

Q&A with Patti Callahan Henry

Q: When did your affinity for storytelling begin? What made you take that initial leap and begin writing your first novel? And why do you write?

PCH:

I grew up with my nose in a book and have always been fascinated with beautifully told stories. I also grew up as a preacher's daughter, which is nothing more than listening to the same truth being told over and over in story. I slowly came to realize the power was not in the lecture, but the well-told story. My daughter is the one who reminded me I wanted to write novels. When she was six years old she told me she wanted to be writer of books and this spurred me on to my original childhood dream.

My first novel—actually a memoir—was called “My Life” and was never published. I wrote it when I was twelve years old. Although I've been writing ever since then, professionally I pursued a medical career. I am a nurse with a Master's degree in Child-Health.

Seven years ago, I finally understood that writing is all I've ever really wanted to do. When I knew I had no choice—that writing was a necessary part of who I was—I pursued it as seriously as I did my master's degree. It became essential that I take classes, read books on the writing craft and actually write every day. The path I took to publication required belief in my work, along with persistence, courage, faith, serendipity and a willingness to study the craft of writing. The catalyst for each step of the journey was the decision—the commitment to write.

I write because I believe in the power of story! My Daddy is a lively Irish preacher and I grew up understanding the innate power of story. When I was a child, I was a book-worm, ignoring all those who made fun of me while my nose was stuck in the Narnia Series. I've always used story to make sense of my life. The driving force behind my writing is the hope that my story will touch someone's heart, that I will tell a story that will tell a 'truth'...and of course my deadlines are a wonderful driving force.

Q:

Reviewers have compared your novels to the works of Anne Rivers Siddons, Pat Conroy, Mary Alice Monroe, and Patricia Gaffney. What is it like to join the ranks of such illustrious writers?

PCH:

I am humbled and grateful to be compared to such outstanding writers. They are masters at crafting sentences rich in description and meaning. I can only hope that the comparisons arise from the deeper, shared truths we each explore in our novels. Or I can only hope they aren't offended.

Q: Your writing has a lyrical quality, what I call "a dance," a rhythm that charms the reader. It also convinces the reader that these people and places are real. How do you do that?

PCH:

Wow, What a beautiful compliment. The writer spends hours and hours in solitary work trying to craft a sentence and when someone calls the writing "lyrical", the heart sings (or at least mine does because my voice definitely can't sing). I'm not sure how it's done or if I do it all beyond the daily act of reading and writing, reading and writing – almost like an obsession. And, as for the characters being real – well, they are when I'm writing them, when they are moving and talking and living on the page in front of me.

Q: What does it take to be a good novelist in today's world?

PCH:

Guts, courage, belief in your work and of course...shameless self-confidence. There are so many people out there who will tell us why we CAN'T write, there aren't very many voices telling us how we CAN write. If I knew what it took to be a good novelist, I'd never waver from it, but I believe the best we can do is tell the truth as we feel it. I also think the novelist needs to be very aware of the kind of book he/she wants to write. It is so easy in today's marketplace to get swayed by what is hot and what is not—what's on the 'lists'. A writer must spend a lot of time searching their own heart about what kind of stories they want to tell.

A new writer must also spend the time and energy to learn about the publishing business.

Q: What is your favorite quote?

PCH: “It is never too late to be who you might have been.” George Eliot (1819-1880). And anything C.S. Lewis ever said.

Q: What is one of the most valuable lessons you’ve learned?

PCH:

One of the most valuable lessons I’ve learned is to always check my children’s pockets for crayons before I put the clothes in the dryer. Other than that—I think my life lesson over the past few years has been to learn and relearn that the more I attempt to fall into other people’s plans for my life, the more God’s purpose for my life is blocked and remains unfulfilled.

Q: Can you offer any advice to the aspiring writer who wants to be published?

PCH:

First I believe you must have an innate and driving passion for writing, the written word and story. After that, I believe that the biggest contributor to one’s work finally getting published is a recognition that there is an art and a craft—in other words there is the deeply creative aspect of writing (ever notice the word art is inside the word heart?), but one must also learn the mechanics, the business, the rules of submission and the technical aspects of writing. Educate yourself on the business of publishing and the specifics of the kind of novel you want to write (the genre).

All writers receive rejections because there are so many different opinions and tastes out there in the publishing world. The key is taking the rejections and using them to your advantage (ex: improving your work, finding the right editor). And if writing is your passion, calling and gift – never give up.

And of course, write and write, read and read, and then write some more.

Q: What urged you to change careers from a Clinical nurse specialist to southern fiction writer?

PCH:

I tell this story because it is inspiring and true: I was playing doll house with my daughter (she was six years old at the time) and I asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. She told me “I will be a writer of books.”

Now she didn't say she wanted to win a Pulitzer Prize or be on the New York Times Bestseller list, she just said she wanted to write books. It was a huge "aha" moment for me and a life-changing moment as I decided, right there on her bedroom floor, that I was going to finally do this thing – I was going to write a book.

Q: How do you fit in time for being a mom and a best-selling author? Is there a secret to this?

PCH:

Everyone has a passion. Mine is writing and telling stories. Motherhood comes first and it is the biggest joy in my life, but writing is a calling and an important role incorporated into woman, wife and mother. I always say that I don't 'find' time to write; I 'make' time to write. Which means I sacrifice some other time-spending endeavors to sit down and write (or edit).

Now when I discover the real secret, I'll shout it from a mountaintop! I only know how to go day-by-day, believing that my beautiful, raucous family is my priority and then moving on from that place to the writing which nourishes and inspires me.