

CONVERSATION WITH PATRICIA GUSSIN: **WEAPON OF CHOICE**

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF, HOW AND WHEN YOU STARTED WRITING.

Weapon of Choice is my fifth thriller novel and I also am a co-author of a non-fiction book with my husband, *What's Next...For You?* which explains our transition from medicine and medical research to books and wine as we have vineyards in New Zealand. After a career in medicine, what got the writing ball rolling for me was the reflection on my years in Detroit, juggling medical school with four young kids. The year was 1967, the year of the devastating Detroit riots. Quite an impactful time, certainly for me, but also for the city of Detroit which has never recovered. *Shadow of Death*, my first novel, nominated as best first novel by International Thriller Writers, focuses on a female medical student with two small children in the epicenter of the riots in Detroit. My other novels followed, but that first one is more autobiographical than the others.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE **WEAPON OF CHOICE**?

I've been anxious to get back into the life of Laura Nelson. She was a medical student in *Shadow of Death* and a thoracic surgeon in Tampa in *Twisted Justice*. In *Weapon of Choice*, Laura is chief of surgery at Tampa City hospital and responsible for the OR, the ER and the surgical ICU. I also wanted *Weapon of Choice* to be a true medical thriller. My novels all have a medical theme, medical characters, medical situations, but I think that in *Weapon of Choice*, I have taken medical suspense to a new level.

DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO ENRICH YOUR STORY?

I definitely use my experience in medicine and my experience as a mother in my stories, and I intermingle them. The balance of a career and a family and the inevitable tension that results is something I've always experienced. In *Weapon of Choice*, Laura has to be there for her daughter and she has to be there for her patients in that ICU. Another factor that weighed in heavily in *Weapon of Choice* was my early experience between high school and college when I worked as a technician in a bacteriology laboratory.

ARE YOUR NOVELS SEQUELS OR ARE THEY STAND ALONE STORIES?

They are all considered stand-alones although they may share characters. Specifically, three titles feature Laura Nelson: *Weapon of Choice* takes place seven years after *Twisted Justice*; and *Twisted Justice* takes place seven years after the conclusion of *Shadow of Death*. So they are not sequels in the true sense. *The Test* is truly stand-alone as is *And Then There Was One* although the discerning reader will recognize a character or two from another title pop up in the story.

THREE OF YOUR NOVELS, INCLUDING **WEAPON OF CHOICE** FEATURE LAURA NELSON YET THEY TAKE PLACE IN QUITE DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES AND DURING DISTINCT SEGMENTS OF HER LIFE. HOW OLD IS LAURA IN THESE THREE BOOKS?

Laura Nelson first appears as a medical student in **Shadow of Death**. She starts at age twenty three and she graduates at age twenty seven. In **Twisted Justice**, she's thirty four, and in **Weapon of Choice**, she's forty one. The interesting thing about Laura is that we can see her career growth as well as the development of her kids as they go from toddlers to elementary school to teenagers as we see in **Weapon of Choice**.

ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

As with most writers, I borrow shamelessly from all walks of life that I have encountered over the years. Mixing and matching characteristics, personalities, and backgrounds is the fun part of writing.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR NOVEL IS MORE PLOT DRIVEN OR CHARACTER DRIVEN?

More character driven as it is so important that the reader identify with the character. I hope that my readers say to themselves, "What would I do if I were in that circumstance?" or "What is she thinking!" The plot is essential to a thriller and has to be fast-paced and come to a satisfying and plausible end. A sense of place is also important. One of the quotes that I am most proud of for **Shadow of Death** came from the director of the historical collection of the Detroit Public Library: "**Shadow of Death** portrays an accurate picture of Detroit during that tough year of 1967. It is realistic, gruesome and stunning, almost shocking in its detail."

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE OR MOST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

In **Weapon of Choice**, Laura Nelson and Stacy Jones are both intelligent, dedicated doctors and genuinely good human beings. Laura is the senior of the two, a widowed mother of four. Stacy has been mentored by Laura in the distant past, she is African American, and single. Of the two, my sympathies lean more toward Laura as she struggles to contain the raging infection in her hospital at a time when she needs to be with her critically ill daughter. In the end though, the hero-award goes to Stacy when she confronts a catastrophic decision.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Two heinous men with disparate motivations dominate **Weapon of Choice**: Victor Worth and Charles Scarlett. One motivated by love; the other by hate. The result: each becomes the harbinger of death. But even worse than these two is Will Banks aka William Matthews who emanates unadulterated evil.

WHAT PART OF WRITING YOUR BOOK DID YOU FIND THE MOST CHALLENGING?

Intertwining the raging bacterial infection in Tampa with the heinous plans of the white supremacy cell in a credible manner took a lot of thought. Luckily Laura and Stacy were able to find the link.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM YOUR BOOK?

I hope that they take away a sense of how difficult it is to balance family and a career; an insight into the world of homegrown bioterrorism; a wake-up call concerning the poisonous hate evidenced by white supremacy cults which still exist across the country.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

I have been inspired by a wide range of novelists from Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* and Ken Follett's *Eye of the Needle* and Nelson DeMille's *The Lion's Game* to Wilbur Smith's *On Burning Shores* to Barbara Taylor Bradford's *A Woman of Substance*.

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

I am sorry to say that writing for me is very erratic pretty much whenever I have at least two hours to focus. I find it hard to start and then when started, hard to stop. I still volunteer in primary care as a physician, I am the editor and president of a publishing company, I help attend to our vineyards, and try to keep track of each of my seventeen grandchildren. That's a lot of competition for writing time.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? ANY NEW BOOKS IN THE PIPELINE

My next novel (yet untitled) will again feature Laura Nelson. The story will commence seven years after *Weapon of Choice*. Laura will become embroiled in a pharmaceutical mishap. Having been a research director in a large pharmaceutical company, this is an area in which I have special expertise and have been waiting to exploit.