

## AN INTERVIEW WITH

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**Sharon Potts, author of *In Their Blood***

**Start to finish, how long did it take you to write *In Their Blood*?**

Writing *In Their Blood* was a journey in itself that took over three years and eight drafts, including one young-adult version. The novel began its life as Requiem and was originally the story of a younger Jeremy and older Elise—closer in age to my own kids at the time. With each revision, the characters became less like my own family and more “their own people.” I also received lots of terrific feedback from reader friends and established authors who helped with what worked, what didn’t, and what was missing.

**How did you get the idea?**

Several years ago, my family and I moved to a lovely house on an island in Miami Beach. One night shortly after we’d moved in, the house was burglarized while we were asleep in the upstairs bedrooms. For months after, I was very shaken. I kept imagining footsteps climbing the stairs—an intruder coming to harm me and my family. That family morphed into the Stroebes.

**Which part of the writing process do you enjoy most, and why?**

I love writing the opening chapters and seeing how my ideas take shape on paper, but I’m also one of those strange writers who actually enjoys doing a substantial rewrite. After I finish a draft, there’s frequently something missing or underdeveloped—the antagonist may not be an adequately worthy opponent, or there’s a plot element that’s important to the story and I failed to follow it through. I get excited at the prospect of reentering my characters’ heads because I know them so well. It’s a bit like revisiting a favorite place, but now having a chance to take in many of the things I was too rushed to see the first time.

**Which part of the writing process do you find most challenging, and why?**

There’s the infamous “muddle in the middle,” that I often bump into. While I write with a clear idea of the story’s premise and where I want to go, I prefer letting the characters take me in unexpected directions. Unfortunately, the problem with an unexpected direction is it can lead to a dead end. I often stall somewhere in the middle of the book and have to rework the plot.

**How did you get the ideas for the characters in *In Their Blood*? Are any of the characters based on people you know?**

Because *In Their Blood* was triggered by an incident in my own life, I naturally began with a family that resembled my own—mom, dad, older son, younger daughter. Like Rachel, I spent a number of years working as a CPA, and much like D. C., my husband frequently writes articles on controversial topics. As the story developed, Rachel, D.C., Jeremy, and Elise become their own people. Jeremy and Elise face challenges and situations that my kids have never experienced—their parents haven’t been murdered, thank goodness!—and so the characters had to cope with situations that aren’t in my frame of reference. As for other characters, while they are totally fictitious, there are naturally bits and pieces of people I’ve known or who made an impression on me over the years.

**In the course of the novel, protagonist Jeremy Stroeb is, in some ways, forced to mourn not only the death of his parents, but the death of his adolescent view of who he thought his parents were. Which of these do you think is most difficult for Jeremy to accept?**

Jeremy’s true pain comes from the loss of his parents, particularly that they died before he was able to make his peace with them. His realization that his parents are human with human failings may have initially been difficult for him to accept, but ultimately is the impetus for his growing up.

**What do you admire most about Jeremy Stroeb?**

At heart, Jeremy is a good and caring person. Although confused about his future and who he is, he recognizes his obligation to his sister and family. But what charms me most about Jeremy is that no matter how terrible the situation becomes, he always comes back punching and determined to do the right thing.

**What do you think are Jeremy's least admirable qualities?**

Jeremy, like many kids who grow up privileged and with lots of parental support, has a tendency to be self-centered and think that everything is about him. It is only when he truly accepts responsibility for his sister and realizes his parents were individuals with lives of their own that he is able to move beyond his narrow perspective.

**What motivates Jeremy Stroeb? How do Jeremy's motivations evolve in the course of *In Their Blood*?**

Initially, Jeremy is motivated by his need to prove himself to his dead parents, who he felt he had disappointed. He takes on the responsibility for his sister and immerses himself in the search for the killer in the hope that, somehow, he will make his parents proud. As the story progresses and Jeremy becomes disappointed in his discoveries about his parents, he also grows. His journey becomes not just about honoring his parents' memory, but also making himself proud of the person he is.

