

ADVENTURES IN RESEARCH: an Interview with Lisa Gardner

New York Times Bestseller Lisa Gardner, is scheduled to be a Spotlight Guest of Honor at ITW's ThrillerFest in July. Lisa is known for her meticulous research and volunteered some of her best Adventures in Research during an interview with CJ Lyons.

CJ: What was the most memorable research trip you've made?

Lisa: The first time I visited the FBI Academy, researching my thriller, *The Next Accident*. It's one of the only places where you can be admiring the lush woods or the sight of a creeping fox, with mortar fire hammering relentlessly in the background. The grounds are gorgeous, the dorm rooms plain Jane (and orange; I don't know why, but New Agents get to start out living in rooms all sorts of shades of orange.).

CJ: Please share with us the most interesting stories law enforcement or forensic professionals have told you.

Lisa: I worked with the Rhode Island State Police on my fifth novel, *The Survivors Club*. One of the officers, Major Michael Quinn, had been the lead detective in a fairly notorious case, where an entire family disappeared from their home in wealthy Barrington.

The police discovered traces of blood, as well as holes in the cement floor of the garage consistent with a high-velocity weapon. With no bodies, however, they couldn't pursue charges, even though they were convinced the husband's business partner, Christopher Hightower, had executed the whole family, including the eight-year old daughter. At the eleventh hour, a tropic storm uncovered the mass grave, and the bodies were discovered by a woman walking her dog.

For all of his brilliance, Hightower had left a ripped corner of a lime bag in the grave, which police were able to match with the edges of the torn bag later recovered from Hightower's car. Hightower was eventually convicted of killing the family with a cross-bow in a trial that was as dramatic as the search for the bodies had been.

By the time Major Quinn related the story to me, a decade had nearly passed. And yet, the major still grew choked up, remembering the excavation of the grave, discovering first Ernest Brendel, then his wife Alice, then their young daughter Emily. It's not a cliché to say that some cases hit close to home. Most of the officers who worked the Hightower case can probably tell you exactly where they were when they heard the news the bodies had finally been discovered. And exactly how they felt to realize that little Emily wouldn't be coming home alive.

CJ: The grossest fact you've woven a story around?

Lisa: Wet mummification. Used it in my current release *Hide*, after an in-depth discussion with a forensic anthropologist on just what happens when you seal a corpse in a water-tight plastic bag. Ewww....

CJ: Are there any stories that made you cry when you heard it, hit you so powerfully that you just had to use them in your fiction?

Lisa: Kip Kinkel's school-shooting rampage in Springfield, Oregon. My family lives in Oregon and many are teachers, so that case struck a nerve. I ended up working with an expert in mass murders to better understand what factors drive children to violence and better yet, what we can do to help prevent future incidents.

Sadly, halfway through the writing process, Columbine happened. That sent me into such a tailspin, I wasn't sure I'd finish the book. But I decided it was more important than ever to explore the phenomena of mass shootings and what we can do. The end result was *The Third Victim*, a novel that sadly, remains as relevant today as it did nearly ten years ago.

CJ: Who is the most interesting professional you've met during the course of research?

Lisa: A former attending nurse at an insane asylum! My current release, *Hide*, opens with the discovery of a mass grave at an abandoned mental institute. For several of the scenes, I had to portray life in a mental institute in the fifties and sixties. Fortunately for me, a friend had a friend who used to work at the hospital in question and arranged for us to do lunch.

I ended up spending four hours being regaled by story after story of tactics patients used to attack attending nurses and the strategies nurses used to survive. As they say, the truth is stranger than fiction!

CJ: Any fun facts you've learned that have come in handy during your real life?

Lisa: I once read how to stop a runaway camel (steer it into a tight circle). It hasn't come in handy just yet, but I'm optimistic.

CJ: The funniest story you've heard during the course of research?

Lisa: Sorry, as a younger female interviewing predominantly male detectives, I don't get told the funny stories. Mostly, I'm showered with in-depth explanations of the grossest cases ever worked, accompanied by photos of the aforementioned severed body parts. Gallows humor is definitely a job requirement.

CJ: Anything that changed your real life or that made you write a story you never thought possible for you to write?

Lisa: My young daughter developed a passion for spiders last year. And not daddy long legs, which maybe I could understand. No, she likes the big, fat hairy tarantulas. Ended

up decorating our front porch with over a hundred spiders, not to mention all the books she checked out from the library on the subject.

At a certain point, I realized this had the makings of a book idea. So I just wrapped up my latest project, *Say Goodbye*, which features a tarantula named Henrietta as a major character. Have to say, never saw that one coming.

CJ: Thanks, Lisa, for sharing your favorite adventures in research! Can't wait to hear more stories during your interview as a Spotlight Guest at ITW's ThrillerFest in July!

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>