

A Conversation with Renee James about *Seven Suspects*

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

My father was a high school English teacher who loved great literature, especially American literature. Other kids went to Sunday school, but I learned the Old Testament by reading Steinbeck and I learned about American culture and "voice" from Melville and Mark Twain. As a rebellious adolescent, I loved writing smart-ass essays and book reviews, and arguing with dictatorial teachers. I got crappy grades, but I got really good at writing material with more wit than substance.

Smart-ass writing and independent thinking got me a BA from Drake (English Major). I took some journalism courses, but the required ones were incredibly dreary and inhumanly repetitious, so I skipped them and took what I wanted. By the time I graduated, I knew I wanted to be either a college English professor or a magazine writer. To get the required graduate degrees to be a professor, I would have had to learn how to use the library and I would have had to invest hundreds of hours reading the starched prose of literary critics, most of whom I found to be tedious. So I was thinking magazines when I graduated and entered the armed forces.

In the army, I wrote profiles for the post newspaper in return for getting out of KP and guard duty. In Vietnam I tried everything to get assigned to a feature magazine published in-country. I wrote a piece for them and they offered me a position, but the Army, being the Army, decided it was more important that I remain in my clerical position.

When I came home I pursued writing jobs and finally landed a decent one with a small, special-interest magazine in Chicago. A few years later, I scored a staff-writing position with Time-Life Books, and my writing career blossomed.

The single drawback I found to a magazine writing and editing career was that most of the jobs were in New York, Chicago and LA, and I really wanted more variety than that in my life. So I had this vague dream all along that I'd love to be a novelist, so I could live anywhere. Of course, it took many decades before I ever felt like I had a story to tell...

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL?

Many things came together in the 2000s: through Internet searches, I finally established that I was transgender—before that, with little information to work with, I thought I was a gay or bi-sexual man who wasn't actually attracted to men, which didn't make sense. Circa 2005, I came out to my wife and she pushed me to explore my identity. One result of that exercise was thinking about how my life would have been if I had come to grips with my gender issues earlier in life and pursued gender reassignment.

I travelled a lot on business then, and to fill time in airports and hotel rooms, I began a fictional journal based on what it would have been like if, at the age of 38 (when I was between marriages), I had become a transsexual woman instead of a single parent with bigger problems than my gender identity.

That journal became a passion. Even though the character wasn't me—that would have been too dull—I got really involved with her. So around 2008 I decided to write a book and over the course of many years and drafts, ended up with *Coming Out Can Be Murder*.

Now I'm completely hooked. My life isn't complete if I'm not working on a novel.

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

I gave poor Bobbi my body to start with—tall, broad shouldered, athletic, and masculine—and the sensitivity and self-consciousness to go with it. At the time of *Seven Suspects* she's been on testosterone blockers and estrogen for many years, and had some surgery, so she's a lot prettier and more feminine than I—but she still has conspicuous size. I think this makes her a more interesting character than if she was a fully feminized woman. It makes her more vulnerable and it inspires her to constantly think about the differences between male and female, and especially, what defines womanhood and femininity.

I also made Bobbi a very artistic hairdresser, which had been my fantasy for years and years. I went to Cosmetology school late in life, as a hobby, to fulfill part of my fantasy, and Bobbi did the rest. She's not just an artisan, she is an artist and, like me, she sees beauty in hair the way mainstream society sees beauty in oil paintings or nature.

The book is also set in Chicago because I'm familiar with the city and especially with the transgender community in the area...it is among the most advanced in the country. Plus, Chicago just makes a great setting for a book.

Some of the details in the book—such as, what it's like to enter a room and have many people gawk at you—come from personal experience.

ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

Bobbi gets my vocabulary and a lot of my feelings. I made her an atheist because I think she's too smart to believe in a God who "works in mysterious ways" and gets away with stuff not even the most popular politician in America could survive. I gave her my love of hair and makeup and clothing, probably so I could express my passion for these things.

ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

Betsy, the ex-wife, is drawn in part on my wife—from her features to her insecurities and especially her compassion and acceptance.

Cecelia is drawn from two very different transwomen I know, both are statuesque, extremely extroverted, and defiantly transsexual.

Roberta, Bobbi's precocious niece, is a blend of several of my granddaughters.

