

Michele Martinez Unveiled

By Dorinda Ohnstad

Like Melanie Vargas, the main character in her crime/suspense novels, Michele Martinez served as a federal prosecutor in New York City. After leaving a prestigious Manhattan law firm, she spent eight years prosecuting narcotics cases as an Assistant United States Attorney in the Eastern District of New York, which covers some of the most drug- and gang-infested areas of Brooklyn and Queens.

Michele's tenacity in life is mirrored in her writing career. She brings to life the same types of vivid characters and intense situations she lived through as a prosecutor, along with pouring her other life experiences into her writing. The Melanie Vargas thrillers reflect Michele's unique background – from humble beginnings to the halls of the Ivy League, from the mean streets of Brooklyn to the glamorous environs of Manhattan's wealthiest neighborhoods, from working late to changing diapers. With plenty of sex and violence thrown in for good measure.

She hopes you'll have a blast reading her books from her debut thriller *Most Wanted* to its sequels, *The Finishing School* and *Cover-Up* (March 2007). *The Finishing School* has been nominated by Romantic Times Magazine as one of the Best Mystery & Suspense Novels of 2006 in the category of "Best P.I./Procedural". This nomination elevates Michele's writing to where it belongs—amongst the best.

Cover-Up will be in bookstores this month and has already received a much-coveted "starred review" by Publishers Weekly, the "bible" of the publishing industry. I have already reserved my copy. Can't wait to see what's in store next for Melanie Vargas. Whatever it is, I know that I'll be in for a ride of a read.

Q: When did you begin the process of writing your first book? How long did it take you? What did you find the most challenging?

A: At a time in my life when I was totally confused about whether to continue being a prosecutor, which I loved, or stay home with my kids, who obviously needed me, I literally had a dream that contained the opening scene of my first novel, *Most Wanted*. That dream answered a question I'd been asking myself for years: how could I put my insider knowledge about violent crime, narcotics and law enforcement to use if I left my job? I did not start working on the book in earnest, however, until I left the U.S. Attorney's Office in 2001. It then took about two and a half years to write, revise (a million times!), find an agent and land my first two-book deal. The most challenging part of the first book was sticking with it and taking myself seriously enough as a writer to believe that the time I was investing was worthwhile

Q: What is your work schedule like? How has it changed since you published your first book?

A: I could pretend to be one of those writers who gets up at four in the morning and produces 20 pages before the sun comes up, but that would be a lie. I write full-time now, and I get to my "office" (the pantry off the kitchen) around eight-thirty after taking the kids to school. Okay, sometimes it's later. And if my kids need me, I take a break. But when I'm really in the middle of a novel (like now), I write eight or ten hours a day. Right before deadline it can be twelve or fourteen. So I'm often working late into the night, as well as weekends and holidays.

The biggest change in my "writing" schedule since my first book has been the need to budget large blocks of time for publicity and promotion.

Q: What are your favorite and least favorite things about being a writer?

A: Best part -- I get to work in my pajamas. No, seriously, the best part is being able to provide enjoyment and inspiration to people I've never even met. Whether it's a grandmother writing to tell me she stayed up all night and can't wait to hear what happens next between Melanie and sexy-as-hell FBI agent Dan O'Reilly, or a Hispanic teen e-mailing to say that my books give her confidence in her ambition to become a lawyer, I feel like I get to touch people's lives. It's a great privilege and very special.

Most challenging part -- it can be lonely sitting at the computer day after day. Sometimes the people in the book start seeming more real than they should. I have been known to talk to them while working out dialogue.

Q: What are your long term goals as a writer?

A: To stay fresh and to continue producing books that are true as well as entertaining.

Q: Do you read your reviews, good and bad, and do they make a difference to you?

A: Yes, I read all my reviews – those I know about anyway. Fortunately, the vast majority of them have been really positive. ("Cover-Up," the third book in the Melanie Vargas thriller series, just got a starred review in *Publisher's Weekly*, which I am really jazzed about! Excerpts and reviews of all my books can be found on my website – www.michelemartinez.com.) Whether reviews matter to me depends on both the source of the review and the substance. There are reviewers whose judgment I trust and whose opinions I take deeply to heart (like Oline Cogdill of the Sun-Sentinel, for example), whether about my own books or other people's. Then there are reviewers who come across as glib or snarky, and who I take less seriously. A review is only one person's opinion after all. On the other hand, I've heard publicists say that any review is better than no review, and that all reviews, good or bad, increase name recognition and sell books.

