

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH HEATHER GRAHAM

By CJ Lyons

ITW member Heather Graham has over 100 books published and has been honored with the Romance Writers of America Lifetime Achievement Award. Recently Heather received a new honor, ITW's Sliver Bullet, recognizing outstanding contributions toward the pursuit of literacy.

Heather is slated to be a Spotlight Guest at ThrillerFest in July. Here's a sneak peak of what you can expect from this New York Times bestselling author of romance, suspense, and paranormal thrillers.

CJ: Please give us a brief background on how you first broke into writing and became published.

Heather: I majored in theater, which meant that I got out of college, did dinner theater, and to survive dinner theater, I was a waitress, tap-dancing waitress, bartender, back-up singer . . . and when Derek, my third child, was born, I really couldn't afford to go to work in order to go to work anymore! So I stayed home.

I was a disaster at home. I still am. Writing for me always has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

I'd actually had a journalism scholarship when I'd started out at school, but I knew I wanted to do fiction. I was in love with Hammer films, Edgar Allan Poe, and then, on the other side, *Gone With the Wind*. I started sending off to *Black Cat*, *Twilight Zone*, and others.

My first sale was a horror story, but after a few years of sending off totally in the dark, I sold to Dell. I seriously knew nothing. I didn't know there were categories. I thought the book would be out in a month or two. I now know that for that to happen, you have to A. sleep with the president, B. run for the office of president, C. be a rock star or football hero, D. commit a heinous crime that shatters not just our country but the world.

I have continued to love everything—seriously, everything, fiction of all kinds, non-fiction—and so I'm grateful to be doing some of everything.

CJ: You are one of the most prolific authors in the field. How many releases will you have in 2007 and which genres will they be in?

Heather: In 2007, I'll have out the pp reissue of THE ISLAND, as well as THE DEAD ROOM, BLOOD RED, THE SEANCE, THE LAST NOEL, and as Shannon Drake, THE QUEEN'S LADY.

THE LAST NOEL is about a family snowbound with killers at Christmas. THE SEANCE and THE DEAD ROOM feature ghosts, and BLOOD RED is, as one might guess, vampire.

My mother came from Dublin with a slew of great non-fiction on Ireland, and she was also a huge fan of gothic novels. I'm glad to keep going in the historical venue, although it seems that, as I write this, the paranormal is what has taken hold. There's nothing like a straight suspense, and I admit to being into the whole ghost/vamp/erie trend as well. I'm grateful to do what I do.

My dad was Scottish, from Stirling, and I love their history, too, so THE QUEEN'S LADY is based on the life of Mary of Scotland.

Oh, and I'm very excited to have a story for young readers out this year. It's with Scholastic. It's out in September, in 666 YEAR OF THE BEAST, and my story is called, "If You Knew Susie."

CJ: You write under your own name and the penname of Shannon Drake. Why did you decide to use a penname? After so many books, do you still keep each as a separate brand? Or are they beginning to overlap somewhat?

Heather: Pseudonyms are wonderful when used to advantage. Sadly, I never did this, though I'm hoping to straighten it out now.

Years ago, when category novels were at their height, the houses were territorial when it came to names. A different house bought a book that my main house hadn't been interested in reading. The editor told me I had about two minutes to make the deep decision regarding my new name. Sons Shayne and Derek walked into the room, and there was Shannon Drake. Shannon Drake is just historical now. She used to be vampires, too.

Pseudonyms are best used for different styles of writing. Say, straight hard-core suspense for one name, comedy, perhaps for another. A clear line so that readers are not confused and angered if they buy a book and expect a different kind of story.

CJ: What do you feel your main promise to your readers is as Heather Graham? As Shannon Drake? Do you think your fans differentiate between the two?

Heather: I think that now, Shannon Drake readers will—or will come to—expect an historical story, and, hopefully, Heather Graham readers will know that it will be occult or suspense or both, but . . . contemporary. And thrilling. (Couldn't resist.)

CJ: How on earth do you juggle writing, research, family, marketing and the rest of life? Can you give us a glimpse of a typical day in your life?

Heather: I wish I had good advice for juggling life in general. We all have other jobs, families, commitments, and then writing. But I try to think in priorities in general first, as in family and deadlines. Then, and I'm sure we all do this do, I worry about the immediate and do a lot of back-burner-ing. I'm a disaster. Home-wise. We've been moving now to a house less than a mile away for almost thirteen years.

