

How do you write? Do you outline the whole book or just plunge in?

I want to be the kind of logical person who outlines, who knows where they are going, but I'm not. I mean, really, look at my life. Is it the straight line of an organized person? No, it's very peripatetic (and I've waited a long time to be able to use "peripatetic" in a sentence.) I start one thing that leads to another that turns into a tangent and then a circle. In my 2nd novel there was supposed to be a murder --- but I couldn't follow through. So now it's a murder mystery with no murder. But I like it better. It's just that I really fell for the character. I might want to meet him again. I couldn't kill him off.

When it comes to actually writing, I find that I need blocks of time. And with my other work, that is hard to come by: I'm always having my 'block' messed up by appointments. Because I don't just write about a therapist, I am a therapist. I have clients who I really care about. I mediate divorces and custody issues. So, to build up momentum, I have to go away for a week, and write like a maniac for 12 hours a day. Then I come home and try to keep plugging. I'm easily sidetracked and my memory is crappy --- for which I blame menopause --- so, at some point, I make charts on poster board to keep the time-line and characters straight. Picture a room, with posters propped up all around, and me at a laptop talking out loud. It can appear more than a tad unbalanced.

Can you share a bit about the research you did for *Fall From Grace*?

Some writers resent the time required to research. But I love it. Perhaps that is also because, in the research phase, all things are possible ... and the actual writing is so much harder. In *Fall From Grace*, I did things like go to a funeral home to check out caskets. Not just look, but feel the material and knock on the metal and wood. I donated blood and talked to phlebotomists. I talked to prosecutors and defense attorneys. I weaseled my way into a DNA lab. I met with a polygraph expert. I sat in on murder trials. I visited the jail.

What I'm most proud of, however, is my autopsy scene. I did not want to write something I'd just read about in another book. I wanted to see and hear and smell. I called in an IOU, and got to spend an entire night in the bowels of the inner-city Kansas City morgue watching homicide autopsies.

It was important to me that it was not just an unattended death autopsy, but a person who had been murdered, killed by violence. I think there is a difference in the emotional field, kind of like what my kids, back in their Star Wars days, would call a "disturbance in the force." It was a transformative experience for me. I didn't pass out, although there were times when I briefly had an out-of-body experience, like I was looking down from the ceiling. I felt honored to be allowed to bear witness to this process of seeking truth and justice. Then I wrote the scene through the eyes of a rookie cop at her first autopsy. This was, of course, written way before the many TV shows where autopsies are routine.

Grace is not a typical female protagonist. She doesn't solve the crime. She is, actually, more victim, at least in this book, and she doesn't come across as the strongest character. This is not reflective of the genre, so why?

No, *Fall From Grace* crosses genres. Grace is an ordinary, middle-class, working-professional woman. She loves her husband, is looking forward to the empty nest when they can reconnect. Her kids are in

college and doing OK. She likes her work. She has a place in her community. She has earned professional respect. She knows everyone in town, at least on the surface, but deep down she's an introvert. She's a "good girl" who plays by the rules.

But she is also complacent and a little naive. Nothing terrible has ever happened to her. And so, when she loses all of it --- husband, respect, position, work, friendships, community --- she is devastated. Grace is no super-hero, leaping to defend herself, consumed with righteous indignation. She is more human, in denial, and, understandably, gets pretty damn depressed. I'm not sure I understood when I first met Grace how she would evolve, losing her scruples along with idealism. Of course, some of those changes are still in my head. I believe that women evolve and grow throughout their lives, often in invisible and unrecognized ways, and Grace will be doing a lot of changing and growing. The Grace of five books from now will be very different from the Grace you meet here.

So, who among other women mystery genre characters is Grace like?

I have terrific respect for Sara Paretsky, and so I'd like to think that Grace shares some of the political sensibilities, although not physical prowess, of V.I. Warshawski. I've read Sue Grafton for decades, and could see Grace and Kinsey Millhone having a glass of wine together while brainstorming ideas about a case. Nancy Picard has protagonists that share some of Grace's qualities. And I love the pragmatic cynicism of Donna Leon's Guido Brunetti. He is a guy, but maybe Grace could one day be for Kansas what Guido is for Venice?

There is a newer series writer, Julia Keller, whose writing and protagonist I admire. Keller is masterful at giving her readers a sense of place, which are the hills of West Virginia. Bell Elkins, her protagonist, is a short-tempered crusader-prosecutor who cuts corners when she feels that justice calls for it. Grace would respect Bell, and they both worry about their kids, and both value intuition. But Grace has a few more books to get through before she's as courageous as Bell.

What and who do you like to read?

Not a fair question. Depends on the week. I tend to be a "bunch" reader, trying to inhale all of a writer's books, one after the other. Like the summer my husband I fixated on Scandinavian mystery writers, starting with Sweden's Henning Mankell, and working our way through Norway, Denmark, Iceland, etc. I swear my speech became more spare, and my outlook bleak. It's amazing how geography and climate impacts language and literature.

Your characters grapple with a variety of issues. Are there some that mean more to you?

Writing fiction allows one to express personal, social and political beliefs through the behavior of characters in the contexts of plot. Different characters may hold conflicting beliefs. I'm less interested in advocating any particular belief system than in posing questions. I want readers to question assumptions. Overall, I'm more 'gray' than black/white. That said, the good guys will more likely reflect my beliefs.

But not all the time.

What was your own family like when you were a kid? Did the family read a lot? Was writing encouraged? Were there dinner table debates?

I've always been envious of writers who describe their childhood homes as full of books --- shelves and shelves and shelves of books. That would have been heaven for me. We had two small shelves, on the wall outside the bathroom, lined with Reader's Digest Condensed Books. And that was it. My father would go to the library, and let me come along, but he never talked with me about what he was reading or asked what I was reading. He wasn't interested in his kids as people. I believe now that he had Asperger's Syndrome, which has given me a different context for his behavior. My mother was a smart woman who had not had the opportunity to go to college, and, while well intentioned, she kept trying to get me to do anything other than read. She wanted a more socially adept daughter.

I was a nerd bookworm, even a little Asperger-ish, and I don't think they knew what to make of me.

There was an expectation that we would be good kids, get decent grades, and not make trouble. Debate was a no-no. In fact, it was pretty clear that anything provocative was off-limits, like religion or politics. The weather was safe, and what was happening in school. No challenge of the status quo. It was not quite "Children are to be seen and not heard" but almost. But then, I was a "good girl," so I didn't experience this as a really big problem. It was only years later that I could see how life could have been different.

Maybe that's why I have a big mouth now.

What do you want readers to come away with after reading one of your books?

I want it to be a good read. And for the plot to have its own logic and coherence. I love a surprise twist as much as the next guy, but I want it to make sense within the context of the book. I try to create characters that evolve in some way, and are different at the end than they were at the start. Best of all would be if readers find that they are thinking differently, even microscopically, about anything --- that the book has elicited a self-reflective "Huummm, I hadn't thought of it that way."

And I would love it if readers felt sad when it was over and wanted to meet up with the characters again. That would be so lovely.