

7-Day Cozy Blog Tour February 2018
Combined Interview

Did you always know you wanted to be a writer or did you have different career path in mind growing up?

When I was young, I tried my hand at writing a Nancy Drew novel. I'm not sure how many pages I wrote or whether it even had chapters. My mother didn't keep it in my "baby book," but she kept the story about the long-necked giraffe. Hmm. What does that say about my first mystery? LOL But to directly answer the question, no, I didn't know I wanted to be a writer. However, I sang and danced and wrote little plays for myself for years, so I guess I was always a storyteller. That passion to write for myself fizzed in 7th grade when I was dealt a mighty blow. A teacher said I shouldn't be a writer. Now, honestly? What teacher does that to a child? I didn't even think of writing again until I was in my twenties...I was an actress...and I wanted to write a screenplay that I could star in. That didn't happen, but taking the step toward writing again and really putting my mind to learning the craft—I took a lot of classes—opened a whole new world for me.

What is a must-have when writing to enhance your creativity? Writing aids, food, music?

There are no "must-haves" for me, but I do enjoy listening to music. I have a number of playlists that are all instrumental. The Secret Garden playlist is the one I use when I'm rewriting. It's very soothing. When I start a project, I'll choose a playlist that fits the mood of the book. Depending on which cozy mystery I'm writing, I'll select Somewhere in Time, Christmas music, or The Secret Garden. For my suspense, I like to listen to jazz or movie themes. In my Cookbook Nook Mystery, Jenna likes to listen to what her mother used to listen to, Judy Garland (which of course has words and is not instrumental), so I often play that music as I drive to get me in the mood. As for writing aids: a computer. Food: decaf coffee and maybe a sweet. Companionship: Sparky.

What kind of research did you do for Pressing the Issue?

This book focuses on the Renaissance Fair that has come to Crystal Cove. I attended many Renaissance Fairs over the years. Last year, I went to the fair in Los Angeles. It was splendid. The scope was vast. I dressed up. I drank mead. I took lots of pictures and touched something in virtually every seller's booth so that I could get a feel for the event. I sang with some madrigals. When I was designing the fair for Crystal Cove, it was on a much smaller scope. I reviewed Renaissance Fair sites online for names of the shops and crafts. Fun!

Now, the book also features Jenna's pal Bailey's upcoming wedding at a vineyard. I've done lots of research at vineyards over the years. There was one I went to in Santa Cruz that had a view of the ocean from its tasting patio. I used

that as my basis, and the rest was my imagination.

Which came first your protagonist, your story or your tone/setting – title, cover art?

Ha! That's a lot of questions. Well, if I'm writing in the series, then the protagonist, because it's always her story I'm trying to craft. Next, I like to come up with a theme for the book. It could be a food-related theme or a seasonal or fair-type theme. That then drives what the title should be. For example, when I wrote *Stirring the Plot*, I was writing about a group of benevolent witches (who aren't really witches) raising money for literacy. *Stirring the "Plot"* was a play on words for witches stirring their cauldron and "plot" because each of the books in the *Cookbook Nook Mystery* series have a book-driven word in them. *Final Sentence*, *Inherit the Word*, *Stirring the Plot*, *Fudging the Books*, *Grilling the Subject*, and now *Pressing the Issue*.

As for the cover art, I pick pieces of art and send them to my editor so they can pass them along to my very talented artist! She has made some beautiful covers for all of my series!

What is your process for determining your style, your voice, your word choice?

The voice comes to me for each of my protagonists. I hope they don't sound the same. They have different backgrounds and different histories, so they shouldn't. As a former actress, I sort of pride myself on finding a voice for each of my characters. Word choice definitely matters. In this particular book, I focused on the Renaissance Fair and how people would speak throughout. It was a hoot researching all the terms used at the fair and how to teach newbies how to use fair-speak in order to have fun and a bit of authenticity. There are websites devoted to finding the right parsing of words and sentences for a fair. Research, research, research really matters to me.

Do you have an interesting quirk about your personality that you'd like to share?

