

Spotlight on Marcia James

November 2007



Spotlight



WG: Welcome, Marcia. Thanks for stepping into my spotlight this month. To start off, please tell us about yourself.

MJ: Hi, Winnie! I grew up in 6 different Midwestern and Eastern states - - from Tennessee to Massachusetts -- as my biochemist parents moved up the career ladder. So my accent is mixed, and I say "y'all" or "you guys", depending on my mood. ;-) I currently live in Ohio. I went to the University of Virginia undergraduate and American University in D.C. for my Masters in English and Communications. I'm married, and my wonderful husband James lent his first name to my pen name of "Marcia James". We've been together over 30 years. We don't have any children or pets because I'm allergic - to pets, that is! ;-D Instead, I have a virtual pet - Smokey, my Chinese Crested hairless dog logo.



WG: Let's talk about your own personal road to publication: Is there some individual, group or event that you can point to as the catalyst/impetus that set you on the road to becoming a writer? Explain.

MJ: I've always enjoyed writing, whether it was poetry when I was 7 or a risqué play for the Latin Club when I was 12. But I never saw myself making a living writing fiction. So I went into corporate video scriptwriting and advertising copywriting after graduate school. And I've been a nonfiction writer ever since. Then, about 15 years ago, I fell in love with Nora Roberts' romances. But it wasn't until I moved to Ohio 8 years ago, that I decided to try my hand at writing a romance. I contacted Romance Writers of America, located my local chapter and have benefited from my co-members' support and advice ever since.

WG: Tell us about your journey.

MJ: Once I joined RWA, I studied the genre, attended meetings, read industry publications, etc - as if I were getting a degree in fiction-writing. Still, it took about 6 years before I sold my first book, *AT HER COMMAND*, to Cerridwen Press. I had a lot of ups and downs before that sale, however. My first manuscript won the first contest I entered and was requested in full by Harlequin. I figured I was on the road to romance-writing success. Harlequin rejected the manuscript two years later. My second manuscript won 6 contests and was requested by almost every NY publisher before being rejected. Since this manuscript (*AT HER COMMAND*) straddled the fence between hot and erotic, it couldn't find a home until Cerridwen made an offer. My third manuscript has won 4 contests and is currently at Avon, Berkley, and Dorchester. Throughout the process, I've continued to treat romance writing as a job, and I've taken advantage of every opportunity to pitch to agents and editors at conferences, power-schmooze with other writers and work on the craft side of the business.



WG: How many books did you complete before you sold your first? Have all/any of them sold since?

MJ: I sold my second manuscript. My third manuscript, the debut book in a comic romantic mystery series, is with three editors and three agents right now. I'm revising my first manuscript, which has been requested by Dorchester.

Spotlight on Marcia James (continued)

WG: What changed most about your life as a direct result of selling that first book?

MJ: Because my first sale was to a small press, I had the opportunity to work hard on developing and promoting my author brand, as well as my book, without worrying about things like sell-thru and contract deadlines for a second book. Because I LOVE promotion, my biggest challenge has been to balance the writing part of my day with the promoting part of my day. ;-)

WG: What about your writing process: Do you maintain a set schedule? Is there such a thing as a typical day for you?

MJ: I'm definitely not a morning person, so I don't often write in the a.m. Instead, I go online when I first get into my home office. (I'm addicted to email!) ;-) Then I do a little PR – possibly guest-blogging or at least commenting on the blogs of author friends. I work on my current manuscript in the afternoon and sometimes in the evenings, if my husband is traveling on business.

WG: Do you set writing goals for yourself?

MJ: I do, but I'd call them "soft" goals. That way, I don't set myself up for failure. I take the time to relish my accomplishments and don't beat myself up if I miss a personal deadline.

WG: Do you have a 'mood setter', something (music, ritual, environment, etc) you use to get you going when you sit down to write?

MJ: I read over the last chapter I wrote, revising it as I go. This gets me back into the story. I don't play any music when I write because I hear music in words – their cadence, alliteration, rhymes, etc. Even instrumental music messes with my ability to hear the music of words.

WG: Do you do a lot of up front plotting before you start or do you just dive in?

MJ: I'm a plot-driven author, so I have a good idea of the basics of the plot before I begin writing a story. This works well with my chosen sub-genre (comic romantic suspense/mystery) since I need to know upfront "whodunit", what red herrings I'm going to salt into the story and how I'm going to weave in the love scenes.

WG: Do you normally start with storyline or with character or with some combination of the two?

MJ: A combination of the two, since I have to make the characters' actions believable within the framework of the story. And certain character goals, motivation and conflict work best with certain types of plots. Plotting comes more easily than characterization to me, so I work hard at making my characters as three-dimensional as possible.

WG: Do you find certain themes or character archetypes making recurring appearances in your stories

MJ: Honesty and the mistake of putting one's work above one's personal life are two themes that frequently make their way into my writing. And I like law enforcement protagonists – men and women who often have to keep secrets from other people and/or represent themselves as someone they aren't, if they're undercover. Lies – even those told to protect innocent people – are still lies and can instigate a story's Dark Moment.

