

Sassy, Smart, and Sexy

© 2006, TJ Bennett

This March, for the first time in its twenty-year history, LARA had the distinction of having two RWA® nominated finalists, one for the RITA, and one for the Golden Heart. Jane Thompson received a RITA nomination in the “Best Novella” category for her women’s erotica novella, “Simon Says” (*Secrets Volume 15*), while Trish Cerrone received a Golden Heart nomination in the “Best Novel with Strong Romantic Elements” category for her chick-lit women’s fiction novel *A Virgin in L.A.* As such, I decided to talk to both of our nominees and get the scoop on their creative process and their ideas of women’s sexuality in romantic fiction.



Jane Thompson
RITA Finalist 2006

*TJB: Ladies, though your books are very different, I think it’s no coincidence that you were both nominated for RWA®’s top awards. The trend in romance is towards women who stand up for themselves, and your heroines, Riley O’Connor from *Virgin*, and Georgia Kennedy from “Simon Says” do just that. There is a “chick-lit” feel to both of the books, but these women are concerned about the deeper truths of life rather than just sex, shoes, and shopping. If you would, give us a short premise of your stories.*

Jane: Simon Campbell is a newspaper columnist who makes his living pandering to the adolescent fantasies of American men. Georgina Kennedy is a respectable librarian with a holier-than-thou attitude towards Simon’s lifestyle. On the surface, these two have nothing in common, but you should never judge a book by its cover.

Trish: [*A Virgin in L.A.*] is a female journey story about the cost of being true to yourself, even if it means losing everything in your life that you’ve worked to create. (But it’s funny. Really.) Self-proclaimed slutty virgin, Riley O’Conner, is determined to clean up her act and the city she lives in, but for a woman who craves acceptance, coming out of the closet as an over-thirty virgin in a city that values everything but virginity doesn’t hold a lot of charm. To make matters worse, she has been rejected by every guy who found out she was a virgin, so telling the truth doesn’t seem like a fast track to true love.



Patricia "Trish" Cerrone
Golden Heart Finalist 2006

TJB: In each of your stories, the heroine is sassy, smart, and sexy. What inspires you when you write your heroine’s dialogue/internal monologue?

Jane: The women in my family, smart-mouths all.

Trish: Uh...not sure. Usually, I just lift up my palms and say, “So whaddya got today?” Then I listen and type. What I consciously do try to do is put the characters in difficult situations, then try to imagine what they would do—either alone, or if interacting with another character. It’s both mysterious and logical to me.

TJB: Witty humor is hard to pull off, yet you two do it beautifully. In that sense, do you think your heroines are a lot like you, or exactly opposite, or somewhere in between?

cont. on
pg 16

Jane: My heroine says everything I never have the nerve to say.

Trish: My heroines are much funnier than I am—at least the funny ones. The strong ones are stronger than I am. The kind ones are much kinder than I am. They are all much bigger and better in general. I desperately hope that all of them are much more flawed than I am, but no guarantees there.

TJB: *How do you go about creating such multilayered, complex characterizations? Where do you begin?*

Jane: What shoes does she wear? What does her key ring look like? What's under the sink in her bathroom? Things like these are where I find my characters.

Trish: You are just full of compliments! All right, I'm thinking...Okay, got it. (I'm just not sure I can explain it.) First, when characters show up, they are already multilayered and complex, I just have to figure out why they are that way, and then try to explain it, too—so really, I don't create so much as chip away or peel. Second, no matter how much my characters know, either consciously or unconsciously, it doesn't usually help them to make the right decision the first time. What they want and what they need are not always the same, so they are naturally conflicted about the next course of action....Perhaps inspiration is actually a process of planting seeds in your brain from a variety of different sources until suddenly you

get the tap on the shoulder, and there stands your character.

TJB: *Your heroines challenge society's view of what women are "supposed" to be like: yours, Jane, when she reveals to the hero that she is a librarian who writes erotic romance, and yours, Trish, when she reveals to her sexually active friends that she's still a virgin at thirty-plus. Do either of you think people have a tendency to put women in a "box" when it comes to our sexuality, and what we should or shouldn't be doing with it? If so, in what way?*

Jane: I honestly don't know but that's an excellent question.

Trish: Well, I'm not sure if men have done it, or the media, or women, or what. I think we need to take responsibility for our actions and who we are, so in that respect I think many women have put themselves in boxes. It feels sometimes that women have lost their balance and become sex-centric in terms of how they dress, how they use their feminine power, how they negotiate their place in the world and in relationships. Our sexuality should be part of a larger whole, not the dictator. We have a feminine power that comes from a source other than our ability to attract men, and if women forget how to exercise it, I think we are going to see generations of women who are simply slaves...

We haven't come out of the box with a better way to express ourselves or our creativity or our humanity. On the "up" side, I think we can step out of the box any time we choose to, and that there are amazing opportunities and expe-

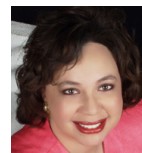
riences waiting for us when we do. In particular, I think in the publishing world you will find an unusually high number of women who have sent their boxes to the recycle bin. (Yep. Didn't want to end that on a bum note.)

TJB: *Finally, one last question. If you could share one piece of advice with other women writers, what would it be?*

Jane: You have something to say? Say it.

Trish: Write. Keep writing. Write some more. Repeat. (I'm sure someone else has said that already, but it's worth repeating.) Write. Keep writing. Write some more. Repeat.

TJB: *Thanks for your time, ladies, and your very thoughtful responses. Good luck in July at the RWA® awards ceremonies in Atlanta. We'll be rooting for you!*



PRO writer TJ Bennett, finalist in the 2005 Golden Heart Paranormal category.