I'm Type A. Can you tell? I like to get things right. I get embarrassed when I mess up. Truly embarrassed. I will apologize for days if I make a mistake. It's not pretty. But this aspect of me does make me try harder all the time. I don't let up. I make all my deadlines. I'm usually early. I work extra hours if that's what it takes. I'll wake at five a.m. if I'm running behind just so I can get caught up.

As for another quirk, I love to laugh, and I have a very hearty laugh. You can't miss me in a crowd if someone tells a good joke.

Where does your inspiration as a writer come from?

I allow my mind to think "what if" all the time. I read the newspaper and use that as a launching type of question. What if this happened in my book? What if this

person existed in my book? What if that food (honestly, yes, from the food section on Sundays) were the theme of my next book? I try never to close my mind down to a new idea. I have pages and pages of ideas written in my computer with ideas. Sometimes I browse through them, although once I've written them down, they do seem to stick somewhere in my psyche. My kids gave me an inspirational idea notebook for Christmas so I can write down ideas if I'm on the road and not near my computer. I love observing people. Sometimes I'll make up scenarios for couples I see at coffee shops or on the street. Who are they? Where are they from? What do they do? When did they meet? I find that kind of story building a great way to keep my mind working creatively at all times.

What was your favorite book growing up? Did that book help in inspiring you to become a writer?

I loved **A Wrinkle in Time**, by Madeleine L'Engle, but no, it did not inspire me to become a writer. I loved the fantasy of it, but I don't typically read fantasy. Although I did read the entire **Dragons of Pern** series by Anne McCaffrey and adored them, and I did write a children's fiction screenplay about dragons because of that. I had no luck selling it, and I'm saddened by that, because it was a real war of the worlds story. It was reading Nancy Drew that got me started writing. I wanted to write mystery. Then I graduated to Agatha Christie and knew that was what I had to write. Then I read a bunch of thrillers and knew that was where my passion lay. You see, I have a lot of interests, which is why I write in multiple genres. My audience, though, is primarily cozy mystery readers, so I will have a tough time finding a broader audience for my other work. Therefore, I write those for "me," and if others wish to read them, great. PS **A Wrinkle in Time** is coming out as a movie this year, and I can't wait to see it. I hope it doesn't ruin the book for me. LOL

Why did you pick to write about the Renaissance Fair in Pressing the Issue? Was it based on some event in your life?

Yes. I went to my first Renaissance Fair back in college, and the event made a huge impression on me. I loved the costume-play or *cosplay* action. I went with a group and we all dressed up. One of my friends was really into interacting with the players at the fair. Though I loved acting, I was not yet a professional actress, so I was a bit intimidated by his free spirit. Since then, however, I've become much more bold. I've attended a number of fairs, and I always interact—with a British accent. I thought it would be fun to bring a fair to Crystal Cove, on a small scale. The man who is the king of the fair (he also owns the vineyard where Bailey intends to get married) is loosely based on my gregarious friend, may he rest in peace.

What do you do when you are not writing?

Good question. Well, I like to walk Sparky, cook, play golf, and I'm learning to play bridge. What a demanding game that is. I feel like my brain is in overload all the time trying to remember the rules and "tricks" of the game. In addition, I like to go to movies. By myself. I find watching a movie in a large theater very relaxing.

Have you ever written a scene that 'creeped' you out?

Not really. Wait, I take that back. Yes, I did. It's in a suspense that hasn't been published yet. The killer is quite creepy. The scene is based on an incident that happened in my life. I was working at a private home as a temporary executive assistant. The man's son lived in the house, too. He was a troubled young man and supposedly going through AA. One morning, I was at the place by myself, or so I thought, when all of a sudden, the young man appears at the office door in pajama bottoms, barefoot, and carrying a huge knife. I froze, and then as calmly as possible said (I'll change his name) Me: "Danny, I didn't know you were here." Danny: "Yes." Me: "Why are you carrying the knife?" Danny looked down at the knife very, very slowly, and then back at me. His eyes were blank. Danny: "Melon." Me: "Melon?" Danny: "I'm cutting melon. In the kitchen." Me: "Go back and get your breakfast." Danny nodded blankly and turned around. In a haze, he returned to the kitchen. And I flew out of the house faster than a scared rabbit. I never went back. I put a semblance of that scene in a book I hope to rewrite and publish.

