

Libertas interview with Jennifer L Jordan August 2006

Seraphina Granelli: Jennifer, please could you start off with telling us a little about your background.

Jennifer L. Jordan: I was born, raised, and still live in Denver, a large city in the shadow of the Colorado Rockies. I've been self-employed since the age of twenty-one, as a technical writer of marketing materials. I've also taught thousands of women how to start and run their own small businesses. Only in the past few years have I defined myself as an author, and fiction writing now consumes most of my productive hours.

SG: When did you start writing and why?

JJ: In terms of creative writing, I started with journals when I was eighteen, to express myself and to heal. In my late twenties, I switched to novels. I'm forty-three now.

SG: The first book in the series was published in 1992 but there was a long hiatus between the second and third books, and now we seem to be on a bit of a rollercoaster – what's behind this?

JJ: I self-published *A Safe Place To Sleep* in 1992 and *Existing Solutions* in 1993 and was ready to release *Commitment to Die* in 1994, when the largest gay and lesbian distributor in the U.S., which accounted for 80% of my sales, went bankrupt.

I lost hope and didn't do anything further until 2000, when I started looking for a lesbian publisher for *Commitment To Die*. It took me two years to find BeanPole Books and another two years for the book to be released. Sort of. Unfortunately, the book never was really distributed or marketed. In 2005, luckily, Linda Hill, of Spinsters Ink, bought Beanpole Books and my contracts. Throughout these years of turmoil, somehow I kept writing, which is why all the releases are coming out back to back.

Spinsters re-released *A Safe Place To Sleep* and *Existing Solutions* in May 2006, *Commitment To Die* continues to be distributed by Spinsters, *Unbearable Losses* was published in July 2006, *Disorderly Attachments* will be out in December 2006, and *Selective Memory* will follow in December 2007.

From this point forward, I should be able to add one book per year to the Kristin Ashe series..

SG: What's your method of writing (– planning, plotting, the actual writing, revision etc)?

JJ: I start with a concept, something that interests me enough to spend six months to a year of my life with it and gripping enough to yield 60,000 to 70,000 words.

The concepts from my first six books are, in order: a lifelong longing for something that was always there; public images masking private horrors; atonement; coping with profound loss; the sickness of unrequited love; and memory's influence on perception.

I always have a few concepts rolling around in my head, and I'll jot down notes and throw them into a file, but I'm adamant about only working on one project at a time.

When I actually begin a book in earnest, I spend about a week on plot, nothing but plot, devising all the twists and turns. In rough form, I outline twenty-five or thirty primary scenes, decide whether to add or subtract subplots, concoct the "whams" (my term for startling revelations), and begin to get a feel for the shape and pace of the book. I'm always clear about the ending before I attempt the beginning.

Once plotting's complete, I start writing. I work on clumps of five or six scenes at a time, usually in order, but not necessarily, and then step back and update my outline.

For a given scene, I'll read the research I've compiled, if there is any, and make a brief checklist of what I want to cover in the scene. I handwrite on legal pads, and the preliminary version consists almost exclusively of dialog. I can't do everything at once. Initially, I hear the characters talking, and only later can I visualise where they are, what their mannerisms are like, how they look, and so forth.

I don't do much editing in this first phase, only a little bit when I transfer the scene from legal pad to computer, which I do shortly after I've written it. My aim is to create, not critique, and I'm anxious to get the story down on paper. This takes me about three or four months to come up with a decent rough draft.

Next, I go through the manuscript, from start to finish, adding details and nuances I missed the first go-around, inserting transitions between scenes, finalising chapter breaks, and firmly setting the order of the story. This is a one or two week process.

From there, I get mean. I spend an equal or greater amount of time editing the manuscript as I did constructing it. I read sections forward and backward, aloud and silently, deleting every unnecessary word and sequence. I assume that nothing's good, and I make everything, literally everything, earn its way back into the book. I set specific word counts for how much I have to delete, usually in the range of ten to twenty percent of the content, in order to remove anything that might prevent readers from galloping to the finish.

I move from good to great to exquisite everywhere I can. I developed this skill as a technical writer. Oftentimes I had to take my own 600-word articles and hack them down to 300 words to fit a limited amount of column inches. Amazingly, the pieces became stronger, and no one missed what was missing.

