A CONVERSATION WITH HELAINE MARIO about *The Lost Concerto*

**TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF, HOW AND WHEN YOU STARTED WRITING.**

I always loved reading but never imagined I would write a book. And then I discovered that whatever work I was doing, I gravitated toward the “writing” part of it. So I began writing for the local newspaper. The articles were well-received, but I wanted something more. Until one day, when I found myself thinking of an old friend and wondering what if?... I reached for a pencil and the words just spilled out. *The Lost Concerto* was born.

**WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL?**

*The Lost Concerto* was inspired by several personal experiences. The first: sitting on the CT shore wondering whatever happened to my first love—the infamous ‘what if’? The second: learning to love classical music as I watched my son play the grand piano and listening to those glorious pieces. Third: living in the DC area and working for eight years at the White House instilled a fascination with international affairs. And finally, travelling, exploring and being inspired by the beauty of Paris and the South of France.

**HOW DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO ENRICH YOUR STORY?**

For me, writing is not so much “write what you know” as “write what you are passionate about.” I always have loved the arts—dance, music, art, theater. The arts are, and will continue to be, woven into my stories. I also have been lucky to have opportunities to travel overseas, and, with time to wander, I discovered atmospheric places that really spoke to me. I could see a whole scene unroll like a film in these places. A cemetery in Paris, for instance. The scenes just wrote themselves.

My reading interests always have centered around novels of World War II and the Cold War, and contemporary novels of mystery and suspense. So it was no surprise to me that my first novel, *Firebird*, told the story of a forgotten spy. And now *The Lost Concerto* deals with a decades-old wartime mystery as well.

Living in the DC area, our daily news is international news. Just reading page 1 of the Post will give you several ideas for a novel. And I did work at the White House for eight years...

**ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?**

Nope. I write about the women I want to be—courageous, talented, accomplished, strong, confident. They run toward, not away.

**ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?**

Just bits and pieces. A hairstyle here, a favorite saying there, a way of moving a hand...

I’ve also been inspired by characters in books and movies. A dancer on TV... Something just hits me, or moves me. I read somewhere that, for a writer, there is no such thing as a walk in the park... it’s a setting for a scene. No such thing as a simple conversation. It’s heard as “dialogue.” That sums it up.
**WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE OR MOST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?**

Okay, this is a very important question to me. I’ve found that I really do not enjoy reading a novel—no matter how well-written—if I do not care about the characters. I just recently read a beautifully plotted and written #1 best seller, but did not like either the male or female main characters. What I’m trying to say is that I really think about EVERY character that I write. Why are they the way they are, what drives them, how do they think, how do they feel? Do I adore Maggie and the Colonel in *The Lost Concerto*? Absolutely. Do I understand Zach’s choices? Yes. Do I have any sympathy for Orsini? Well, I hope readers at least will understand his complexity.

**WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?**

To continue on from “most sympathetic” to “least”…a brief story. In an early draft of *The Lost Concerto*, Victor Orsini was a shadowy, barely mentioned figure written only to move plot. Until my husband looked at me and said, “Victor is totally one-dimensional, but he could be the most complex and interesting character of all…” I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and let Victor come alive for me. I wrote five new scenes, gave him family, a secret, a depth of anger and pain… He is still brutal, cruel, and vengeful, but hopefully readers will see why. As for Dane… Do I like him? Absolutely not. I’m afraid of him. But I tried to show why he is the way he is.

**WHAT PART OF WRITING YOUR BOOK DID YOU FIND THE MOST CHALLENGING?**

Plot, plot, plot. I am all about my characters and their thoughts and relationships. (Sometimes, to my publisher’s chagrin, my characters are more ‘thoughtful’ than ‘thrilling.’) Also, I will admit that the brutal characters are much harder for me to write. Any kind of violence is an awful struggle for me. Give me a conversation to write any day. (Also, I find men characters more difficult to write than women.)