Q: Who are some of your favorite authors? Is there anyone in particular you draw inspiration from?

A: There are so many amazing writers at work in the crime, suspense and romantic suspense genres at the moment that it is difficult to choose. I read widely in my own genres and draw inspiration from authors I'm reading depending on their own particular expertise. Recent reads that have inspired me – "Persuader" by Lee Child, for its breathless pacing; "Still as Death" by Sarah Stewart Taylor for its nuanced characterizations; and "To Die For" by Linda Howard for the hot love scenes.

Q: Having met you, and having read *Most Wanted* and *Finishing School*, I have to ask how much of Melanie Vargas is based on your own life?

A: We share many characteristics. Melanie, like me, is half-Puerto Rican, comes from modest roots but has an Ivy League education, loves being a prosecutor but experiences great stress juggling her demanding job with being a mom. But Melanie is also NOT me. She has her own separate life -- a different office, boss, romantic life, baby, parents, sibling, apartment, etc., etc., than I have. She also faces much more extreme circumstances than I do. I've gone up against dangerous criminals in the courtroom, but never -- thank God! -- in a burned-out basement with a gun in my hand, or getting stalked through the darkness in a laser-tag emporium by a guy wearing night-vision goggles. Despite the differences, I still like to think that if I were placed in Melanie's difficult (although stylish) shoes, I'd kick butt the way she does.

Q: How much of Melanie Vargas' life is planned out in your head? How do you know where you will go with her next?

A: Anybody who writes will understand this: I don't control Melanie's life. I don't sit down with a pencil and a legal pad and sketch out her story arc. She seems to exist independently of me and make her own choices, and when I am thinking or writing about her, I am able to channel her for the reader. It's almost like taking dictation. I generally know what she is up to a book or two ahead. Beyond that, she doesn't know, so how could I?

Q: Are you currently working on a new book? If so, can you talk about it a little?

A: I am hard at work on the fourth book in the Melanie Vargas series, "Notorious," which will be out in March '08. In "Notorious," Melanie is about to bring a famous rapper to trial on murder charges when his defense lawyer is assassinated before her eyes in a car bombing. What was already a challenging case morphs into a dangerous murder investigation with national security implications.

Q: How many books do you plan for the Melanie Vargas series?

A: I don't have a number in my head. One thing that makes writing interesting is that the characters and plots tend to go off in directions the author doesn't expect. Melanie might

stay in the U.S. Attorney's Office making important cases for years to come, or she might burn out and decide to go teach yoga!

Q: What techniques do you use as a writer to develop such a sense of suspense in your novels?

A: The most important "craft" choice I made early on was to switch from first to third person point of view. Since I'd essentially lived Melanie's life, and since all first novels are autobiographical, my natural inclination with "Most Wanted" was to write in the first person. However, the first person viewpoint limited me to showing the reader only what Melanie herself experienced directly. I couldn't show the killer lurking outside the door polishing his knife, or other scary things that enhanced suspense. I realized this during the writing of "Most Wanted" and switched to third person before I sold the book.

Q: What is the best advice you would you give another writer?

A: To treat writing like a job rather than a hobby. If you want to get published, you have to put in the time and make the commitment to do your very best work. Also, join writers groups like MWA and RWA for the networking opportunities.

Michele will be promoting her newest novel *Cover Up*, due out March 2007, at the following locations:

Saturday, March 24, 2007

Baltimore City Lit Festival
Appearance times to be announced
Enoch Pratt Free Library
(410) 396-5430

Tuesday, April 3, 2007

6:30 p.m.
Dinner, talk and book signing
(Call store for details)
Mystery Lovers Bookshop
514 Allegheny River Blvd.
Oakmont, Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh)
(888) 800-6078
www.mysterylovers.com

Friday, April 6, 2007

7:00 p.m.
The Book Vault
9 North Main St.
Wallingford, Connecticut
(203) 269-7323
www.thebookvault.net

Thursday-Sunday, July 12-15, 2007

Thrillerfest 2007

Appearance times to be announced

Grand Hyatt Hotel

New York, New York

(Requires registration)

www.thrillerfest.org

Saturday-Sunday, November 10-11, 2007

New England Crime Bake

Sixth Annual Mystery Conference for Writers and Readers

Dedham, Massachusetts

Details to follow

Registration required

www.crimebake.org

Additional publicity stops will be posted on Michele's website at

www.michelemartinez.com, once arranged.