Do you have a favorite fictional character by another author you'd like to meet?

I would love to meet Sophie Winston, from the Domestic Diva Mysteries. She is extraordinary when it comes to entertaining people. She is always ready to invite friends into her home and feed them. Her freezer is packed with ready to bake cookies and all sorts of meals. And Sophie is calm personified in a storm. I'd like to see what that looks like in real life. Me? I can be calm, but more often than not, I'm a bit like a tornado. LOL

Do you read the same genre that you write?

I do read cozy mysteries. I really enjoy them. Now, I don't have a lot of time to read and I'm not a speed-reader. Oh, how I wish I were. So I try to read at least one of each of my friend's books. I also read titles from authors I've never met. I attend conferences and often pick up books by authors on my panels. They'll be new to me, but I like getting an overview of what is out there. Now, I also read suspense and thrillers. I adore them and that's where my career started. That's why I write across genre now. In addition, I've started reading some gentle romance or what some would call romantic comedy. When I was a screenwriter, I wrote romantic comedies. I'm trying to decide whether this is something I'd like to write in the future. There is lots of "heart" in these books.

Here are some of the authors I read in the cozy genre:

Krista Davis, Cleo Coyle, Sheila Connolly, Peg Cochran, Roberta Isleib aka Lucy Burdette, Mary Jane Maffini aka Victoria Abbott, Linda Wiken aka Erika Chase, Denise Swanson, Leslie Budewitz, Kaye George, Janet Bolin aka Ginger Bolton, Marilyn Levinson, Janet Koch aka Laura Alden, Jenn McKinlay, Amanda Flower, Julie Hyzy, Hannah Dennison, and Kate Carlisle. The list goes on...

I'm wondering how you typically like to begin a book? Do you start with chapter 1, or do different parts come to you first?

I like to start with an outline. Then I do start with chapter 1. However, I have often gotten to chapter 15 and said, hm, what should I write? I don't like to ever feel blocked, so I might write only the dialogue or only the action, and move on to the next chapter. I have been known to write the climactic scene before I get there. I think that's because I like to know how the battle plays out so I can build to that battle. Does that make sense?

What do you hope readers will take away from your work?

I hope they will notice the *heart* that I put into the story. My amateur sleuth is loyal to those she (or he) loves—family, friends, and extended family. I hope readers will understand that the passion my amateur sleuth devotes to finding the truth makes her (or him) a good person as well as a valiant person. My amateur sleuth respects the police or sheriff, but often, her (or his) keen eye has the edge to see the truth earlier than the authorities. In addition, my amateur sleuth attracts people who have insider information. She (or he) is trusted and admired.

Am I naïve beyond words? LOL But this is my intent.

Why did your protagonist have to be the one to solve his crime?

In **Pressing the Issue**, Jenna was close to the deceased. He was a patron of the shop. She enjoyed wines from his vineyard. Her aunt and his family had been close for years. In addition, he was the man who had agreed to put on Jenna's pal Bailey's wedding at the last minute when another vineyard closed. Jenna feels obligated to solve his murder in order to help Bailey find some closure.

Do you have several books already planned in this series or do you plot as you go along?

I plot as I go along, but I do think ahead to the next book as I fashion the

current book. I want to know what relationships might have changed. I want to know where Jenna is going in her persona life. Will she marry Rhett? Will they have children? Will that kill the series? LOL I think about her family and friends and where they are “at” in their lives. Are they finding love? Are they happy with their career choices? These things matter in the long run. But honestly, an author has to take it one book at a time in the current climate of publishing.

You write on multiple platforms...why...and do you prefer one to the other?

