

## **Q&A with Laurel Dewey, author of *Protector***

### ***How did you get started in writing?***

I started writing stories and plays when I was about seven. I can remember faking sickness just so I could stay home from school and finish a story. In junior high school, I entered poems and short stories in contests and had a few published in school papers. By high school, I was writing dramatic monologues for myself and others to perform in dramatic competitions. I continued writing longer and longer short stories until they were technically “novellas.” I joined a few writers’ groups and endured endless critiques that forced me to become a better writer. At age 20, while still in college, I wrote and helped produce several radio mystery theatre scripts for public radio stations in Los Angeles, California. It was my first major credit and whet my appetite for bigger and better fish in the writer’s ocean. My first long-term gig as a professional writer was with BOP Magazine, the teen idol magazine. I churned tons of material out during my tenure at BOP and it truly gave me an appreciation for how to be concise and grab a reader’s attention.

### ***What do you like to read?***

My tastes run the wide gamut from crime thrillers and murder mysteries to esoteric literature and historical fiction. I’m especially drawn to stories that are character-driven and where you get to really know the protagonist.

### ***How long did it take you to write *Protector*?***

I wanted to make sure I had a real understanding of what detectives do and what they have to mentally endure on a daily basis. To accomplish this, I enlisted the help of homicide detectives and street cops, interviewing them, going on lots of “ride-a-longs” and reading copious material on crime scene investigation, criminal profiling and technical data. The research process took nearly eight months but it was well worth it in the end.

As far as the actual writing of *Protector*, the first draft took a total of 14 months to complete. Since I’d never written a novel before, I think I was a bit timid of the process in the beginning. I also tended to overwrite way too much. By the last five months of the process, I became much more disciplined and would start writing around 4:00 pm and finish at 2:30 am. The first draft came in at a whopping 650 pages and included a side story that I removed in the second draft in order to shorten the book.

### ***Where do you get your creative ideas?***

Since I’m drawn to characters first and then their story, I think I get ideas from observing people and imagining why they do the things they do. For me, building an interesting main character is akin to sculpting a bust out of clay; you start with a lump of ideas and carefully carve out a person who only exists in your mind. It’s a malleable and fluid process that can literally take me

months to construct. When I'm done, I know their birthday, where they went to school, what foods they like, what makes them angry, who they love and hate, what secrets they need to keep hidden and, most importantly, what makes them tick. Once I have the main character fully formed, I build a plausible story around them that she/he would naturally be involved in.

The really fascinating part of all this is that when the main character is fully fleshed out, they begin to direct the story in ways that are just short of magical. The characters begin writing the scene. I'd have a concrete direction of where a scene should go and then, out of nowhere, the characters would say something that directed it in a completely different direction. That's when the magic began. And yes, it was eerie at times. They truly came alive and started to dictate where they needed to go in the story. That might sound "woo-woo" to the casual reader, but if you're a writer, chances are you've experienced that astonishing moment when creativity actually takes form and has a heartbeat all its own. It doesn't happen every day but when it does, you should definitely let it happen and see where it goes.

***How much of your own personality do you put into your characters?***

I think any writer uses their pen to explore a certain amount of self-inquiry. It may not be apparent to them at first, but writing can be a very liberating and cathartic process. I've been asked many times if I am Jane Perry, my protagonist in *Protector*. The answer is a defined "not really." Look, I'd be lying if I said there weren't elements of Jane Perry in my character or aspects of behavior I had at the time of writing the book. But she's a mixture of people I've known and the rest is from my imagination. What's great about Jane is that she's evolved from the first draft and so have I. In the beginning, she was pretty harsh and lacking in compassion. Her anger was so jacked up in the first draft that my editor strongly suggested I make her a tad softer so she'd be more likeable.

What's beautiful about Jane Perry is that I've actually learned a lot from her. That sounds kind of esoteric but I know I've become a better person from knowing her.

As for other characters in the book, there may be slivers of myself imprinted in them as well. But on the whole, it's imagination that really forms who they become.

***Some reviewers and readers have commented that Protector has a strong character and story structure much like a film. Can you comment on this?***

My time in Los Angeles writing spec teleplays and screenplays taught me about structure that has been absolutely invaluable when writing a novel. I learned about the five words that were necessary for any successful story: A person with a problem. That person and that problem should be introduced within the first 10 pages of the story.

While it's not imperative, it really helps if you outline your story with the traditional "Three act principle"—i.e., the three acts of a play. This helps me to create the tension and struggles within a kind of graph.

Here's how it works: The first act should introduce most of the major characters and establish what their problems are. The antagonist or antagonists must also be introduced in the first act. The antagonist can be a situation as well as a person and, in fact, this helps heighten the tension. The first act needs to end with the main character's problem reaching its first climax and/or complication.