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM YOU BOOK?**

I’ve been told by many readers that they laughed and swooned and worried and cried and fell in love. That is a wonderful compliment, as, more than anything, I want my readers to think, and to FEEL. I want them to care about Maggie and her Colonel (I am half in love with him myself…). Readers often say, “I didn’t want it to end.” Those are the six best words I could hear. They want to know what happened next. They *remember* my characters, my stories continue to resonate, and I am grateful.

**WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?**

From my early life, but truthfully offering the most powerful inspiration… Helen MacInnes, Evelyn Anthony, Phyllis A. Whitney, and my favorite—Mary Stewart, the “Queen of Suspense.” These writers are no longer living. All of these women wrote about international intrigue, suspense, and romance, WWII and the Cold War, with evocative, European settings.

Now, the good ‘thriller/mystery’ writers I enjoy are Daniel Silva, James Lee Burke, Ken Follett, Michael Connelly.
Men who just write good stories—Pat Conroy, Khaled Hosseini, Nicholas Evans, Arthur Golden, Herman Wouk.
Women whose writing/characters/great stories I admire are Kristin Hannah, Lisa Scottoline, J.K. Rowling, Mary Higgins Clark, Anna Quindlen, Anne Tyler, Linda Fairstein, Kathryn Stockett...

**WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?**

Unregimented, no schedule. Some days I don't get near my desk. Need at least two hour blocks of time. Research. Write. Re-write. Re-write again. Toss it. Change it. Add something. Or someone. Take a walk, or read, or listen to music for inspiration.

I don't sail, but I think, for me, writing must be like sailing. On a day with no wind, I am still. But on a day when the sails fill, I just fly with it.

Frequently, when I can't sleep, a scene unrolls in my head, complete with dialogue. I try to write it down in the morning. And sometimes, it's actually good!

One last thing. I am a very slow writer. For me, inspiration comes in bits and pieces, over time. I can get the bones down, it's the polishing—the heart, the 'giving life'—that takes time. I've just started a new book—and I have no idea where it's going. But I love the not knowing.

**WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?**

There are four pieces of advice that have really mattered to me the most.

1. “Don't apologize.” I am writing what I want to write, and I don't pretend to be someone I'm not.
2. “Don't give up.” At some time or another, every writer is hurt by painful rejections or bad reviews—myself included. The first draft of *The Lost Concerto* spent two years in a drawer. But this story deserved more than 'death in a drawer.' Because I believed in these characters, I finally just forced myself to learn, make the changes I needed to make, and look at the novel through new eyes.
3. “Even when you think your manuscript is absolutely-positively-for-certain done, edit it again!”
4. This is the best, and my favorite, from Pat Gussin—written in a letter to me years ago when Oceanview rejected an early manuscript of my first novel. She said, simply, “Deepen your characters.” A light went on, and I found my true 'writing home.'

**WHAT IS THE WORST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?**

From an agent, early on: “It's ready.” When it wasn't.
From the same agent: “Take out all the political and international stuff. Women want to read about the ordinary woman in their home town.” What I write isn't for everyone, clearly, but I'm so glad I didn't listen. You really do need to be true to yourself.

**WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? ANY NEW BOOKS IN THE PIPELINE?**

I’ve begun work on a “combined-sequel.” By that I mean that I am continuing the stories of several characters from both of my novels, and adding a few new ones as well. *The Lost Concerto* left several questions unanswered, and this time I
want to explore stolen art rather than lost music. Although a symphony conductor keeps slipping into my head and asking for a role...

**ANY FINAL WORDS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY ABOUT YOURSELF, YOUR NOVEL, OR LIFE IN GENERAL?**

At age 67—68 when *The Lost Concerto* is published next year—this is one of the true great surprises of an already unpredictable life. I keep asking myself if I am dreaming. And, while there are too many moments in life that we cannot change or control, I know that it’s how we deal with what happens to us that matters. That is when we learn who we truly are. This always will be a theme in my novels.