I prefer them both, so I don't play favorites. I started out as a suspense/thriller writer because that was what I liked reading most when I finally devoted myself to writing. I wrote two thrillers, but they didn't sell. When I moved across country, I decided to try my hand at mysteries—my other love. But I knew I needed classes. So I bought a lot of books and studied the genre. I joined an online group with Sisters in Crime and found a critique group. I work-shopped a number of my stories in that group. Ultimately 4 of the 5 found our way to cozy mysteries. We're all published, so it was a group of talented authors. I'm thrilled to have found them. I like writing suspense because each of those books is a standalone, not a series. Having come from the screenwriting world first, I see those books as “movies” and write them with that kind of taut tension in mind. For my cozies, I focus on relationships and characters arcs and the “fun” and “challenge” that my readers like to face while solving the crime.

What is the most difficult part of the writing process?

Picking what's next and not beating myself up if I pick poorly. LOL Honestly, I have so many ideas that I'd like to write, but settling on one and hoping it's the “right” one is vital. And daunting. If I had teams of writers that I could designate to write all the other ideas, à la James Patterson, maybe I wouldn't feel so anxious. But then the reality sets in and I realize that not all my ideas are winners. Some will be golden. Some will not. And in the long run, when I'm gone, I simply hope that I entertained a few people over the course of my lifetime. I'm not writing a book that will be read for eternity. I'm not that kind of writer. I write to entertain. If I do that, I will have served my purpose.

Which of your books would you like to have made into a movie?

I would love to see any of my thrillers made into a movie—I love watching thrillers on the big screen—and I'd love to see any of my cozies made into TV series. I think the cozies, particularly, would do well on the Hallmark Channel. They are considered “blue sky” stories (happy endings), and the series is set on the beautiful coast of California. How much more picturesque could you get?

Did you ever, or do you still, take writing classes, seminars, etc.?

I took lots of classes, and I read a lot of books on writing. Yearly, I go to conferences for writers where they offer courses on plotting, dialogue, setting, character building, etc. I find refreshing my view of writing invaluable. I just bought a new workshop-style book for how to write a blockbuster. We'll see if it works. Some of the books I've used repeatedly are Hallie Ephron's "Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel," and Chris Reardon's "Don't Murder Your Mystery." One of my favorite seminars was developing the character of the killer. I would hate for my killers to be one-dimensional.

How hard is it to write about food?

Well, it's interesting, I'll tell you that. I was taught early on not to create a scene at a coffee table. It's static and boring, a teacher said. But in a foodie mystery, there are lots of café and kitchen scenes. So...what I try to do is make food part of the story and the scenes involving food *active*. Do the cooking. Taste-test. Move around the kitchen preparing the table and the setting. As for the food itself? I work hard to find words to describe what my characters are either preparing or eating. In **Pressing the Issue**, because it's all Renaissance Fair-style food, I spent a lot of hours testing out recipes. Then I had to decide where those foods *fit* in the story. For example, Rhett and Jenna purchase Hawker's Mush at the fair and taste it for the first time. They go to Mum's The Word diner and enjoy shepherd's pie. At the Cookbook Nook, Katie gives a seminar on making pasties.

Are any of your characters based on people you know and are they okay with that?

Ha-ha. Are they okay with it? I haven't asked them because I don't tell them. I've based a few characters on people I know or on compilations of people I know. A long time ago, a writing instructor advised a group of us to change the sex or the whole look of a character so the people we knew wouldn't have a clue we'd based the character on them. After all, it's the personality that matters most, right?

Have you ever considered having characters from one series make an appearance in the other series?

I haven't done it overtly, but I've referred to Charlotte Bessette from the *Cheese Shop Mysteries* in the *Cookbook Nook Mysteries*. They met online. She advised Jenna about some cheeses. Come to think of it, I reference Charlotte again in **Pressing the Issue**. If you read it, you'll see why. Plus I've mentioned a darling culinary bookshop on the coast of California in my *French Bistro Mysteries*. As for having the two worlds collide and actually seeing a character in that world, it might feel strange and take the reader out of the moment [almost breaking the fourth wall, as it's referred to in theater], so I'm not sure I want to go that far...although Rhett's folks do own a lovely restaurant in Napa Valley, and Jenna and he could to the wine country and stop in Bistro Rousseau for a bite, don't you think?