The second act carries the story further. This is the act where the meat and potatoes of your story are played out. The main character must encounter more roadblocks to solving her/his problem and at the end of act two, there should be the make or break complication that leads up to a cliff hanging moment of tension.

This leads right into act three where all the problems are resolved, the answers to the any puzzles are given and the main character, hopefully, evolves and overcomes their adversity.

While fiction writers aren't necessarily taught this type of outlining, it really does make a world of difference in the story telling aspect. It forces the writer to establish interesting characters who have real problems. It makes the writer get creative and come up with solid (hopefully believable) complications for their main character. While some people may look at this type of outlining as too strict or a "connect the dots" mentality, I assure you that if ANY story fails to follow this basic principle, it will end up losing the reader because there will be no one to root for and no problem to overcome. Look at any classic story, from Shakespeare to Star Wars, and you'll find this tried and true "formula" for making a story a success.

I have to also add that all those years of writing spec screenplays strengthened my ability to write natural-sounding dialogue, which is the backbone of a screenplay. I wish more novelists learned how to write great dialogue because that crisp repartee is often lacking in fiction these days.

***In reading reviews of Protector, some people have said that you created a new genre. How do you respond to this?***

I think it's one helluva compliment and one helluva responsibility. I can assure you that I never started out to create a new genre in fiction. If it happened, it happened by accident. I started out writing a pure character-driven story with the backdrop of a crime thriller. As the book evolved, the paranormal/metaphysical element bled into the story quite naturally. My main character, Jane Perry, fights her demons and questions whether she's losing her mind. Her unusual connection to nine-year-old Emily is profound and unexplainable to both of them until the final pages of the novel. Defining the genre of *Protector* has always been difficult and one of the reasons it took so long for it to get published—nobody knew how to "position" it in the marketplace. Was it fiction? A crime thriller? A murder mystery? Paranormal? Metaphysical? New Age? Believe me, I had plenty of people question how to define the story. Thus, I think the idea that I created a new genre was born.

If that's the case, then I suppose *Protector* and the sequels in the series might introduce metaphysics to readers who wouldn't necessarily buy that kind of book. I give them a good story with a crime element but I throw in the mystical element. But I don't beat readers over the head

with it. The main character, Jane Perry, is as cynical and logical as they come. But even *she* has to reluctantly admit that she possesses a gift of intuitiveness that is beyond the realm of the mundane world. She struggles with the concept and eventually begins to accept it but *only* after she can't rationally explain it any other way.

***What kind of advice would you give to young or struggling writers?***

If you write what you think is popular or what you think will make you money, you're writing for the wrong reasons. You have to write from your heart. Truthfully, *Protector* was the first time I ever wrote from my heart and it made all the difference. A literary professor in college told me that to be a good writer you had to "LOVE what you do. Engage in the process of creating great characters and stories. Believe in your protagonist as if they really existed. Feel their pain and have compassion for their weaknesses." He was right. All of this takes tremendous energy and time but it's what makes for a really good read.

You also have to risk being vulnerable. I say "risk" because for so many of us, being vulnerable is dangerous. It's putting out this naked truth that anyone can shoot down or call "ordinary" or "boring." You have to risk that reaction and *still* write if writing is your passion. Eventually, if you keep writing, your voice will find others of like minds.

And honestly, in my opinion, you either are a writer or you're not. *Real* writers have no choice—they write because if they don't, they die inside. For *real* writers, writing is like breathing. When they don't have the outlet for that expression, their life falls like lead around them. So, you either are a writer or you are not. I don't believe you can teach someone to write and create great characters and stories. Sure, you can certainly teach someone how to conceptualize an idea and frame his or her story in a tighter outline, but you can't teach talent. You can't teach creativity. You either have it or you don't. You can hone talent and encourage creativity, but you can't take a workshop expecting to attain it.

***You mentioned that Protector would become a series. Where do you envision the story going?***

I'm currently writing the sequel to *Protector*, titled *Redemption*. In *Redemption*, Jane continues to struggle with her addictions and, through this, meets an extraordinary and mysterious woman who chooses her for a task that requires a sharp, criminal mind and excellent intuitive instinct. But as always, the core of *Redemption* has to do with Jane Perry's metaphysical evolvment and realization that there's more to this world than meets the mundane eye. It's a very emotional story as Jane learns a secret that turns her life and reality upside down. There's also the theme of not seeing the world in "black and white"—how one can live two poles of the spectrum, sometimes simultaneously. It explores the idea that a person can be both the victim and the perpetrator. It's all about questioning what you believe in and realizing that cause and effect is a powerful impulse.

You know...simple stuff...