

Margie Lawson's Author Interview with CJ Lyons:

Margie: How many years have you been writing? How long did it take before you nailed a contract?

CJ: Telling stories all my life—lots of time spent in time-out because of them, but that also gave me more time to make up new stories, so I'm not sure if it had the effect my parents were looking for!

I've been writing those stories down ever since I could read and write—age 4. Before that it was making up dramatic (or melodramatic!) plays using my mom's hair curlers as finger puppets.

Once I decided that I might want a second career and hey, this writing addiction wasn't curing itself, it was a few years of submitting to the wrong agents/editors (I thought I was writing mysteries at first), getting wonderful 2-3 page rejection letters, and wondering what I was doing wrong.

Then published friends sat me down and said: you're not writing mysteries. Your books aren't about whodidit, they're about people, relationships....and you write a helluva sex scene. You should join RWA.

I joined RWA in the fall when I submitted my Golden Heart entry. A few months later I got the call that book had finaled in the Romantic Suspense category and a few months after that I got The Call and sold for the first time....so once I targeted the right audience, things moved pretty fast.

Margie: How do you structure your writing day – or do you wait until your muse whispers in your ear?

CJ: Neither. When I still worked full time as a pediatrician, taking overnight and weekend call, 12-14 hour days in flu season, etc, I could only write on my days off. So I became a blitz writer, fermenting story ideas in my head during work days and sitting down and writing 20-40 pages on a day off.

Now that I'm a full time writer, I rebel against a set routine---too many decades of having to be at the hospital early in the morning and everyone enforcing their needs on my schedule, I guess. I don't write everyday, don't have a schedule or page count.

Instead, I have the characters in my head and I try to honor their story by devoting quality time and energy to telling it. I don't wait for inspiration to strike—I actively cultivate it by doing a lot of thinking about my characters and their stories, so that when I sit down to write it's productive. I don't keep track of word counts, but usually on my writing days I can do 2-3 scenes (not always consecutive—I tend to write the emotional highpoints and fill in the rest later)

As Margie can attest, somehow this chaos produces a lot of volume—I write fast and can finish a 100,000 word ms with room to spare on my deadlines. A good thing, because most of my work comes in the revision rather than the more fun rough draft.

Margie: Have you experienced times (weeks, months, years) when you struggled with writing? If so, was it before you were published, after, or both? Do you know what contributed to those difficult times? How did you overcome those psychological hurdles?

CJ: YES!!!! Of course! But the times I hit a dry spot weren't the times you'd expect. For me, the most busy, hectic, stressful, chaotic, impossible times of my life—first year college, medical school, internship, etc—have been some of the most productive times in my life!

Writing is my solace, my way to cope, my retreat from the real world. Any wonder that during my first year in college I wrote a YA fantasy, during medical school came a Science Fiction novel, or that after the murder of one of my fellow interns I turned to crime fiction?

None of these were written with the purpose of publication—they were to help me deal with life.

The times I hit dry spots are the times when the rest of my world is uninspiring—this was one of the ways I knew I needed to consider a second career and was facing burnout after 17 years of practicing medicine. I went for months without writing—unprecedented!

It wasn't that I didn't want to write or couldn't write, I had tons of fretful starts that went nowhere during those months, it was that everything I did write was suddenly awful, tasting of ashes, without music or delight.

Finally, I looked around my life and realized it wasn't that I had suddenly lost my ability to write but it was the rest of my life that wasn't working out and needed fixed.

It took a lot of courage to make the changes I needed in my life, but it was well worth it!!!

Margie: A high percentage of writers in this class identified procrastination, perfectionism, time management, and self-doubt as their top self-defeating behaviors. Which self-defeating behaviors plague you? Feel free to expand that list. ;-)))

CJ: None of the above except the occasional self-doubt---I know when a story works for me, so it's not doubt in my ability to write a good story, but now that I'm published I need to divorce myself from the process and concentrate on writing a story that works for my audience. This is much harder!!! Finding excellent first readers has been my salvation here, as well as being selfish when I write my first draft.

That first draft is just for me, me, me!!!! Probably why it pretty much writes itself—I'm telling myself the story I want to tell and since I'm a seats of the pants writer, I'm discovering my characters and plot at the same time. Such fun!

Then the hard part is revision that comes with the second draft. I've taken to calling it re-visioning for the reader.

This is where I need to divorce myself, think of the book as a marketable product, and knuckle down and slice and dice to make it a rewarding experience for the reader who's paying their hard-earned money for it! Yeah, self-doubt often comes into play here <g>

My other SDB is that I'm a juggler—I get bored easily, so I take on several projects at once. In fact, right now, I'm under deadlines for book 2 of the Berkley series, a short story featuring the same characters from the series, a non-fiction article, several guest blogs and feature interviews, starting a standalone novel, and working on a non-fiction book proposal I'm partnering with a friend on—and those are just the writing projects!

Good thing my medical training has left me with both a taste for chaos and the ability to prioritize it (my agent laughs because I call this "triage"), so everything gets done on time. But it would be oh-so-easy to get distracted and/or overwhelmed, so I try to keep a watch on it—and have learned to say "no", well, kinda, sorta <g>

Margie: Any recommendations for these writers who are working hard to defeat their self-defeating behaviors?

CJ: This is going to sound too Zen/touchy-feely/mystic mumbo-jumbo and I know it goes counter to some of what Margie covers in class, but my advice is.....stop.

Stop beating yourself up. Relax. Life is meant to be fun, and if you're not enjoying the writing process, well, maybe writing isn't for you. At least not right here, right now....

I think it's vital to know why you write—if submitting to agents and editors and trying to get published is sucking all the joy out of something you once loved, then hey, stop submitting, stop trying to get published. Just because someone else says "writers must try to get published" you don't need to buy into that.

Maybe right here, right now, writing is serving another purpose for you and you're denying its wonderful benefits, the healing power, the chance to explore ideas, because you've joined the publication rat-race and turned it into a competition.

You know the she finished 50,000 words in a month and I only did 7,000; he got a major publication deal and all I got were rejections; her book came out in hardcover, mine is only mass-market; he got a three book deal, I only got a one.....it never ends!

Ask yourself: why? Why do I take time and energy away from my friends and family to write? What do I get out of it?

Listen to your answers and follow your own path.....it will twist and turn and change over time, but you'll be so much happier. And honestly, you'll be a better writer for it.

It takes a lot of guts to dare to be a writer—to share your innermost fantasies, the world you created, with anyone whether it's an audience of only yourself, your friends, or the

whole world! Give yourself credit for following your dream and don't beat yourself up if your dream is different than those around you.

It takes hard work to make a dream come true—don't make it harder by sabotaging yourself.....oh, wait, maybe this does fit with what Margie teaches after all!!!

About CJ:

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 several trauma centers, on the Navajo reservation, as a crisis counselor, victim's advocate, as well as a flight physician for Life Flight. She is a member of MWA, International Thriller Writers, RWA, and Sisters in Crime. Her writing has appeared in Romantic Times BookReviews, CrimeSpree and Spinetingler.

Look for her debut novel, *LIFELINES*, coming from Berkley in March, 2008. Publisher's Weekly called *LIFELINES* a "spot-on debut....a breathtakingly fast-paced medical thriller." Contact CJ at <http://www.cjlyons.net>