

Patricia Sargeant Interview Questions

Patricia, Welcome to The Bookstore! We're so happy you could join us!

Please tell us a bit about yourself, your family, background, etc.

Debbie, thank you so much for inviting me to chat with you and your readers. It's a pleasure to be here.

My family and I are very close. My parents have passed on, but they gifted me with three loving and lovable siblings. I grew up in New York City, but I attended The Ohio State University where I received a Bachelor of Arts degree in news editorial journalism. I met my husband the first day of my freshman year.

After several relocations – Connecticut, Texas, California – we returned to Columbus, Ohio. I left newspapers and magazines for corporate marketing, but I'm still a news junky.

For our readers unfamiliar with your work, please tell us what kind of books you write.

It would be my pleasure. I write romantic suspense – I call them Romances to Die For – featuring ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. The stories are character-driven.

How long have you been writing, and how did you get your start? I understand your sister played a big part in your love of writing.

You're correct. When I was in elementary school, reading wasn't my first priority. (smile) But my sister, who's a couple of years older than me, is a bookworm. She loved going to the library, and I enjoyed going with her. We'd borrow several books each visit. The difference was, she'd read hers, whereas I'd leave mine on the nightstand and return them untouched during the next library trip.

One day, she recommended I borrow *Black Hearts in Battersea* by Jane Aiken. I did – and put it on my nightstand. When it came time to return it, she asked if I'd read it. Well, I couldn't lie. (blushing) She gave me such a look of disappointment that I felt compelled to renew the book and actually read it. That's when I discovered the joy of reading.

Was becoming a romance author something you dreamed of or did it just evolve over time?

After reading *Black Hearts in Battersea*, I knew I wanted to be a published author. I wanted to write a story that would captivate readers like that story captivated me. But it wasn't until years later when my sister introduced me to Harlequins that I realized I wanted to write romances.

Is your family supportive of your writing career?

Yes, they are. I'm very lucky to have them.

In 2003, I almost gave up my dream of becoming a published author. There were changes at my day job that put a lot of pressure on me. I felt I couldn't keep up with work and personal commitments. One day, my youngest brother called to chat. I told him I was really stressed. Between work, family and personal commitments, something was going to have to give. I told him I was thinking of giving up my writing. I'll never, ever forget his response. In an appalled voice he said, "Don't give up your dream. Don't ever give up your dream. Even if you just write a little bit every day, don't give up your dream."

I followed his advice and, about a year later, I signed my first contract.

What drew you to write romantic suspense? Is this your favorite romance genre?

Oh, that's a great question, Debbie. I love romance, and I love suspense. Together, they're a powerful combination. Not unlike chocolate and peanut butter.

A well-written suspense keeps you in the story. At the heart of a good suspense is motivation. And what is the ultimate motivation? Love. Love of family, friends, country. Love makes you find the hero within you. That universal truth connects you to the characters and keeps you in their story.

Although I really do love romantic suspense, I also enjoy other genres – both fiction and nonfiction. I like mysteries and fantasies. I also enjoy history, current events and biographies.

*Your debut book, *You Belong to Me*, came out in November 2006 to wonderful reviews. Please tell us a bit about this book.*

I'd love to. *You Belong to Me* reunites a divorced couple in a race to unmask a serial killer.

The heroine is a science fiction author who's sold the movie rights to her book. Imagine her surprise when she realizes the production company is co-owned by her ex-husband. In addition, someone is trying to kill them to prevent the book from becoming a movie. Will the hero cave in to the killer's demands or will he accept the heroine's help to stop the killer?

*Your second book, *On Fire*, is due out in September 2007. Tell us about this book and its main characters. Is this book related in anyway to your first book, *You Belong to Me*, or are they both stand alone books?*

On Fire isn't related to *You Belong to Me*. It's actually the first book in what I'm calling my Fire trilogy.

