

A CONVERSATION WITH MERRY JONES about *Elective Procedures*

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

I started writing as a young child. It wasn't until my youngest child was born, though, that I gave myself "permission" to take my writing seriously enough to write books. I began with non-fiction. Then I wrote humor. It wasn't until my husband became seriously ill with cancer that I began to write suspense books—Looking back, I think it was my way of taking control over life and death, fear and danger. Although I was powerless against cancer, I could conquer anything within the pages of my books—overcoming evil and quashing criminals. Fortunately, my husband recovered and is nine or so years cancer-free. But I'm still dealing with the sense of unpredictable, overpowering peril. And I use it in my books.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE *ELECTIVE PROCEDURES*?

A few things: First, I was in Mexico recently, during the festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and I was struck by its spirit and energy. I thought it would make a great backdrop.

Second, I know many women who've had plastic surgery to "improve" their looks. Among them are a few who traveled out of the US to "get some work done." Those women were very secretive about it, and I was intrigued by the process and the risks and expenses they'd take on to make their noses smaller or their chins tighter.

Third, I've noticed how preoccupied with "looks" our culture is; I thought it worth focusing a mystery around that topic.

Fourth, I've known women who have a distorted view of themselves—Eg anorexics who are thin but see themselves as large. But it's not always that extreme. So many women see flaws in their appearances (I'm no exception) and focus on those. The discrepancy between how we see ourselves and how others see us—the way we can obsess on the superficial when we KNOW it's superficial—fascinates me.

HOW DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO ENRICH YOUR STORY? ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

Well, the setting of Mexico is exactly where I spent a recent vacation, as I said above.

And as a woman in this culture, I've had to deal with being/feeling "imperfect." I've known dozens who've had plastic surgery to fix noses, lift faces, tuck tummies, etc., with varying results.

ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

Yes. Susan is based on several Susans I've known. Jen is modeled after one of my daughter's former sorority sisters. Becky evolved from a dear friend of mine who died too young.

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

Combination, but heavier on character.

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

I'm with Charlie. He might be simply a figment of Elle's imagination, but he's a loyal figment. Okay, not completely loyal—Elle remembers him cheating on her and stealing her money, and even after his death she sees his ghost flirting with a female spirit. But he's devoted to her and as loyal as he can be. Even in death, Charlie is an appealing rascal who remains by Elle's side. Or in her head.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

The doctor's wife. Not because her perception about her appearance is so distorted—That could make her sympathetic. What bothers me about her is that she's jealous of others, possessive of her husband, viciously vindictive not to him but to the women she thinks he's attracted to. She's narcissistically self-obsessed, devoid of empathy.

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

I always find it challenging to weave the threads of the story together so they seem seamless at the end. But also, writing first person added a challenge because I couldn't show action except when Elle was present. I had to mold the plot in a way that could include her in action scenes.

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

First, I hope they'll be entertained. But also, I hope they'll learn a little about body dysmorphic disorder. And about how driven people can be to "improve" themselves.

I hope they'll think more about physical beauty and the emphasis we put on it. I hope readers—especially females—will think about their own beauty, asking themselves if they are overly self-critical or insecure about their appearances. I hope they'll become a tad more comfortable in their own skins.

Oh, and I hope they'll think about the supernatural. Life after death. Spirits. Souls. Possibilities.

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

I weave together several strands of suspense, so that readers get involved simultaneously with the plot and subplots. (In this case, the strands include ghastly murders, a stalker, a romance, a dead ex-husband's hold on Elle, and possibly, a menacing ghostly spirit.) The stakes keep getting raised as characters get more entangled in increasingly dangerous and more personally targeted situations. The strands swirl and spiral, each raising questions and suspense, and how they fit together isn't apparent until the end.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

Joy Fielding, Susan Miller, Dennis Tafoya, Hemingway, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, William Styron, Nora Ephron, etc, etc.

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

I lose track of time when I'm writing. And I get absorbed in the world of the book, so I'm distracted when I'm with other people. I try to write every day for three or so hours. If I don't, I feel pressured and ornery, as if the book is tapping me on the shoulder and nagging me.

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

There are two:

Just write. (My husband, Robin.)

The best way to start is to start. (Third grade teacher, Mrs. Kellen.)

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

My first agent advised me to stay away from fiction. She said it was too tough a market, and I should stick with non-fiction. She discouraged me from listening to my own voice.

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

Always working on the next one. Right now, I'm living with a new character, getting to know her. She's pretty quirky, on the sidelines of life.

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

A suspense novel, in my mind, should be more than a whodunit. It should provide catharsis, taking readers to an emotional edge and allowing us vicariously to experience and survive evil and danger. The book's resolution should give readers relief from tension, renewing our appreciation of our relatively calm daily routines, relationships, and lives. Beyond that, the telling of the story should inform us about something we didn't know before, or remind us of something we've forgotten. When we finish a good novel, we should feel satisfied and restored. We should want to savor it before moving on to the next.