

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Patricia Gussin, author of *The Test*

Start to finish, how long did it take you to write *The Test*?

The Test took me about a year to write.

How did you get the idea?

My husband and I were heading toward the beach one fine summer day when we came upon a neighbor who seemed agitated, so we stopped to chat. Acting like amateur psychologists, we let him rant and rave about how fanatical he was about what to leave his children in his will. He wanted to be fair, but also wanted to reward them according to his perception of admirable behavior. He ended up by saying, "I guess, what I want is to rule from the grave." That statement served as the framework for *The Test*. What would happen if a very wealthy man created a will designed to rule from the grave?

Which part of the writing process did you enjoy most? Why?

I enjoyed creating the Parnell family. I love large, complicated families and find them the perfect stage to play out the range of human emotions.

Which part of the writing process was most difficult? Why?

The most difficult challenge in writing *The Test* was to pick one of the Parnell siblings as the primary protagonist. In the end, I chose Ashley because she is the one who falls prey to opportunism and the evil of greed.

***The Test* is quite different than your previous novels, *Shadow of Death* and *Twisted Justice*. What prompted you to tackle a different type of novel?**

Laura Nelson appears in *Shadow of Death* as a medical student in 1967 and returns as a thoracic surgeon in *Twisted Justice* in 1978. In *The Test*, I wanted to introduce a new family in a more modern environment. 2001, a year of terror on a worldwide scale, seemed an appropriate era to demonstrate terror of a more personal nature. Readers of *Shadow of Death* and *Twisted Justice*, however, will recognize a recurring character in *The Test*.

In all of your novels, family is an important theme. Why is that?

I come from a family of six children, and I have seven children. My whole life has been the balance of a medical career and a big family, so I have a huge family insight bank to draw from. The family unit is so full of emotion and vulnerability that it seems the perfect focus. Each family is unique, but the concept of family is ubiquitous and eternal.

In *The Test*, the six Parnell siblings are all radically different. Do you think that it is an accurate depiction of a large family?

Yes, I do. Based on my experience as a parent and a pediatrician, every child is unique. I have never heard a parent say, "My children are all the same." In a family like the Parnells, six siblings and three mothers, the disparity among them could be anticipated. But even with the Parnells, the drastic difference between Dan and Frank, and also between Ashley and Carla, could not be predicted, but I think is more typical than not of sibling differences.

What do you think was Paul Parnell's primary motivation in creating "the test" – a desire to do something meaningful for the family he left behind, or a desire to control from "beyond the grave," or maybe a little of both?

Paul Parnell was well intended. He was desperate to do whatever he could to inculcate "goodness" in his children. So yes, he did want to do something meaningful in creating this credo of a test, but he also knew he'd be doing it from "beyond the grave".

Of the six siblings, which do you find most sympathetic? Why?

I find Carla the most sympathetic. Carla is not only overindulged, but also abandoned in the wake of her parents' illnesses. She sinks very deeply, but ultimately struggles for recovery.

Of the six siblings, which do you find least sympathetic? Why?

Initially, Frank. He seems so self-centered, egotistical and arrogant, but as the story evolves, he slowly, then dramatically, changes to elicit the sympathy he then deserves.

How did you get the idea for the novel's villain? Is he based on anyone you know?

Conrad Weldon is not based on anybody I know, but is a composite of the evil that lurks beyond the surface of a psychopath's veneer. Ashley is the perfect target for Conrad, and he manipulates her with the grandiosity and self-assurance of his narcissism.

Given their affluent upbringing, the Parnell children certainly didn't go without material wants, yet each sibling seems to be searching to fill a void in their lives. What was your reasoning in making this a central theme in the novel?

Even though the Parnell children represent different phases of Paul Parnell's life, they all suffered from a type of emotional deprivation—parental neglect for Frank and Dan, parental illness for Ashley and Carla. And this neglect left scars, but a different type of scar for each, reflected by that sense of filling a void.

Throughout the course of the narrative, each character in the novel is tested in ways far beyond the actual "test." Do you think Paul Parnell envisioned his test as a way to get his family to confront their real issues?

Paul wanted them to confront their own individual shortcomings as he judged them and as he pointed out to them in an individual note. He never could have envisioned the adverse outcome of this well-intended approach as related and unrelated events intervene.

Do you think Paul Parnell was motivated by guilt in any way, and if so, do you think his guilt was justified or imagined?

I think that Paul was motivated by guilt, some justified and some imagined. He did feel a sense of desperation to correct his shortcomings as a father. Since it was too late to go back and do things differently, he had to do something now. He'd been a very powerful man so he would have found it difficult to accept failure.

Do you think the Parnell siblings are victims of their affluent upbringing? Why or why not?

Yes, I believe that with the exception of Rory and Monica, the siblings are victims of their upbringing. Rory and Monica had the benefit of growing up in a loving, middle class environment. The others were victims in some way, especially Ashley and Carla.

Even though Paul Parnell has passed away before the book opens, do you think he is "present" throughout the narrative? Why or why not?

Paul's presence is felt on almost every page of *The Test* even though he's not physically present. He has set the stage on which his children play out the drama of their complicated and interacting lives.

In *The Test*, you manage to seamlessly weave together six very different story lines in a very dramatic way. How on earth were you able to accomplish that?

I wrote the first version of *The Test* in the multiple first person narrative. Each sibling, as well as Conrad, had their own first person voice. I thought that this technique would showcase the different personalities as the characters told their individual, yet intersecting, story of what happened as a result of "the test." I found too much repetition in that draft and in the interest of accelerating the pace, I changed to a multiple third person technique. However, going through the exercise of each character telling the story did help me keep all the story lines in control.

In the end, do you think Paul Parnell accomplished his goal? Why or why not?

Paul Parnell's goal was accomplished at the end of the story, but not via 'the test' technique that he'd imposed, but rather, by tragedy and adversity.

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What do you hope readers will take away from *The Test*?

I hope that readers will take away the recognition of the true values in life and the enjoyment of a thrilling story.

What's next for Patricia Gussin? Do you have any other books in the works?

My next book of fiction will be a thriller, *Abduction*. Two of three identical triplets simply disappear from a shopping mall in Auburn Hills, Michigan. The children's parents are Katie Monroe, a forensic child psychiatrist, and Scott Monroe, a former professional baseball player and a coach for the New York Yankees. Both parents can be traced back to *Shadow of Death*. After that, I'd like to continue the Laura Nelson story as well as to get back to the Parnell family.

But my very next book, co-written with my husband, Robert Gussin, is non-fiction. We haven't settled on a title yet, but are considering the following: *How Did We Get Here?*; *Thoughtful Impulsiveness*; *Creative Retirement: How We Became Winemakers, Book Publishers and Authors*; *When Retirement Becomes Fun: Our Post-Work Adventures into Vineyards and Books*, and *What's Next*.