On Fire takes place in Charleston, West Virginia. The hero is a fire investigator. The heroine is a newspaper reporter. The two start out as enemies but become allies when they realize the string of arsons they're investigating is related to a series of murders.

The theme for *On Fire* is trust. The hero was badly betrayed by the media in the past. Although he's physically attracted to the heroine, he instantly distrusts her because she's a reporter. But, to solve the case and win her love, he has to prove he trusts her.

What do you want people to remember most about your books? The characters, the plot or just the all around feeling of having read a fantastic book?

Oh, I really like this question. I would like people to fall in love with my characters. I would like people to see my characters as people they could empathize with dealing with personal fears they could relate to. (Hopefully, not stalkers, murders and political corruption; but rather challenges that, once resolved, will further their personal growth.)

For example, the theme of my debut novel, *You Belong to Me*, is family. How do you define family and what would you be willing to do for them? I think people can connect with that question.

I also think people can relate to *On Fire*'s theme, which is trust. I think it's a truth that, without trust, relationships fail. But to trust someone, you have to know her. You have to let go of prejudices and past experiences and realize that you're meeting this unique person at this unique time. Who is she and what will she mean to you?

Will you continue to write romantic suspense or would you like to eventually explore other genres of writing? I'm sure anything you try will be awesome!

Oh, thank you so much for those kind words, Debbie! They mean a lot to me.

I do have a mystery series I would very much like to sell. It has romantic and paranormal elements. The series takes place on a fictitious Caribbean island. The heroine is a nurse from the country. The hero is a detective from the city. In the first manuscript of the series, the two team up to confront a villain who appears to have supernatural powers.

I've also written the proposal for an epic fantasy trilogy that takes place in another galaxy. I love this series. It deals with politics, spirituality and prejudices. The theme is leadership. When do you lead? When do you follow, and what are you willing to sacrifice for the good of the people entrusted to you?

I'm very excited about all of these projects but, for now, I'm focusing on romantic suspense. I'm working on the proposals for the remaining stories in the *Fire* trilogy. Then I'm going to return to write the sequel for *You Belong to Me*.

What kind of writing style do you have? Do you plot and outline before starting to write or are you a more casual style writer?

I develop copious outlines. I tried jumping right into the story, but – oh, it was disastrous. I got panic attacks, not knowing where the story was going. I started outlining in self defense.

First, I chart my hero, heroine and villain's goals, motivations and conflicts. Then I create my list of 20 Things That Have To Happen In This Story. Then I write a scene-by-scene

chapter outline. Once I'm comfortable with the outline, I start the manuscript. These lists probably sound like overkill, but I find them very, very helpful.

Have your characters ever taken off in a direction that you didn't expect? If so, what did it do to your storyline?

This is a very interesting question. The only example that comes to mind is a secondary character in *You Belong to Me*. I'd planned to kill her, but she wouldn't die. That irritated me, but it didn't throw off the storyline much. After *You Belong to Me* was finally published – years later – I realized why she wouldn't die. She's the heroine in the sequel to *You Belong to Me*. It's funny how our subconscious works, isn't it?

Tell us about the research you do for your books. Approximately how long does it take you to do the research, and what kind of research materials do you like to use – reference books, online resources or perhaps personal interviews? Do you feel your contemporary settings require less research than a historical setting would?

Wowza! Great question. My assumption is historicals take a great deal more research than contemporaries. However, I do a lot of research for my books because I want my fictional characters and situations to be supported by a factual, this-could-really-happen framework. I subscribe to the theory that, if you want readers to suspend disbelief, build a world they could believe in.

For example, the film industry serves as the backdrop for *You Belong to Me*. To pull readers into the story, I had to create the environment for them. My research included terminology from the film industry as well as the components of pre-production, timeframes and finances.