I chip away at this overwhelming project, a full-length novel, at once impatient and terrified for the end to come. No one, including me, can write a whole book. But I

can craft a bunch of pieces and assemble them in a logical and compelling order, which is how I approach the task.

SG: Whilst your books are classified as crime, they don't really sit in the traditional mystery genre – they are much more about the “why” than the “who” and “how”. Is this what you intended or has it naturally developed that way, and what attracted you initially to the crime genre?

JJ: I'm attracted to reading and writing in the mystery genre because plot is my first love.

As for style, I absolutely intend for each book in the Kristin Ashe series to be a psychological mystery.

I've consciously created these unusual puzzles for her to solve, but only now am I finding out how much I've startled some readers and reviewers by defying the “rules” of the mystery genre. My books don't contain the typical assortment of red herrings, alibi checking, evidence processing, chase scenes, and violent climaxes that appear in more traditional mysteries.

SG: The series bravely deals with many controversial and emotive subjects – child abuse, incest, rape, abortion, frigidity, murder, suicide, emotional repression and self-loathing. Phew, have I missed anything <g>! There's a lot of dark material there and one inevitably has to ask if your writing has been a form of therapy? Have these books been difficult to write?

JJ: My writing has been therapeutic and will be until the day I die. My stories will always reside in the stories I tell.

The books weren't difficult to write so much as they were extremely painful to edit and proofread. Worse, it took, and takes, every ounce of strength I have to allow them to be published. To this day, I can't reread the first three, because it unnerves me to be reminded of how much I exposed myself and betrayed my family.

In the fiction that parallels my life, I told the truth, but that doesn't make it any easier to articulate.

SG: However, and it's a big however, whilst the books have their dark side there is also a lot of humour that stops them from becoming overwhelming – especially in the last two (Commitment to Die and Unbearable Losses). Is this something you have to work hard at, to find the right balance?

JJ: I spend a lot of energy moving scenes around to find the right tone. As I write the first draft, I create an elaborate plot spreadsheet, to keep track of which characters are coming and going, what action's taking place, what's building or resolving, and which sections feel light or dark.

In the end, I rely on intuition to know what works, and I think my books appeal to readers because they're an accurate portrayal of the contradictions in their own lives.

SG: Kristin Ashe is a great character – she reminds me to some extent of JM Redmann's Micky Knight – equally frustrating and endearing but much more repressed than the sassy Mickey! Is there a lot of you in Kristin? Do you get frustrated with her sometimes irrational (on the surface) behaviour?

JJ: This is the funniest question I've ever answered, because Kristin never frustrates me. Not for a split second. Which probably answers your other question. Yes, there's a lot of me in Kristin.

Strangely, there's also a lot of me in Fran Green, Kristin's sidekick, who is a sixty-something, ex-nun. I'm not that age, and I could barely stay awake through a ten-minute homily, much less join a convent, but she and I share more traits than I probably should admit. I know I'm the one who thinks up all the one-liners and puts her in outrageous situations, but she irritates me constantly...sometimes because I wish I were more like her.

SG: Kristin must be the world's best empathiser <g>! This isn't always the case for people who have suffered abuse. How carefully have you had to construct this character and her intense reactions?

JJ: I've suffered abuse, yet am empathetic. Whether that's in spite of the abuse or because of it, I don't know. But on a deep level, I understand every side in a situation. I always have. This doesn't necessarily serve me when I try to make decisions, simple or life-changing, but it helps me as a writer.

I've transferred my empathy to Kristin, and to a lesser degree to Fran. When Kristin interviews someone during the course of an investigation, she asks the questions I would ask, she becomes furious when I would become furious, she feels affected when I would feel affected, she falls apart when I would fall apart – but to an extreme, because this is fiction. I can't always explain where the boundary lies between us, but I'm in her essence, and she's in mine.

SG: To some extent I would say that the first three books, whilst being individual stories are very much an arch of Kristin's inner struggle. Is this how it was planned? Have you and Kristin exorcised some demons together? Whilst Kristin does continue to have some inner turmoil – she just wouldn't be the same if she didn't! – do you find that you're now a little freer to develop the external plot?

