out of her control, or of her own making?

The seminal circumstance in *Twisted Justice* was out of Laura's control. However, her reactions reflect the realities of both her world today and the secrets of her past.

Without giving away the ending, do you think justice is served in the end?

In the end, the justice served may have been too harsh.

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Both *Twisted Justice* and *Shadow of Death* build incredible momentum from page one.

What is your secret to keeping the pages turning?

What a nice question. I love fast paced suspense. I hope mine turns out that way, and I hope it comes back to me because I want to do it again.

Do you envision any of the characters from *Twisted Justice* returning?

Yes, perhaps again seven years later when Laura is – who knows what? But in my third novel, I plan to introduce the Parnell family. A wealthy, dysfunctional family embroiled in conflict on many levels.

Do you think Laura puts her children above Steve? And if so, do you think she is justified?

I do think that Laura puts her children above Steve. And that's probably unfortunate. I think this reflects a lot of women. It's not a good thing, but it's a common mistake that will erode a marriage.

The family dynamic is an important component of *Twisted Justice*. Do you think Steve and Laura view family in a different way?

Both Laura and Steve are dedicated to the concept of family, but their family backgrounds are different. Laura's family, close and loving. Steve's family, aloof and remote. More pointedly, Steve's past makes him an abysmal father to his daughters, but a dedicated father to his sons.

How was the process of writing *Twisted Justice* different from the process of writing *Shadow of Death*?

Shadow of Death took ten years and I wrote the first draft on pads of paper followed by multiple revisions. *Twisted Justice* did not take nearly that long and I've learned the wonders of the laptop. Thank goodness.

Could you ever see yourself writing outside the mystery/suspense genre?

I love the mystery/suspense/thriller genre so that's what I love writing. Outside this genre? I don't know. Possibly.

What do you hope readers take away from *Twisted Justice*?

Sleepless nights and clamoring for the next episode. Seriously, I hope readers will take away an appreciation of difficult marriages and the complexity of family dynamics ---and a sense of how fragile and precarious a life can be.