In *On Fire*, the backdrop is a fire investigation. I wanted to put readers in the investigation. Again, I had to learn some industry terminology. I wanted my characters to sound like firefighters. I learned about protective gear, what happens during and after a fire, arson indicators, fire accelerants, investigative procedure. I researched basic statistics, too – the cost of fire damage, percentage of arsons solved, general profile and motivation of an arsonist.

My research is actually ongoing. Outlines help me identify the initial information I'll need. But often, while I'm writing, I'll think of other details that will help fill out a scene.

I use every form of research you've mentioned. I don't depend solely on the Internet because I can't verify the source's accuracy.

I'll start with the Internet to find resources. For example, I found the International Association of Arson Investigators by searching the Web. The organization put me in touch with its president, who very kindly answered tons of questions and told me of research manuals that could also help. I borrowed reference books and videos from the library. I also interviewed a local firefighter.

Actually, based on my research, I had to rework several scenes in the first third of On Fire's first draft. This really hurt. (smile) But it also made the story much stronger.

Do you have a favorite place or time to write? Do you try to keep to a specific writing schedule and strive for a certain amount of work per day?

Since I have a day job, during the week, my goal is to write for two to three hours each night. On the weekend, my goal is three to four hours each day. I try to keep to that schedule, but sometimes things come up. I've learned not to beat myself up as long as I've written *something* that day.

My favorite place to write is my family room, that way I can spend the evening near my husband. If he's watching TV, I'll put earplugs in and just sit near him. If I get into a writing zone, he'll sleep on the sofa until I'm ready for bed.

How long does it take you to write a book? Does this include revisions and edits?

From outlining and research to writing and revision, it takes me about nine months to complete a manuscript. I still worry about how long it takes me to write, but I try to remember every writer has her own pace. I shouldn't compare myself to other authors who write much, much, much faster than I do. (smile)

Now that you are a published writer, has anything been different than you expected? The fans, the promo work, anything? Is it better or worse than you expected?

The promo is worse than I expected. (smile) It's time consuming, expensive and bewildering. You take the time and spend the money on the promotion, and you're still left wondering if your marketing strategy is correct. Are you doing enough? Too much? Too little? Are you using the right tools to reach your audience? Who is your audience?

I spoke to a couple of editors at my publishing company about promotion and they said, as a new author, I should concentrate my time and efforts in writing the best book I possibly can. A good book is your best marketing tool. So when I miss an advertising opportunity or determine I don't have money for promotion at the time, I remind myself that my priority is writing the best book I possibly can – and hope everything else falls into place.

Since I love to write, that advice is music to my ears. (smile)

What one piece of advice would you give to a beginning writer?

Find and develop your writing voice. A strong, unique writing voice is so important. You may have a great story, but you must make it unique to you, otherwise it won't resonate with an agent or editor – or a reader.

Case in point, there are a lot of damsel-in-distress-type stories out there. Still, they keep selling. Why? Because the author has told the damsel-in-distress story in a voice that is uniquely her own.

I'll give you examples. Take L.A. Banks's Vampire Huntress series and Christine Feehan's Dark series. When you strip these books down, they're both vampire series, correct? However, you can't imagine L.A. Banks writing the Dark series and you can't imagine Christine Feehan writing the Vampire Huntress series, can you? That's because both series are unique to their authors. It's their voices.

Here's an example from a different industry: Patti LaBelle and Celine Dion both sang "If You Ask Me To." Same music. Same verses. Very, very different renditions. Why? It's their voices, their treatments of the song.

Turn off your inner editor and write your story your way. Worry about polishing your writing later. Reach inside yourself and find your voice.

Patricia, thanks so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to chat with us. We have really enjoyed it!

Debbie, it was truly a pleasure for me. You ask great questions. Thank you for your time and trouble. I look forward to seeing you again at your annual book signing event, and to meeting your friends and readers. Best!

Come visit Patricia Sargeant at our Oct. 13, 2007, Kentucky Romance Authors annual mega author book signing hosted by our store. You won't want to miss this fantastic author!