

A BSB Interview With J.M. Redmann

by Connie Ward, Bold Strokes Books Consulting Publicist

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What made you decide to become a fiction writer?

The rumor is that I was dropped on my head as a young child. I don't think it's one of those things you decide, like "I'm going to be a lawyer." I have stories in my head and the hubris to put them on the page. Where did that come from? I'm not even sure. I grew up in a family that read a lot; we were always going to the library and toting a hefty stack of books home. My parents met as journalists on the same newspaper and they were both college educated (my mother the first in her family), so reading and books were always part of my growing up. They both wanted to be writers, too, but life never gave them the chance. I can't really remember not wanting to be a writer; I was writing short stories in third grade. Maybe I had some inchoate dream of writing one of those books in that stack from the library.

What type of stories do you write? And why?

I've always read and liked mysteries. Now it probably seems hard to imagine, but when I started writing my first book, *Death by the Riverside*, there just weren't that many lesbian detective novels out there, (certainly none that used the name Cordelia). I just wrote the book that I wanted to read. I wish I could say that I had some grand scheme, that this was all thought out and analyzed, but I really just followed the words on the pages. I'm as surprised as anyone at what came out. But let's be real. Part of deciding on mysteries was practical; it's easier to sell a mystery both to publishers and to readers. Also, at the basis of most crime novels are death and dying, good and evil, and while it is possible to gloss over them, you can also really take a look at the kind of damage violence does, or how we deal with grief and loss, and still be true to the genre. I like to point out to all my English-major snob friends that was a genre play; it has every convention of the revenge tragedy in it, from ghosts to body counts.

What do your family/friends think about your writing?

That I was dropped on my head when I was young. I have a few friends who are writers themselves, but most people see writing as a book that appears on a shelf. They don't know the long, lonely hours spent staring at a computer screen trying to put words on a blank page. Probably just was well, as they'd think I'm even weirder than they already do.

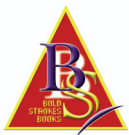
Where do you get your ideas?

From life. And my head. And some odd alchemy of the two. I read a lot, generally pay attention to life—daily skim of the *New York Times* online, local news, that sort of thing, but rarely have I read a story and thought, I need to write about that. It's more a concatenation of what's in my head, where my characters are, and what should happen to them.

How do you write; do you plan everything out or just write?

Neither. Or both. I start with what I consider a road map, like taking a trip to a place you've never been before. You have a map, but the actual journey probably won't follow the map exactly; there may be detours, or places you find on the way that entice you to stop, or others that you find you prefer to hurry through. I do most of my mapping in my head, jotting down a few notes as I go along. I did an outline for my first book, and when the book was written it only told me what I didn't do, so I haven't bothered since.

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What makes *Death of a Dying Man* special to you?

That I actually got it written. A big chunk of it was already written when Katrina hit. After that the New Orleans I was writing about no longer existed. I knew I couldn't write the book that I had planned to write, that I had to come to grips with how my characters were affected by the storm—even as I was dealing with how I was affected. Tellingly, there were times when I read over what I'd written and discovered that it was in present tense, not past tense. It was hard to write something that present and near and still somehow (I hope) manage to keep the perspective of writer.

How much of yourself and the people you know are in your characters?

I will confess that there are two continuing characters that, while not really based on me, I can go to myself and say, what would I do in that situation and that often works for them. But I can't do that with Micky Knight. I have to get in her head and out of mine. (No, I'm not going to tell you who the two characters are, but if you're really obsessive, I'll drop some clues. One went to the same college I went to and the other looks like me—I'm a big-boned descendant of German farm stock, so if you haven't transmogrified this character into a willowy blonde, as one reader told me she did, you might be able to guess.) I don't think readers realize what scavengers we writers can be. I've only got my life to draw on, yet in a novel I've got a wide range of characters, all with their own backgrounds and experiences—not that that all has to appear in the book—but still I have to come up with some reality for them. Stealing something from my own life and experiences is much easier than making something up, doing the research, or trying to imagine something I've never lived. So, even when stray pieces of who I am pop up in the books, it well may not mean that I'm baring my soul fictionally. It just may mean that I needed a street like the one I used to live on, so I used that one instead of re-inventing it.

