

Chats with Lisa Gardner

By Dianna Love Snell

Dianna – When did you start writing “seriously” and what influenced the direction of your writing?

Lisa - I wrote my first novel at 18, mostly because I didn't know any better. Up until that point, I'd always written short stories, poetry, etc., but none of it felt quite right. What I loved to read were novels--Stephen King, V.C. Andrew, M.M. Kaye. I particularly loved big, sweeping stories filled with danger and romance. So it occurred to me one day, that's what I should be writing--a whole book filled with murder, mayhem, and of course, happily ever after.

Dianna – How has publishing (with regard to your genre) changed since your first book was printed?

Lisa - Suspense has entered a mode of "authentic fiction." Far from the melodramatic days of over-the-top bad guys and one-dimensional PIs, readers want the reading experience to feel real, as if it could actually happen. This means more complex characters and of course, utilizing real-world police procedure. Fortunately, I'm a research junkie, so I thoroughly enjoyed delving into characters, crime and criminal justice. Interviewing police detectives and FBI agents is the best part of my job

Dianna – What is your weekly writing schedule like - so many pages a day or per week?

Lisa - I aspire to 20-40 pages a week. I work 9-5, like an office job. Unfortunately, as my career has grown, so has the number of "non-writing" activities. The big challenge for me is to remember that the writing must always come first, even when it's easier to answer e-mail all morning, and tell myself I've been working.

Dianna – What is your favorite way to relax and recharge your muse?

Lisa - I love hiking and gardening. I generally finish a novel just in time for summer, so I can spend a few weeks of quality time outdoors, plotting the next book. It's been a good system for me.

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Dianna – What resource books and/or websites would you recommend for mystery and suspense writers?

Lisa – I'm a big fan of Gryphon Books. I like their selection of crime books, resources for the suspense author. I also love the on-line classes taught by the Kiss of Death chapter of RWA. Anyone serious about suspense, should definitely check out their website for the latest offerings.

Dianna – Speaking of websites, www.lisagardner.com is easy to navigate and fun for a reader. Do you change yours often and what other online activities do you have – such as a blog?

Lisa – The two most popular items we offer on the website are on-going. First is the Tricks of the Trade page, which is loaded with articles on writing, including a lecture series on writing romantic suspense and another lecture series on crafting the perfect synopsis. The second feature is the annual Kill a Friend, Maim a Buddy Sweepstakes.

offered on the contest page, where you can nominate the loved one—or not so loved one—of your choice to die in my next novel. Interestingly enough, people really like that contest. I drew the new winner last week—who will appear in my January '06 release GONE—and the number of entries was just plain staggering. I'm impressed by how many minds are even more homicidal than my own.

Dianna – How involved is your agent and/or editor in the process of each story, and is the amount of input the same on every book?

Lisa – I have an absolutely fabulous agent and editor. I use them both as springboards for ideas when I'm first generating a novel. So at the start of the writing process, I talk to them both quite a bit. But then I disappear for nine months to write. Writing for me, really is a solitary craft.

Dianna – Where do you live and what drew you to that location? (If you prefer not to discuss your home, then use – Where is one of your favorite getaway spots and why?)

Lisa – I live in the mountains of New Hampshire, because I'm a mountains sort of gal. Grew up in Oregon, don't quite feel comfortable anyplace that's flat. I love hiking, love spending time outdoors. I try to wrap up my books before summer, so I can go out and play!

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Dianna – What is a mistake unpublished writers make when first attempting mystery-suspense?

Lisa –. Contrived plots. The villain gets away because the police were stupid or the heroine didn't ask the logical question, that sort of thing. Suspense is a very glutted market, which puts the pressure on the writer to be very clever. Don't go with the first thought in your head. Go with your fifth or sixth much more interesting idea. That's the one no one will see coming.

Dianna – What does it take to get a publisher behind you? Do you have to hit the USA Today first?

Lisa – I think publishers are most excited by a really big idea. Say a thriller where dinosaurs are recreated from DNA extracted from bits of amber. Or a book that opens with a murder in the Louvre. The right idea can certainly get New York jumping. Barring that, I recommend developing a really powerful voice. Tell your story a way no one else has told it, and you will get attention.

Dianna – What do you do when your muse wants a vacation before you finish a book? Any suggestions for when you aren't feeling at optimum level for writing?

Lisa – As a working mom, my muse wants a vacation most days and so do I. I think the trick is to figure out what recharges you and proactively use those tools. I get a lot of ideas driving. I also seem to solve most of my plot problems when walking. So I try to build time into my week for both activities. It doesn't do me any good to be sitting at the computer if I have nothing to say.

Dianna – What is something most people don't know about you and would be surprised to learn? ☺

Lisa – I really like the Simpsons. Really, really like the Simpsons. I should join a 12-step program or something. It's not sane.

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Dianna – Do you start with an outline or are you a “seat of the pants” writer?

Lisa – I’m both. I spend 3 months researching my novels, learning the police procedure that will form the basic skeleton of the novel. But many of the finer details, and most of the character development, I like to explore as I write. That way, I’m always open to the better idea. It’s funny sometimes, how it all works out.

Dianna – How did you promote yourself in the beginning and how is it different now that you are a NYT best selling author?

Lisa – I’ve never done much promotion. Not now, not then. So I honestly don’t have an answer to this question, except that I’m living proof you can build a career while being a shrinking violet.

Dianna – What are your research methods? Do you research heavily in advance or along the way?

Lisa – I research heavily in advance. I like to visit all locations used in the novel. I also interview extensively the branches of law enforcement I will be using in the book. I think the best stories come from the front lines, so while you can read about police procedure, I prefer to talk to the officers directly. Most of them are very kind, and all have had stories that are stranger than fiction.

Dianna – Do you write while traveling or on the road promoting?

Lisa – I did my first ever book tour this winter for ALONE. I definitely wrote while on the road—it was the only way to keep on track for deadline. It’s also possible that I ate way too much ice cream. But that’s another story, for another time. 😊

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