

AN INTERVIEW WITH

PATRICIA GUSSIN, author of *Shadow of Death*

Q: OKAY, THE MOST OBVIOUS QUESTION: IS *SHADOW OF DEATH* AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL? YOUR BIO SAYS THAT YOU WERE IN THAT PLACE AT THAT TIME. IN OTHER WORDS, ARE YOU LAURA NELSON?

A: Well that is the question, isn't it? And the answer is 'no', I'm not Laura Nelson. Although much of what Laura experienced in *Shadow of Death* I experienced because 'yes', I was there at that time. The scariness of Detroit. The ongoing curfews. The palpable hostility. I was a med student then. I did have 2 sons, the ages of Mikey and Kevin. And I did have 2 pregnancies, ending up with 4 children, all under the age of 7. Not 5, like Laura. And no rape. No murder. And no Dr. Monroe.

Q: WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO WRITE THIS BOOK?

A: I never planned to write a book. Ultra busy juggling seven almost-grown kids and a vice-president job for worldwide research at a big pharmaceutical company, I didn't have a spare moment. Not until I found myself flying back and forth to China and Japan. Once I'd emptied my briefcase, eaten a meal, had a glass of wine, watched a movie, taken a nap, I pulled out an empty pad of paper and started writing. About two years and many trips later I had a huge stack of notepads, all crammed with barely decipherable scribble.

Q: WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO DO THIS?

A: I honestly don't know. Maybe I'd been thinking about my medical school days more than I consciously knew. But all of a sudden the terror of the times and the enormous demands of small kids and horrendous work loads and dangerous lack of sleep paved the way to ask the question: "What if..." And that's what started the story, followed by a long line of 'what if's...' leading to twists and turns and ultimately the ending, which was light years beyond what I could have imagined in the beginning.

Q: YOU'RE A PHYSICIAN, A WIFE, A MOTHER, AND YOU'VE HAD A LONG CAREER IN THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY. DO YOU DRAW UPON YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES WITH FAMILY AND COLLEAGUES?

A: To a certain extent, of course. Life experience and research are essential author tools. First novels are notorious for a heavy dose of personal experience and *Shadow of Death* is no exception.

Q: HOW DID YOU HANDLE MEDICAL SCHOOL WITH FOUR YOUNG CHILDREN? YOUR BIO SAYS YOU HAVE SEVEN CHILDREN. WHEN WERE THEY BORN?

A: At times I'm sure I was overwhelmed. But I have such a Pollyanna attitude that all I can remember is how wonderful it is to have little kids. I adore babies, and having kids three through eleven is pure heaven. After that there's a lull in the fun as the anxiety level dials up. Then like a miracle, the pure heaven comes back followed by the magic of grandchildren. As for my other three kids, one was born when I was an intern in Tampa, and my two step-children joined the family when I lived in Philadelphia.

Q: WITHOUT GIVING TOO MUCH AWAY, THERE IS A SCENE IN THE BOOK WHERE A FEMALE DOCTOR IS OPENLY CRITICIZED FOR HAVING A "MAN'S JOB" – AN ATTITUDE NOT UNHEARD OF NEARLY 30 YEARS AGO. WERE YOU EVER SIMILARLY CRITICIZED FOR CHOOSING A CAREER IN MEDICINE?

A: There were those who tried to discourage me from going to med school in the first place. Certain college counselors, whom I decided to ignore. Thank goodness. But personally, I experienced no blatant criticism. Maybe a few askance looks, which I also chose to ignore. But I did feel that I had to work extra hard especially because I had small children. I guess I was paranoid that everybody was waiting for me to 'go home early' or 'beg off night call'. But I never did, and I think that earned me a lot of respect from my classmates and my professors.

Q: WHAT WAS THE HARDEST PART OF WRITING THIS BOOK?

A: Taking that stack of notepads and deciding to word-process them. The lowest moment: faulty knowledge of 'save' and 'delete'. Lesson learned: go straight to the computer.

Q: AS A MEDICAL STUDENT IN DETROIT DURING THE RIOTS, YOU HAD TO BE UNDER INTENSE PRESSURE. DO YOU FEEL IN ANY WAY THAT WRITING SHADOW OF DEATH HAS BEEN A CATHARSIS FOR YOU? WAS IT DIFFICULT FOR YOU TO REVISIT THAT TIME?

A: When I was in med school I was too overwhelmed with just making it through the day to reflect on the horrible devastation that I'd witnessed. Shadow of Death took me back to that time, letting me relive in slow motion those four years and appreciate the social turmoil and the personal stress. But I can't say this was difficult, more like nostalgic.

Q: WHAT WAS THE EASIEST PART?

A: Actually writing the story. I could do that twenty-four seven.

Q: HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO WRITE THE *SHADOW OF DEATH*?

