

Sometimes Crime Does Pay An Interview with Author Patricia Smiley

By Dorinda Ohnstad

Patricia Smiley came to writing later in life. Before she embarked on her literary path she earned a BA in Sociology from the University of Washington and an MBA (Masters of Business Administration) from Pepperdine University. Her MBA coursework included a large amount of business writing, which she discovered she enjoyed doing. In her final trimester of the program she was required to develop her own career plan. Her plan plotted out how she was going to write a commercially sellable mystery novel, which she ultimately achieved—years later.

Her career plan in hand, Patricia made the mistake of telling people about her lofty ambitions, which made it embarrassing for her as the years went by without a manuscript. That's when she decided that if she was going to write a commercially sellable mystery novel she would first have to learn the craft of fiction writing. She started by enrolling in a UCLA Extension writing course, joined Sisters in Crime and started attending mystery writing conferences such as Left Coast Crime. In other words, she went about the business of being a writer. Next she applied to University of California-Irvine's MFA (Masters of Fine Arts) program, but was unsuccessful in gaining admission. However, the Director of the program sent her a note along with her rejection encouraging her to join Elizabeth George's writer's group. Although the last three potential additions to that group had been rejected, the group accepted her. In 1996 she joined the group and started working seriously on her first novel. Two years later she finished her first draft of *False Profits*.

Once the manuscript was edited and ready for marketing, Elizabeth George referred Patricia to her first potential agent, who said a lot of nice things, but ultimately said no to representing her. Not to be deterred, she sent out query letters to agents, aiming for all the best in the business. Her efforts were finally successful. She received a call from William Morris, although her husband accidentally erased the voicemail message before she could hear it. That wouldn't have been so bad except that he had also written down the wrong name before deleting the message. Patricia put her amateur sleuthing skills to work and uncovered the William Morris agent that called.

Finally, Patricia had a manuscript to market and an agent from a prestigious agency to peddle it for her. Her agent sent it to three publishers and received three offers in response. The only part of her plan that didn't pan out was selling her book to a major publisher. Regardless, she was thrilled to finally achieve her goal of writing a commercially sellable mystery novel. Unfortunately, it takes more than a contract to bring a manuscript to book store shelves. Just when her career plan seemed like it would finally see fruition, 9/11 struck and she found herself jockeyed between different editors, some jumping ship for other publishing houses and one died three months into the editing process. Still, Patricia persisted until eight years into her critique group, five years after

agency representation and two-and-a half years from the time her manuscript had been purchased by Mysterious Press she finally had a novel on the market.

Her debut novel *False Profits* about Los Angeles management consultant Tucker Sinclair received a starred review from *Booklist* and was a *Book Sense* recommendation. Her follow-up novel *Cover Your Assets* was a *Romantic Times* Top Pick. Both novels were *Los Angeles Times* Bestsellers. *Short Change* is the third in the series. Her short fiction has been published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and "Two of the Deadliest," an anthology edited by Elizabeth George.

Patricia Smiley follows the old adage *write what you know*. She will candidly tell you that Tucker Sinclair, the protagonist in her mystery series, is based on her. Tucker has an MBA, provides consulting services to small business owners and lives and works in the Los Angeles area ala Patricia Smiley. In addition, her first two book's plot points came directly from her own life experiences. However, by book three she felt she had used up the interesting bits of her own personal experiences and had to foray into new ground. This is where her work over the last thirteen years as a citizen volunteer with the LAPD has come in handy. In particular, the last four years as a Specialist Reserve Officer has given her the opportunity to work as a burglary and theft investigator, lending plenty of authentic experiences to draw on. As Patricia would say, "there are a lot of detectives who become crime writers, but there aren't many crime writers who become detectives." This experience boosted her writing, while providing her access to professionals who could answer all her questions about police work. However, she doesn't volunteer for that purpose. She does it because she loves the work and the people she gets to work with. That love shows in her work.

All of Patricia's novels boil down to two critical issues: 1) good people who take the wrong turn at the fork in the road, and 2) betrayal by a friend. Tucker seems to have a knack for taking on clients caught in the crossfire who find both their businesses and lives at stake as a result. It's a good thing that Tucker is as handy at sleuthing as she is at management consulting, although sometimes she leans on her client turned friend Charley Tate a private detective.

Cool Cache, the fourth book in the Tucker Sinclair Mystery Series, released June 2008, finds Tucker Sinclair currently without her boyfriend Joe Deegan, an LAPD homicide detective. Like the three previous novels in the series, it is written in first person point of view, which allows the reader the opportunity to get into the head of the highly independent, impulsive and witty Tucker Sinclair. In typical Patricia Smiley fashion, the book is a quick read that keeps you entertained with Tucker's quick wit, even in the face of adversity. While the plot isn't complicated it isn't simplistic either. My only disappointment with this book was the missing romantic story line with Joe Deegan, who is now engaged to his former fiancée who previously cheated on him. However, the culmination of the book reopens the potential for a future relationship between Tucker and Joe, which hooks us hopeless romantics into anxiously awaiting the next book in the series in the hopes that the two will eventually realize they are meant to be together.

