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*Dedicated to providing support,
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of novel length fiction*

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INTERVIEW WITH CJ LYONS

by Jeff Shelby

CJ Lyons is the Kickoff Speaker for the 2007 RMFW Colorado Gold Conference.

She was a finalist for RWA's prestigious Golden Heart and winner of the Golden Gateway award. Her debut medical suspense novel, *LIFELINES*, hits shelves next year. She was kind enough to answer a few questions about both her background in medicine and her writing.

JS: Your background is in pediatric emergency medicine. Can you explain exactly what that is and what drew you to that as a career?

CJ: I trained in pediatrics at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh but decided that I wanted to work with children in the ER, so I went on and did more training in Pediatric Emergency Medicine. Lots of people wonder why anyone would choose to work with critically injured and ill kids, victims of abuse and sexual assault, and all the other craziness that comes with life in the ER. People who come to the ER are usually aren't there by choice but because it's a last resort. I was drawn to emergency medicine for a variety of reasons, but it basically boils down to a desire to protect and serve, in my

own way. A chance to make a difference, to change the world—which is also a driving force in my writing. Of course the chance to fly around in helicopters was a definite added bonus!

JS: When and why did you start writing?

CJ: True confession time. I'm a writing addict—I've been making up stories ever since I was a kid, using my mom's hair curlers as finger puppets to act them out until I learned to read and write. Being able to escape into a fictional world anytime I want, what could be more addicting than that?

After a close friend was murdered during my internship, sheer escapism gave away to more serious and darker-edged themes as I struggled to comprehend the violence that had entered my life, my writing saved me, helped me through those dark times.

JS: You nabbed an award from RWA, but your debut novel, *LIFELINES*, is billed as a medical suspense thriller. Can you tell us a little bit about your experience in both genres?

CJ: My work is cross genre. It's not traditional romance, as there are never any happily-ever-afters guaranteed for my characters—hence, my tag line of: *No One is Immune to Danger*.

LIFELINES also is not traditional mystery. The emphasis isn't on "whodunit" but rather on the relationships of the people affected by the crimes at the center of each book. I also cross into women's fiction with

strong women characters struggling to juggle careers, relationships, and "real life." Hmm...guess that makes my novels women's fiction/medical suspense/thrillers with romantic elements. I just call them Thrillers with Heart.

JS: LIFELINES comes out next year from Berkley. Tell us how the deal came about.

CJ: I seem to be starting my publishing career by breaking all the rules. Anyone who knows me would tell you that's no surprise—I'm not very good at following rules. Anyway, instead of the traditional query-submit-request-negotiate process, Berkley actually came to me. They had read one of my manuscripts and it wasn't quite right for them.

But--and here's where karma, kismet, the alignment of the stars all come into play—Berkley was searching for an author to create a new series for them, the premise being Grey's Anatomy meets ER. They enjoyed my voice, liked the fact that I had the medical background to bring a real-life edge to the project, and after a brainstorming session over the phone, we had a deal. I'm still pinching myself to see if it's real.

JS: How did your medical training benefit you in the writing process? Did it hinder you in any way?

CJ: My medical background helped me because it has exposed me to a world where ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary feats of heroism everyday. It's also shown me exactly how foolish and self-destructive people can be. To the point where I've had to tone

down some characters and incidents based in reality because truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

Knowing the realities also makes writing medical scenes more difficult. So much of what people see on TV and in the movies is far-removed from real life in the ER, so I had the challenge of meeting audience expectations ingrained from years of fictionalized medicine, but also wanting to keep it real. And entertaining. To accomplish this, I compressed the sequence of some medical events (which, if played out in real time would be boring) and found ways to increase the tension and conflict so that readers could follow the medicine while developing an emotional connection to the characters.

JS: LIFELINES is the first of a series. Did you plan for it to be a series from the outset?

CJ: Berkley's original idea of ER meets Grey's Anatomy meant an ensemble cast of characters. In response, I created Angels of Mercy Medical Center where the drama centers on the lives and loves of the women who work there. It was planned as a series from the outset. Several on-going subplots will provide continuity throughout the novels, although each book will stand alone. Each of the main characters has a secret that will be unearthed and each will face her greatest fear during the course of the series. Don't ask me for too many details, though, because I'm a seat of the pants writer and I just don't know until I start writing.

JS: What are the challenges in writing a series for you?

CJ: Since I tend to only have the vaguest idea about a book before I start writing, the biggest challenge is not having the plot details outlined several books ahead of time like most series authors do. Instead, what I focus on is knowing my characters so well that I can "feel" where their story is going and sprinkle little details about them throughout the novels so that when their turn comes to take center stage, it will all (hopefully!) fall into place. This is what is known as the "jumping off a cliff without a parachute" school of writing. I do not recommend it for the weak of heart!

JS: What's the most enjoyable part of writing for you?

CJ: The best part of the day to day job of writing is getting to know my characters. I love it when that magical light bulb clicks on and I suddenly understand what makes them tick and why they do what they do, how it influences their actions now, and where they're headed in the future. For me, this usually isn't specifics, like what color dress a character wore at her prom, but more about their fears and aspirations, who influenced their lives and how, what they hope and dream and why.

The best part of writing as a career is the wonderful people. The writing community is one of the most generous and gracious groups I've ever been privileged to work with.

JS: What part of writing do you as a novelist most struggle with? How do you conquer that?

CJ: Plotting and pacing. With plots, I tend to go to extremes, push my characters to their limits and beyond. Often this is good, but sometimes there are gaps in logic that I need to slow down and fill in for the reader. To deal with this, I am very selfish with my first draft. It's all for me—I give myself permission to write pure crap, just to get the story and my characters on the page and let them do what they want, come alive for me.

The hard part comes with the second draft. This is where writing segues from fun to work. Hard work. I have to divorce myself and focus on what readers want and how to entertain them, give them their money's worth. With this draft (which often takes longer to write than the first one), I cut all my pearls of prose, trim, trim, trim, fill in plot holes, focus on structure and pacing, and delete any scenes that aren't advancing the plot. I'm ruthless—and this is all before receiving any revision requests from my agent or editor. They tend to be even more ruthless than I am, thank goodness.

I love the way my agent and editor push me and show me new possibilities. They are both perfectionists and have a much better eye for logic than I do, so it's a pleasure taking revision notes from them. With their help, writing the third draft actually becomes fun again!

JS: If a genie walked into your house right now, what would you wish for? (And what does the genie look like?)

CJ: The genie would be Patrick Dempsey—those twinkling eyes, that melodious voice, the dimples...oh

yeah, and he has Shonda Rhimes' ear!! He could slip her a copy of my book. What would I wish for? That's much harder. I've been so blessed and lucky with both my medical career and with my writing. I guess the thing I dream of most is the same thing many writers dream of: to be able to write in a way that not only entertains but also inspires readers to make a difference. After all, the whole reason I began to write was a desire to change the world. Come to think of it, that's also the same reason I went into medicine.

Hopefully with my writing I'll be able to reach even more people. I can't imagine a greater joy than hearing that my work has somehow influenced someone's life in a positive way. No matter what happens, at the very least, I'm having a whole lot of fun along the way!

You can learn more about C.J. at her website www.cjlyons.net.

Jeff Shelby's latest novel, *Wicked Break*, arrives in paperback this month.