Which lesbian authors inspired you the most? Do you have a favorite of this author(s)?

I will read most anything, including cereal boxes in the morning. (It really is very mysterious what some of those ingredients are.) Probably every writer I've read has influenced me—for good or ill. I think I admire every writer who has the courage to put the words on the paper—it can be so hard and scary and frustrating. So it's hard to narrow it down to only lesbians and from there to only one author. I majored in theater in college and I think having to read all those plays taught me a lot about dialogue. I worship Chekhov, the worlds he could convey in nuance. The desert-island author is Jane Austen. I love her stuff because she manages one of the hardest things in writing—the believable happy ending. George Elliot, I'd die happy if I had written *Middlemarch*. Sarah Waters, Dorothy Allison, Jeannette Winterson, Helen Humphreys, Adrienne Rich—we have a great wave of contemporary lesbian writers. Louise Erdrich, Michael Cunningham, Barbara Kingsolver, Pat Barker, E. Annie Proulx, Jim Grimsley, Keri Hulme, Octavia Butler, others I can't think of at the moment. As for mysteries, Dorothy Sayers is the mother of us all, and Barbara Wilson and Katherine Forrest are our lesbian mothers. In no particular order: Sara Paretsky, P.D. James, Amanda Cross, Sue Grafton, Nevada Barr, Michael Connelly, Michael Nava, Ellen Hart, Manda Scott, Laurie King, Julie Smith, Greg Herren, Nicola Griffith, Kevin Allman, James Sallis, Ian Rankin, Pat Welch, Jaye Maiman, Abigail Padgett, Sandra Scoppettone, Patricia Cornwell, Val McDermid. Like I said, I'm a reading slut.

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Do you have any suggestions for new writers?

That it's ongoing, there is no moment when you're a "success," there's always another book to write, to re-write, to edit, etc. This is a crazy life and the only reason to do it is for the words on the page, those lonely moments when it is just you and your writing. Everything else, being published, reviewed, winning awards (or not winning them), is capricious and ephemeral, and finally outside the writing.

Even though I don't expect to ever make it to fame and fortune, writing has opened some amazing doors for me, including things like traveling to Australia and Europe, meeting people who have become great friends, having a far-flung network of writing buddies. I even get invited to make a fool of myself answering questions like these. Does anyone really read the answers?

Also that writing about sex and violence is probably some of the hardest to do. They are so innately physical, beyond the realm of language and into the land of the body and touch and sensation—pain and pleasure. It is very hard to capture those two with only words and paper. Most times less is more. Capture the important moments, don't do a blow by blow (or lick by lick).

It's also a challenge to capture the "small moments" of life. The stray thoughts, noticing something minor at the time, or just a quick conversation with meanings under the words.

Which is your favorite among the books/stories you've written? Why?

That's sort of like asking which of your children or your pets are your favorites. Each book taught me something. The earlier books are rougher and sometimes (too often, let's be honest) show the learning curve of a new writer. But I had to write those books to learn to write better books. Probably if I had to pick one—sort of the point of this question—it would *The Intersection of Law and Desire*, even though it's a fairly dark book. I learned a lot about writing with that book; it was the first time I had a really good editor. She was straight, but was a poet and had edited Audre Lord, among others. Also, while I've had some good covers—like the Bold Strokes ones—this was one of the best. It won a design award. Of course, if *Death of a Dying Man* turns out to be a bestseller and makes me enough money to quit my day job, it would become my favorite.

When you're not writing what do you do for fun?

I love to travel (except to Atlanta, which I have gone to so many times for my day job that I could really live without ever going there again). Reading, of course. It's a lovely way to procrastinate about writing, as I can claim that writers have to read. Cooking—well, eating—my partner and I both have foodie tendencies. To compensate for the latter, we usually go to the gym several times a week. Exercise and showers are great places to sort of let the brain roam around. I've stumbled over more "oh, that's how I solve that plot problem" in those two places than just about any other.



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