JJ: I didn't plan a three-book arc, but after the fact, I realised I'd formed one of family dysfunction – mother, father, brother. Kristin and I both evolved and healed in the creation.

With *Unbearable Losses* and the next two, I was able to let go and construct more complex mysteries. They, too, are all independent stories, but the three combined complete another arc – one of young lesbian heartbreak and the aftermath that follows into adulthood. I only know this because I'm completing book six as we speak.

Beyond that, what the books in the series will bring, I won't know until I get into them. I have vague ideas about plot, but I never fully understand a book until long after I've written it.

As for Kristin, I don't have any more family drama planned for her, but she will continue to struggle to maintain intimacy with Destiny, her lover, and sanity with Fran, who becomes her full-fledged business partner in *Disorderly Attachments*.

SG: And will it give you more space for some of the other characters? Destiny, for example, has obviously been a huge part of Kristin's 'recovery' but she isn't given much 'airtime'.

JJ: Yes, getting Kristin's issues out of the way has given me more of a chance to showcase Destiny and Fran.

SG: Tell us a bit about the upcoming book *Disorderly Attachments*. How does this develop the series?

JJ: There are three storylines in *Disorderly Attachments*. The first involves a client who hires Kristin to find out more about a woman she is eyeing for an affair – and the woman turns out to be Destiny. The second concerns a developer who needs to determine if a house is haunted before she'll buy it and turn it into condominiums. The third traces Fran's rabid path as she looks for love after ending her thirty-three-year relationship.

In the Destiny storyline, readers will see for the first time what motivated her to become an activist and the toll it takes on her to be one of the few visible, political lesbians in Denver.

SG: What are you working on now?

JJ: The sixth book in the series, *Selective Memory*. In it, a classical pianist who is experiencing memory loss after a near-fatal accident hires Kristin to recreate the events leading up to the crash. When her memories return in fits and flashes, few of which she shares with Kristin, they reveal a twenty-year obsession with another woman.

For the first time, I'll be using alternating first-person narrators, Kristin, as always, and the pianist, whose voice is haunting.

SG: You self-published your first book back in 1992 and now you are being published by the revitalised Spinsters Ink, which seems a perfect fit. How do you think the lesbian publishing business has changed over the last 15 years?

JJ: The most significant changes have been the explosion of the Internet and the implosion of an estimated seventy to ninety percent of the 200+ lesbian/feminist/gay bookstores that were in business in America in the early 1990s. Those changes represent cause and effect and leave me with mixed feelings.

Lesbian readers, however, should celebrate, because now there's more content than ever before. There are more publishers, many of whom are exclusively Internet-based, more outlets from which to purchase books, again Internet-based, and more access to authors.

I might never drive to Nebraska or fly across the Atlantic, but thanks to my website (www.JenniferLJordan.com) readers can write to me, and I'll write back. They can download first chapters of my books and read comments on how I came to create each one. I couldn't have provided this fifteen years ago.

None of it makes up for the loss of the stores, because with them we lost our local community centers and something of our souls, but it helps.

SG: What have you read recently that you enjoyed?

JJ: Nothing. I can't read when I write. I've had to satisfy my cravings for mysteries by watching old episodes of Poirot, Midsomer Murders, Sherlock Holmes, Lovejoy, whatever I can find on cable channels. The shows are exactly what I need, so lightweight that I rarely care who did it, why, or even whether the solution makes sense.

SG: Which writers have been inspirational to you over the years?

JJ: More than any other, Natalie Goldberg, because her books on writing gave me the courage to write and publish.

Also, not in any particular order: Sue Grafton, for her humour; Sandra Scoppettone, for her complex protagonist; Dick Francis, for his engaging tone; Armistead Maupin, for his dialog; Carol O'Connell, for her enigmatic style; Patricia Cornwell, for her invention of a subset in the mystery genre; and Agatha Christie, for her productivity.

SG: How do you relax?

JJ: I'm not sure I ever do, but the closest I come to feeling at peace is when I'm snowboarding and my mind is at rest.

SG: Thanks very much for taking the time to talk to us.

JJ: I was stunned by some of the questions. Thank you for the thought behind them and the care you took in reading the books.