A: From start to finish, ten years. The transition from scientific writing, restricted to meticulously documented facts, to wildly creative fiction with the sky the limit, took me though many drafts. I number my drafts alphabetically. I'm on "L". Remember, I had lots of kids, then grandchildren, lots of travel -- not all as leisurely as Asia, and lots of professional responsibility.

Q: WHAT DID YOU DO AFTER MEDICAL SCHOOL? HOW DID YOU END UP IN A PHARMACEUTICAL CORPORATION?

A: I chose Pediatrics. No surprise there. But when I started private practice at the Mease Clinic in Dunedin, Florida., I decided on Family Medicine so I could treat the whole family. Then I got an offer that I couldn't refuse in Clinical Research for a major pharmaceutical company and I moved to Philadelphia. Several positions later, I became worldwide vice president for research for over the counter medications. I'm still Board Certified in Family Medicine and practice primary care medicine as a volunteer at a senior citizen clinic in Sarasota, Florida.

Q: WHERE DID YOU GET THE IDEA OF WEAVING THE WHITE AND BLACK FAMILY TOGETHER AND SUPERIMPOSING THEM ON THE PRIVILEGED CLASS? WAS THIS MEANT TO BE A SOCIAL STATEMENT?

A: How can anyone exposed to Urban America not contemplate the horror of poverty without hope? Maybe the tragedy in New Orleans will bring new focus to America's shame. Nothing else has, and that's a pitiful statement, isn't it?

Q: IN *SHADOW OF DEATH*, THE CITY OF DETROIT TAKES ON THE PROMINENCE OF A CHARACTER. DID YOU HAVE TO DO MUCH RESEARCH?

A: Yes, even though I lived there during the events of the late 1960's. The Detroit Public Library has an excellent collection of riot-related materials in the Burton Historical Collection. David Poremba, the Librarian - manager has written many books about Detroit including an excellent chronology, *Detroit in Its World Setting* at the time of Detroit's 300th birthday in 2001. Please see the 'Behind the Scenes' section of my website for dramatic 'place and time' insight into Detroit's darkest hours.

Q: YOU WEAVE RELIGION INTO THE FABRIC OF THE STORY AND YET YOUR PROTAGONIST FLIES IN THE FACE OF ACCEPTED MORAL VALUES. HOW DO YOU RECONCILE THIS DICHOTOMY?

A: Isn't that human nature? How about those scenes in the *Godfather*? Seriously, I don't mean to be sacrilegious. But to paraphrase our new Supreme Justice Roberts: judges (insert authors) are like umpires. They are there to call the balls and strikes, not to pitch or bat.

Q: WHAT DO YOU ADMIRE MOST ABOUT LAURA? LEAST?

A: Laura is a loving mother and a genuinely nice person, and she's resilient, refusing to abandon her dream in the face of terrifying obstacles. What I like least is that she lacks the confidence to trust. Rather than risk her career, she becomes a liar, putting at risk her relationship with her husband.

Q: DO YOU HAVE OTHER BOOKS IN THE WORKS?

A: Yes. Two. Laura Nelson returns eight years later in a mystery suspense novel. The second will introduce a new set of characters. It's a thriller, tentatively called 'The Test'. A billionaire dies, distributing his estate to his heirs according to a 'moral value' test. The family implodes in dysfunctional behavior as a psychopath inserts himself into their midst.

A: WHO ARE YOUR FAVORITE AUTHORS?

A: I read constantly, but I keep works of these authors on my bedside table for inspiration: Margaret Mitchell, Michael Palmer, Wilber Smith, Michael Connelly, Harlan Coban, William Coughlin, Barbara Bradford Taylor, Frederick Forsyth, Warren Adler, Brad Metzler, Stephen White, Jonathon Kellerman, Susan Howatch, John D. MacDonald, Mary Higgins Clark, John Grisham, and Ward Larsen. I have many more, but no more space on the table.

Q: ANY ADVICE TO ASPIRING WRITERS

A: If I can do it, you can. In the words of Winston Churchill, "Don't give up!"

Q:WHAT'S THIS ABOUT A VINEYARD? IN NEW ZEALAND?

A: Bob and I fell in love with New Zealand and just had to have an excuse to keep going back. Our vineyard is located in the Marlborough Region (South Island), in the Awatere Valley about a hundred yards from the South Pacific. We grow sauvignon blanc and pinot noir grapes and sell them exclusively to Thornbury Wines, a subsidiary of Villa Maria Estate.

For more information about Patricia Gussin, the story behind the story, and updates on upcoming appearances, please visit www.patriciagussin.com

To arrange an interview or request an advance copy of Shadow of Death, please contact Maryglenn McCombs by phone – 615.297.9875, or by email – maryglenn@maryglenn.com