

A BSB Interview With Anne Laughlin

by Connie Ward, Bold Strokes Books Consulting Publicist

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What made you decide to become a fiction writer?

I started writing much later than most writers I know of. I was fifty when my first story was accepted for publication, and I'd only started writing a few months before that happened. It's as if something was finally unleashed within me, for though I didn't have a conscious desire to write before that, I did have a desire to DO SOMETHING for a very long time. I bounced around from hobby to hobby seeking that something, but never stretching myself very much. It may have been as simple as my turning fifty and finally giving myself permission to fail. In other words, I knew that writing was not something I would be really good at right away, and I was okay with that. I realized I didn't need to be perfect.

I've been a huge reader all of my life, but in the period leading up to my writing my first story I was reading a ton of lesbian fiction, including a little fan fiction on the Web. I was finally inspired into action not so much by the writing online, but by the support the writers were getting. The readers seemed genuinely happy to be reading all of these stories written by unknown, beginning writers. I wanted to see if they'd be happy reading something I wrote. I posted my first piece on The Sandbox, and within an hour someone had posted something unbelievably nice about the story. I was so excited that I literally had to get up and walk around the block. It was like a circuit connecting for me—me to computer to reader and then back to me. Pssst. I haven't looked back.

What type of stories do you write? And why?

My second novel, *Veritas*, is a traditional mystery in the sense that you don't know who the murderer is (hopefully) until the end of the book. My first novel is a suspense story, in that you know who the bad guy is all along, but you don't know what she's going to do with the main characters or how she'll get caught. So in regard to my book-length work I seem to be gravitating toward crime writing, with a fair amount of romance running through the work. I like the freedom of it, the many, many story lines and characters I can explore, the fact that I can test my skills as a writer both in developing an entertaining, complicated plot and nuanced, complicated characters.

My story-length work began with a number of erotica pieces (under the name Claire Martin) and love stories. Recently I've been writing more literary pieces, and that's been a real growth experience for me. I have found it necessary to do this because I'm interested in attending writing residencies and workshops and other places that have competitive entry requirements, and it's almost impossible to get into them if you submit genre fiction as your writing sample. I'm sure it's not impossible. Name mystery or romance writers can go where they want, I presume. But I'm not one of those writers. I also enjoy continually trying different things as a writer, so moving to larger themes is a good challenge for me.

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Where do you get your ideas?

For the most part, I haven't the foggiest idea. I can tell you about one story and where I got the idea for it. I was reading the newspaper while on vacation a few years ago when I saw a piece about a man who'd been thrown from his motorcycle in the middle of the night, apparently in a one-vehicle accident. He flew into a corn field, rendering him invisible to passersby. Unfortunately, he died from his injuries, but I immediately wanted to write a story using the same thing set of events. My fictional version was about a young woman who is driving to Chicago on her motorcycle to play tennis in the Gay Games. She dodges an animal and is thrown into a corn field, and the story concerns the attempts to rescue her and her own thoughts on making some changes in her life, all as she lies there in the corn field with her broken leg. Alyson picked up the story for *Best Lesbian Love Stories*. I can say that was the first and last time a story has come to me in such a complete form. Usually I'm piecing little bits together until I have a whole.

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

I heard another mystery writer once say that she plans things out pretty carefully because she doesn't want to write herself into a corner. In other words, you're merrily going along, developing the plot as you write, and you suddenly realize, 150 pages into the damn thing, that your heroine is going to look like an imbecile because of the way plot points are coming together, or there's no way to get her out of a jam without using the dreaded deus ex machina, which supposes that your readers are imbeciles. I took this to heart and generally write several fairly disorganized plot outlines before I really get started. I then keep ahead of myself throughout the book by reassessing the plot a few steps ahead of where I actually am in the writing. This allows me to change the course of the book as it develops, but makes me feel fairly confident that I'm steering in the right direction.

I try to be more organic when I'm writing short stories, and generally that's worked well. I can see a different sort of freshness and voice in the shorter works. However, I've run into a problem with a story I'm writing now. I'm really pleased with the first half of it, but I have absolutely no idea what will happen in the second half. I've had to put it aside, hoping something will come to me eventually, but my "organic writing" hit a great big old wall.

What makes *Veritas* special to you?

Veritas does have a certain history. It's set on a small college campus in a small Midwestern town, and it is physically based on Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. I dated a professor there many years ago, and I want to emphasize that not only is my memory of the physical setting quite dim at this point, but that nothing else in the book is based on anyone or any event at Cornell. However, during the time I spent with her there I came to love the feeling of the closed environment, the small society of super-smart people plunked down in the middle of nowhere, relying on each other socially as well as professionally. It's the kind of setting that can produce any number of stories. I just riffed on the age-old drama of academic politics and tenure battles and made it into a murder mystery.

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

If there's any part of me in my characters it has found its way there unconsciously—or subconsciously. Sometimes aspects to them might reflect some of my tastes but not much about character. For example, my main characters all seem to love coffee, and I'm a known coffee freak.

I very much avoid putting people I know into my writing. That's just a lose/lose situation as far as I can see. To me the fun in fiction is making all this stuff up, and that's what I do. And that includes the erotica!

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

All of Carol Anshaw's novels, and Lucy Bledsoe's also. Sarah Waters, most particularly *The Night Watch*. Emma Donnoghue, particularly *Slammerkin*, Jeanette Winterson, in doses. In mystery, Kate Atkinson, Denise Mina, Val McDermid, and Stuart MacBride. How any of these writers' influence has shown up in my books I couldn't say, but they are the writers who are among my favorites to read. I do try to write the books I would want to read myself.

Of course, I'm failing to mention many writers who could be included here. It's impossible to make such a list when you've been reading your entire life.

Do you have any suggestions for new writers?

Sew Velcro to your desk chair and the seat of your pants. Then sit.

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

Here's my biggest fear—that I won't sound like a person who has any fun. I have a lot of fun, but I don't do anything in particular. My partner and I really enjoy each other's company and make each other laugh a lot. So that means we don't have to go out to have fun. We enjoy friends and watching the perfect amount of TV and reading a ton. We love to travel, but like everyone else we're watching our spending more now. We like to take advantage of the amazing cultural life here in Chicago. I've been in recovery for nearly twenty years now, and a good part of my time is spent working with others and trying to be of service. I have no idea how that sounds to others, but I have to say that I can't imagine a better life than the one I have now. A partner I love, a home we love, my writing, my friends, the list goes on. I'm a real-estate agent, and there's no question things could improve there. But in the grand scheme of things I have only the sort of problems I used to dream about having. It's all good.



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