**Did you have to do any special research while writing *In Their Blood*? If so, what did you research?**

I love the Internet! One thing often leads to another. When I was researching the Grenadines as a location for a luxury hotel, I learned certain things about their laws and practices that helped my plot come together. I also used the Internet for a refresher on Odysseus and his journey, which in some ways Jeremy's parallels.

**Did you face any challenges related to writing, as a female novelist, about a male protagonist?**

I find getting into different characters' heads very gratifying—even the killer's, though I don't have any personal experience murdering anyone. It was easy for me to be inside Jeremy's head, since my son is about Jeremy's age and has gone through many of the same dilemmas and thought processes. I did ask both my husband and son to read over Jeremy's reactions to make sure they were consistent with how a guy would have behaved in the same circumstances. My husband, by the way, developed quite a crush on Marina!

**What commentary do you make about the importance of family in *In Their Blood*?**

To me, it's all about family. That's probably why I feel so connected to *In Their Blood*. As my kids were growing up, I couldn't help but ask myself, what if my husband and I were no longer in their lives? How would they get on? Had I taught them enough? Although Jeremy is the protagonist, I envision Rachel, the mom, watching her children from afar, silently praying that they will make the right choices.

**What was your reasoning in exposing Rachel and Daniel Stroeb as flawed—both as parents, and humans?**

It was important for Jeremy to move outside his limited view of the world and see his parents as complex individuals. It helped him understand that his parents, like Jeremy, had faced things they'd had to struggle with. Once Jeremy was able to take them off their pedestal, he no longer felt the need to compete with them. He realized he wasn't all that different from them, and on balance, that was something he could be proud of.

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**How did you come up with the title? Were there other titles you considered, and if so, what were the titles?**

Originally, the novel was called *Requiem* and I still make reference to Mozart's Mass. As the book evolved, I realized it wasn't so much a story of a son honoring his dead parents as it was about how connected parents and children really are. Much of Jeremy's actions were effectively predetermined, because it was "in his blood."

**Do you think *In Their Blood* is a character-driven, or plot-driven, novel?**

I've written several novels and I've learned that unless you have a strong plot line to hold onto and pull you, the writer, along, it's difficult to progress. That being said, it's the characters, their interrelationships and their development, that intrigues me. I hope I've succeeded in creating a breathless, exciting story about people the reader truly cares about.

***In Their Blood* is a fast-moving novel filled with mounting suspense. What is your secret to creating both action and suspense?**

I tried to give the reader a sense that Jeremy and Elise are at risk from the moment they decide to pursue their parents' killer. The reader is aware of threats and complications that Jeremy doesn't see. Jeremy, although smart and alert, is also young, naïve and susceptible to being distracted. I hoped to create a situation in which the reader is smacking the pages of the book saying, "No, Jeremy. Don't!" but Jeremy can't hear the warning.

**What is the best piece of advice about writing you've ever been given?**

I think the most important thing is to keep the characters and their reactions as real as possible. If a character behaves in a stupid or inconsistent manner, it's the quickest way to lose the reader.

**In your writing process, which comes first – the characters, or the plot?**

I usually start with a thread of an idea for a plot then figure out what kind of characters would work best.

***In Their Blood* was unusual in that the characters and plot idea all came together in a package. Do your characters have a tendency to develop as you're writing, or are they fully fleshed out before the writing begins?**

We've all heard authors talk about their characters taking on a life of their own as their novels develop. That's absolutely true for me. I would set up a situation or a scene, then watch as the characters interacted with each other. Often, I'd be surprised at what they said to each other or the information they revealed, that I honestly didn't know about. By the time I finished writing, the characters had become "real" people to me and quite different from anyone I actually knew—or planned.

**What's next for Sharon Potts? Do you have any other books in the works?**

I'm currently working on a novel I had the idea for several years ago. It's another story of family and relationships that takes place in a time and place that no longer exists. Back in the 1960s, mothers and their kids would spend summers in remote bungalow colonies in the Catskill Mountains while their husbands worked back in the hot city. This idyllic, isolated setting creates the perfect juxtaposition for a serial killer who escapes from the State Penitentiary to prey on the summer people.