

CONVERSATION WITH MERRY JONES

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

I started writing as soon as I could hold a pencil. I can't remember a time when I wasn't making up stories. If I don't write, I get anxious, even bitchy. Not writing is like trying to hold my breath—Sooner or later, I have to give in and start again. I believe everyone has creative energy and, if they don't express it somehow, it will fester inside them, become destructive.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL?

Well, maybe the satisfaction of murdering a first husband (I have one) in a book. Maybe the comforting idea that a person who's died is still around (I'd lost my dad, then my mom shortly before writing this). Maybe the idea that you never know who anyone is (we see only a part of each other), let alone whom you can trust—Not being sure of what's true and who's truthful is a recurrent theme in my books—the root of suspense.

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

Well, as I said, my first husband was worthy of death by fiction, and it was gratifying to make an "ex" into a victim. More than once, I've had the experience of discovering disturbing truths about someone close to me only after his/her death. I've wished I could talk to people I've lost. I met a magician in a singles bar soon after my divorce. He took a quarter from my ear. I went out with him for a while.

I hated being in the singles bar, same as Elle. Susan is based on a person I used to know, a lawyer who lives nearby. My kids had guinea pigs and hamsters. When they were little, the hamsters in one daughter's class were named Romeo and Juliet—Just like the ones in Elle's class. My first husband used to save the corks from wine bottles. We had jars full of corks all over the place.

ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

See above

Also, the vague, blurry feeling Elle had at the funeral. (How cheery :/) I've felt that detachment at funerals. The unreal sense of writing obituaries. (As I said, I wrote this about the time my mom died.) Buying a casket. All that is based on experience.

ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

Susan was a neighbor, earlier in life.

The magician grew out of the magician I met in a singles' bar after my divorce, but he was a sweet guy, not like this one.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR NOVEL IS MORE PLOT DRIVEN OR CHARACTER DRIVEN?

Character. But they're inseparable. Plot is what the characters do to each other.

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

I feel for Charlie most of all. He's struggling to find out why he was killed. He wants his wife to forgive him. He knows he's made mistakes, but he feels misunderstood and wants to fix his life even though it's too late. I find that very sad.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

I really didn't like Charlie's sister. She's a hypocrite. Selfish. Cold. Judgmental. Just a bitch.

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

Keeping track of the rose.

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

I want them to have fun. But always in my books, I deal with unexpected turns in close relationships and the up-ending of daily life.

Often, I try to bring attention to a particular kind of crime—often an underreported one.

In CHARLIE, the crime I focus on is pedophilia—Particularly the kind that is performed legally in certain countries abroad. There really are people who travel long distances to have sex with children. And there are children who are sex slaves in many countries. Awareness is a first step in stopping this...I hope.

Beyond the crime, though, I hope readers will take away affection for Charlie and Elle, and an appreciation for the friendships shared by the women characters. I hope the bittersweet discovery Elle makes about Charlie will inspire readers to value their own relationships—even the flawed ones—while they can.

HOW DO YOU DIAL UP THE TENSION TO KEEP YOUR READERS ON THE EDGE OF THEIR SEATS?

I don't keep readers there. I think a book needs breaks in the tension. But, in Charlie, Elle is driven to discover not just what happened to Charlie, but also who Charlie was—and what her marriage was. To do so is to plunge into the unknown. And the dangerous.

Part of what I do is share the character's inner life. Memories make events more meaningful—eg. Having a stranger call Elle "Elf" seems neutral. But when the reader realizes that Elf is the pet name Elle's dead husband used to call her, the incident becomes unsettling. When a number of unsettling events occur, tension builds.

There's an understanding with the readers of women-in-jeopardy books: the heroine will go alone into "the dark basement," whatever form that basement takes. Tension comes from knowing she will go there, waiting for it, watching it play out. But that tension works and is believable only if she has a credible reason to go—and if the reader wants her to go there.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

Hemingway. Golding. Joyce Carol Oates. Styron. Seuss. Sendak. Heller. Kesey. Tafoya. Etc.

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

I get lost in the moment, have no idea how long I've been sitting at the computer. When it's going well, I feel like I'm taking dictation. New twists of plot or situations with characters sometimes arise without my planning. At times, the "villain" I've planned turns out not to be guilty at all—It's someone else, a complete surprise when I realize the "truth."

When I'm working on a book, even when I'm not writing, I'm writing; I live within the book (at least partly) just about all the time.

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

Two things:

1. The best way to start is to start.
2. Just write.

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

Relax, don't worry about sales figures until the sixth book of the series.

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

The fourth Harper Jennings thriller is in the works, comes out next fall. And maybe (?) another book to follow Charlie?