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE OR MOST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Cecelia has been my favorite character (other than Bobbi) in the first two books, but in *Seven Suspects*, Roberta steals the show. She's really fun to write, and the dynamics between her and Bobbi are ripe with possibilities. I'd like to make her the costar of the next Bobbi Logan book.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Mark, the self-indulgent, sociopathic womanizer gets my vote for jerk of the year. I detest people who lack conscience and empathy, and there are way too many of them in our society.

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

The most agonizing was what to do with Roberta when the stalker started getting violent. As a writer, parent, and grandparent, I loved her character and the by-play between her and Bobbi. But I also have a life experience that makes it extremely painful to see children put at risk, and I just couldn't make myself expose Roberta to danger.

I also struggled with the opening scene. Originally, it was dark and confrontational and laced with references to a sexual encounter. I loved it because I love dark, gritty scenes, especially to start the book, but it was too dark and ugly for many readers, and it took several rewrites to get it right.

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

I hope readers come away with a deeper understanding of transgender people, and an interest in conversing with the trans people they meet in real life.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

I grew up on John Steinbeck and I consider John Grisham the best storyteller of our times. I gravitate to writers who combine an intriguing plot with deep, textured characters—Tony Hillerman, Larry McMurtry, and Sara Paretsky come to mind. Many others in the mystery/thriller genre are inspirational, especially in the first book or two they write using the same hero—Martin Cruz Smith, James Lee Burke, Nelson DeMille, Lee Child, to name a few.

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

The more I write, the more it changes. Initially, writing fiction was an intense pleasure. I was learning about the characters and the plot as I went along—much like being a reader, except I got to bend things

the way I wanted to. As I've learned more about plotting, character arcs, and storytelling conventions, I've taken a more disciplined approach which has reduced some of the pleasure in writing the first draft. It's a more restrained process and I constantly struggle with uncertainties about the developments of scenes, characters, and plot, but I also end up with a much better first draft and I still enjoy the process.

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

Just sit down and do it. If it's bad, redo it tomorrow.

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

Any of myriad "rules" that people lay down about writing novels. The only good rule is to tell an interesting story.

I went to an intense John Truby seminar on plot some years ago. Over the course of two-and-a-half days, he outlined dozens of elements of plot, whether you're writing a book or a movie or a play, and he added that each storytelling genre has its own distinct "beats" or structural requirements. But at the end, he said the trick to being a great storyteller is bending and blending some of these elements and ignoring others to come up with your own unique stories. I thought that was quite brilliant of him.

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

I'd like to do a story with Bobbi and Roberta collaborating on something. I'm still working on the plot and character concepts. It's important to me that the characters grow and change in each book.

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

Just a few bullet points that may or may not be of interest:

- We tend to equate "transgender" with transsexuals like Bobbi, mainly because transsexuals are the ones who come out publically and field the questions. In fact, "transgender" is an umbrella term that covers a spectrum of gender-nonconforming identities, from cross-dressing to gender queer to transsexual. I make this point because for every "out" transsexual, there are many transgender people who are not out or are out but not transitioning. My heroine is a transsexual woman, but I am a transgender person who lives in both genders. If you met me in my male presentation, you would consider me a "normal" binary male. If you met me the next day in my female presentation, you would know I started out in life as a male. In the vernacular of the trans world, people like me are often referred to as "cross-dressers." For some, it's a fetish, for others, it's a compromise—they'd rather transition to the other gender, but worldly issues prevent that.

- The transgender experience is changing rapidly. In 2008, when I walked into a restaurant or coffee shop, heads turned, people stared. Today, hardly anyone notices—we've become a common sight in many places. Bobbi's transition occurred in 2003, when it was still difficult socially. *A Kind of Justice* was set in 2008, when things were better but still far from the acceptance we have today. *Seven Suspects* is set in the current time, which includes both a high degree of acceptance, at least in nicer neighborhoods, and an undercurrent of bigotry that's never too far away.
- Bobbi deals briefly with a truth in the Chicago trans community, and probably elsewhere: young trans people today often have a much different experience than trans people of my generation—especially white, middle-class trans people. They are better able to come out in school, many MtoFs never reach puberty as men and so become much more passable women than we...and we are different subcultures as a result.