

Q&A

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR:

How did you get into writing?

I fell into fiction writing - literally. After I broke my foot during my sophomore year at the University of Michigan, I had to find a class I could get to easily on crutches. Since it was late in the registration period, I was left with a choice between only two courses: Descartesian Theory and Creative Writing. I might have been clumsy, but I wasn't dumb. I chose the writing class! Aside from the actual injury, it was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I discovered I had a real passion for writing and from then on, I was hooked.

What was the Iowa Writers' Workshop like?

It was an honor to have been accepted into the program and honestly, I spent the first month waiting for them to realize they had made some sort of clerical error. I expected them to kick me out. Fortunately, they didn't. I had some teachers who did kick my butt, though. I usually refer to my years at Iowa as "Thick Skin School." Learning to accept criticism and see how it could benefit my work was invaluable training for life as a writer. I certainly don't think that a Masters' Degree is necessary to be a successful author, but the Workshop helped me tremendously and I wouldn't be the writer I am today were it not for the time I spent there.

What was your big break?

After I finished my second Masters' Degree in Fiction Writing at the University of East Anglia in England, I came back to the States and entered a few short story collection competitions. By then, I'd had enough rejection letters to wallpaper my entire bedroom and wasn't at all hopeful, but postage and photo copying costs were the few things I could write off on my taxes at the time, so I thought I'd give it a shot. Luckily, I won the Drue Heinz Literature Prize. When a gentleman from the award committee called to inform me that my collection had been selected as the winner, I thought he was a telemarketer and almost hung up on him! I couldn't believe my ears. I have immense respect for the short story as an art form, so I'm glad that the first book

I ever published was a collection of short fiction. That will always be special to me.

Why did you decide to move into the mystery genre?

I blame "Scooby Doo." Seriously. According to my mother, I was utterly inconsolable if I missed the cartoon as a kid. I've adored mysteries from a young age and I'm actually surprised I didn't think about writing one sooner. There was a mystery storyline in my first novel *The Grave of God's Daughter* and I found that part of the book most compelling to write, so I came away knowing what my next project would be.

What inspired you to write *The Lightning Rule*?

As a mystery fan, I'd often found myself reading novels that involved murderers and thinking: "Why doesn't that guy pick on someone his own size?" I started to tinker with the idea of a killer who didn't pick on someone his own size but rather somebody much bigger and what that would imply. I'd read a short story in high school called "The Most Dangerous Game" about a wealthy man with a passion for big game hunting who uses his own private island to hunt the biggest game of all - people. The concept of one human hunting another was truly chilling to me, and I decided to try and bring that same sort of intensity to this book.

The main character in *The Lightning Rule* has a strong Polish heritage and your last book focused on a tight-knit Polish community. What role has your ethnicity played in your writing?

Though I personally don't speak Polish, my mother's family did, so I grew up hearing this foreign language and not understanding it, yet I was fully aware that it was a part of my own heritage. Like most people, I can identify with the intense desire to be like everyone else, to be American, for example, yet there is always a latent fear of succumbing to the mainstream and losing one's own identity. The theme of individualism versus acceptance is a struggle almost everyone can identify with no matter who they are or where they're from.

The issue of racism figures heavily into *The Lightning Rule*. What was your intention in raising that specific topic?

In the novel, the city of Newark is being torn apart when white law enforcement officers clash with black citizens while under the city streets, one white man hunts one black teenage boy. The parallels are intended to be obvious. My hope is that people will read this book and question - or even reassess - their own views about equality.

There are no profanities in *the lightning rule*. Was that intentional?

Actually, it was. After my first novel, *The Grave of God's Daughter*, was put on the New York Public Library's Best Books for the Teen Age, I got to thinking that it might be an interesting experiment to try and refrain from using any expletives in my next book. I'm well aware that most teenagers are already familiar with all of the colorful curse words that exist in our language, but I wasn't entirely convinced they were necessary to tell a good story. And hey, if that would make the book more accessible to young adults readers too, then great! The Newark Riots, like the other historic riots that occurred that summer in 1967, are a part of our history as Americans, and though this account is a work of fiction, everyone - regardless of age - has the right to know about what happened.

What does this book mean to you?

I approached the novel as an opportunity not only to entertain but to educate. I love a great mystery, and if I can learn something along the way, even better! I didn't know much about the Newark riots until I began the research and I was constantly surprised to find that few people, even those from New Jersey, knew what had really gone on. Bringing awareness to a commonly neglected slice of history and the racial issues that spurred it was as important to me as telling a terrific story.

Why did you become a writer?

Frequently when I meet new people and tell them what I do for a living, they ask that very question. My answer is

usually that I don't have any other marketable skills. But really, writing is what brings me the most satisfaction. I love feeling a new concept for a book crystallize in my mind or hearing a snippet of conversation and knowing I'm going to work it into my next project. Writing itself is like solving a mystery: you have characters, plot, some drama, and some themes, and the challenge is tying each of those threads together to make a cohesive story. Sometimes I don't even know how things will turn out, but to tell you the truth, that's the best kind of mystery to solve!