While Patricia's books aren't complicated sit-on-the edge of your seat suspense novels, they are well-written and will keep you hooked from beginning to end. They make for a great one-day read. I'm currently packing my bags, getting ready to head off for a girl's weekend away on the Mexican Riviera (if there is anything left of it after Hurricane Norbert's blustery visit), and would throw one of her books in my suitcase—except I've read them all already.

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: I had been thinking about writing a book long before I typed "Chapter One," but it wasn't until I joined a writer's critique group that I committed myself to the project. Once I got started, it took me about two and a half years to finish *False Profits*. The biggest challenge was to continue sweating over the manuscript until I got it right. Some people encouraged me to put it aside and begin the second novel, but I felt that if I couldn't make the first book work, I couldn't make subsequent books work either. It was a powerful learning experience for me.

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

A: I love writing when things are going well. When they are not going well, it's torture. My least favorite thing: DEADLINES.

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

A: Life has definitely become busier since my first book was published. In addition to writing books, authors have to spend a good amount of time promoting them. I'm also a chronic volunteer. Sometimes I think I need a 12-step program. I struggle every day to find balance in my life.

Q: Who are some of your favorite authors? Is there anyone in particular you draw inspiration from? If so, how has that influenced your writing?

A: I continue to add favorite authors to a list that would fill all of your column inches. When I began the Tucker Sinclair series, my goal was to write novels that married humor with a serious mystery. In that regard, two books inspired me. The first was *After All These Years* by Susan Isaacs. It was a laugh-out-loud funny mystery with a romantic element and clever plot. The second was Sue Grafton's *G is for Gumshoe*. After reading each of those titles, I remember thinking *I'd love to write a book like that*.

Q: Some authors catch an early lucky break and others, like you, have to be more persistent and wait years to finally see publication. What would you say was your biggest career break and if you could do it all over again, would you do anything differently that you believe would've shortened your path to publication?

A: I knew from the outset that I was entering a crowded market, but that never deterred me. I just figured out of thousands of books published every year that there had to be room for one more—mine. I have always held the belief that success requires hard work, perseverance, talent, and a whole lot of luck. A sense of humor doesn't hurt, either.

I wouldn't change anything. All of those difficult moments now make amusing stories. My biggest career break? The next one, I think.

Q: How has your involvement with writer critique groups and groups such as Sisters in Crime helped in your development as an author?

A: I try not to lose sight of the importance of networking with other writers. That's why organizations like Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America are such valuable resources. I'm also a big fan of critique groups if you can find a good one. For nine years, I was a member of a group led by Elizabeth George. She and fellow group members taught me volumes not only about the craft of writing but also about the writer's life. I was so fortunate to be part of that community of writers, because they nurtured and supported me through some difficult times.

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

A: The central crime is planned out book by book, but I've done more long-term planning with regard to Tucker's personal life with Joe Deegan, P.I. Charley Tate, and of course, her mom Pookie and her Westie Muldoon.

Q: Witty dialogue is a key trait in your books. Is this something that comes naturally to you?

A: I never worry about making things funny in the first draft. I just hope it comes together by the end, because I love to make people laugh.

Q: How many books do you plan for your Tucker Sinclair Mystery Series? Any plans to start a new series or write a stand alone?

A: I don't have any idea how many books there will be in the series, because writers don't generally make those decisions—publishers do.

Q: What advice would you give an aspiring mystery author who is contemplating whether to write a series or stand alone novels?

A: Publishers like a series because they provide an opportunity to build an author's readership book by book. On the other hand, careers are built on standalones, too. My only advice is don't write what's hot at the moment. By the time your book gets published, that "type" of book won't be hot anymore. Write what you love reading. Write

a great book. Learn to take criticism without letting it destroy you. Ask for help when you need it. Don't give up. Thomas Edison once said, "Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."

Q: Authors love to write, but few like the marketing aspects of the occupation. Given your business background do you view marketing differently than other authors?

A: I enjoy the marketing aspect, which is a good thing because publishers expect their authors to promote themselves in as many ways as possible, including on blogs, book tours, social networking sites, the moon... I just wish I had an unlimited budget and a staff of thousands.

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

A: I recently finishing a couple of short stories, one for *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and the other for an anthology—*Two of the Deadliest*—edited by Elizabeth George that will be released in 2009. My next book will be a departure from the Tucker series. It will feature a professional investigator and it will be based on my experiences working with the police department. Stay tuned...

For more information about Patricia Smiley and her novels visit her website at www.patriciasmiley.com or check out her crime fiction blog she shares with fellow authors Jacqueline Winspear, James O. Born, Paul Levine, Cornelia Read, and James Grippando called The Naked Truth About Literature and Life at www.nakedauthors.com.