There is no such thing as a typical day. I travel frequently, more every year, because we have more initials every year . . . BEA, RT, FRW . . . all kinds of places. And last year, both my nephew and my son were married, one in the Keys, one in a castle, so it was very busy, but incredibly cool to actually get to walk my nephew down the aisle and then watch my son get married in his Graham kilt--with the tarantella playing for the Italian relatives, an Irish jig to dance to, and all kinds of vodka flowing for my Ukrainian daughter-in-law. Very happy year, but busy!

Now, with five children, I have one year left with the youngest at home, and so I try to be there for her--and, of course, we all know, our children are all ours for life, so we are involved with them, their hopes, their dreams, their problems, their celebrations, forever.

I write anywhere, anytime. I thank God for laptops. I am a creature of when and what. Given a deadline, I will make it, no matter what else is going on. I like mornings--but I've gotten up at six AM for more years than I care to say, so it's natural. But on deadline, I notice that one and two AM may be looking just as fine!

For writers starting out – whatever your schedule, stick to it. A day a week, an hour a day, whatever. Make your commitment, and stick to it. There will be occasions when you are thrown off. Get back on. Do it. If you don't do it, it won't happen. That simple.

I know doctors, lawyers, housewives, business moguls, clerks, dog-trainers, and so on, people with high school degrees and people with several PhDs who have made it. What they shared was a love of reading, and determination. Oh, and a story to tell, and the burning desire to tell it.

CJ: What do you find is the most rewarding part of your career? Any particularly memorable fan comments or meetings? Awards or honors?

Heather: It's a tremendous reward to be in the field. I'm not being Mary Poppins here, I'm just a realist. To go to great places, know other great folks.

It was a real reward to get to meet tons of the authors I had read. One of our members influenced me tremendously—I was in love with his work more than a decade before I was able to meet him. I was shaking. Don't want to say who, because I'm afraid he'll think I was a stalker. Turns out, of course, that he's great, down to earth . . . and I admire him all the more.

Getting to do the Vampire party at Romantic Times each year, our New Orleans workshop and dinner theater, and being a Thriller Killerette are amazing rewards as well. My fellow Killerettes, Harley Jane Kozak and Alex Sokoloff, became instant best friends. It was as if we had known one another for ages, and really neat. My thanks here to our fearless leader, Bob Levinson, and the rest of the pack. They are all phenomenal. ITW has introduced me to many people with talents that go far beyond the field, such as MJ Rose, promo, Gayle and David and so many others—sheer sight and organizational skills and so much more.

I've been lucky enough to get rewards from Waldens, B. Dalton's, RT, and to have been a recipient of RWA's Lifetime Achievement Award.. My daughter, Chynna, was a bit younger when I got it. She was the first one I told. Her reaction—"But you're not dead yet!"—was great. Kids are amazing. They will always keep you real.

CJ: What is your next big challenge? At your level of success, do you still have concrete goals or dreams about what you'd like to accomplish with your writing? Could you share them with us, and why they're important to you.

Heather: I consider it a challenge just to stay on the shelves. It's an ever-changing, fickle world. I hope to keep pleasing readers, and, of course, acquire new readers. Who doesn't hope to do well on lists? I have far to go!

I don't really want to retire, so I pray I just keep thinking of things, and that I think of things that will fit in with the world, my own desires of what to write, and what readers will want as well.

CJ: What one thing do you think would most surprise your readers to know about you?

Heather: I'm not terribly sure anything about me would surprise anyone. I'm an open book. Kids and cats and dogs. Water, scuba, ballroom, and music, theater. I love it when I can just hop down to the Keys for a day or two. Diving is like a drug to me, makes the world wonderful!

Oh, maybe the skunk. She's an albino, cute little pink eyes. Really a great pet.

CJ: Thanks, Heather! We're all looking forward to seeing you in person at ThrillerFest!

Award-winning medical suspense author **CJ Lyons** is a physician trained in Pediatric Emergency Medicine. She has assisted police and prosecutors with cases involving child abuse, rape, homicide and Munchausen by Proxy and has worked in numerous trauma centers, as a crisis counselor, victim's advocate, as well as a flight physician for Life Flight. Her medical suspense series will debut from Berkley in 2008. Contact her at <http://www.cjlyons.net>