WG: What do you see as your own personal strengths as a writer?

MJ: Foremost, my quirky sense of humor. For example, *AT HER COMMAND* pokes fun at the alphabet soup of D.C. government agencies and asks the question, "What would happen if the FBI, the DEA and the D.C. police put operatives undercover at the same sex club but didn't tell each other?" It was a lot of fun dropping these protagonists into a surreal world where they were fish-out-of-water. As for other strengths, I also have a good vocabulary and strong grammar and punctuation skills, thanks to my years as a nonfiction writer. My editor said the *AT HER COMMAND* manuscript was the cleanest (no need for line-editing) one she'd ever seen. Of course, I have to give credit to my critique partner, Kensington author Patricia Sargeant, for catching mistakes I missed!

Spotlight on Marcia James (continued)

WG: Are there any obstacles/conflicts, specific to your particular lifestyle, that get in the way of your writing? If so, how do you try and overcome them?

MJ: My biggest obstacle is being an extrovert who loves socializing. Writing is a solitary business, and I have a hard time resisting the temptation to make phone calls, send emails and do lunches with friends.

WG: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your process?

MJ: I write 100,000-word manuscripts with a primary and secondary set of heroes and heroines. In addition, there's a mystery within the plot. To help me keep everything straight as I write my manuscript, I create a secondary document that includes character descriptions, a timeline for the story and a chapter breakdown. This information is invaluable and keeps me from scrolling through hundreds of manuscript pages when I suddenly can't remember if my hero drives a blue or black Jeep or my heroine's cat is named Karma or Crystal.

WG: Do you have a favorite sub-genre as a writer? as a reader?

MJ: My favorites include contemporary romance, romantic comedy and romantic suspense/mystery. I have to admit, I'm drawn to happier stories (those with less angst) and stories light on blood-and-guts. ;-) I enjoy some reunion stories, but it can be frustrating to think about a hero and heroine who have been separated for 10-15 years.

WG: Is there a genre you haven't been published in yet that you'd like to try your hand at someday?

MJ: A straight romantic comedy or a contemporary romance with very light paranormal elements might be fun to try.

WG: Do you have any advice to offer writers still striving toward publication

MJ: Obviously, it's important to work on the craft of romance writing, but many aspiring authors think they can wait to learn the business side of the industry once they receive The Call. But that day is actually when they need to be fluent in the business of romance writing. My advice is to read the dry articles on contract clauses, foreign rights and author self-promotion BEFORE you sell. Also, lock in your pen name's domain name and – if you can't afford to have a Web site designed and up-and-running prior to being published – at least figure out on paper what your author brand will be and how your Web site will look. Waiting until after you get The Call will add an amazing amount of stress to an already hectic time.

WG: Is there some piece of advice you received or bit of 'conventional wisdom' that you wish you had ignored?

MJ: Susan Elizabeth Phillips and Jayne Ann Krentz do a workshop at RWA's national conference about not being a "good girl" and instead being a savvy businesswoman. Having worked in the corporate world for years, I already did much of what they suggest – such as aggressively submitting my work vs. worrying about simultaneous submissions. I also never "write about what I know". Luckily I enjoy research, since I'm always giving my protagonists professions I know nothing about or putting them in situations I've never been in. And I don't "write the book of my heart". While I enjoy writing my books and fall in love with my characters, I write commercial fiction and never take a manuscript rejection as a rejection of "my baby." I think it's better to separate yourself from your writing. Otherwise, you might take the rejections as comments on your self-worth, not your prose.

WG: What do you find to be the most rewarding thing about being a writer? What aspect do you struggle with the most?

MJ: I love turning my plots and characters into an entertaining book. And hearing from pleased readers just makes my day. The most frustrating thing about being a fiction writer – particularly a romance author – is the attitude of most newspaper book reviewers and a portion of the general public that romance and other genre fiction novels are just formulaic, escapist books. Since romances are empowering and primarily written by and for women, that attitude is misogynistic. And I've been known to write more than one letter to the editor about the topic! ;-)

Spotlight on Marcia James (continued)

WG: When you're not writing, what do you do for fun?

MJ: Mmmmmmm. This is a G-rated interview, right? LOL! My husband and I enjoy golfing, dining at nice restaurants, going to wine-tastings and attending fundraisers with silent auctions. Plus, I'm an admitted video poker fanatic. I could never afford to live in Las Vegas, although I do win more often than the average gambler. ;-)

WG: What are your favorite movies and/or TV shows? Why?

MJ: I love romantic comedies, as well as funny and quirky TV shows like *Monk*, *Psych*, and *Pushing Daisies*. I think the new show, *Chuck*, has an adorable Beta-male hero. I'm also a fan of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.

WG: I love to collect quotes, all kinds of quotes - inspirational, quirky, motivational, profound, etc. Do you have a personal favorite you'd like to share.

MJ: I'm sure you've heard of this one:

***"No one can make you feel inferior without your permission."* -- Eleanor Roosevelt**

I like that quote because there are so many things in life that can affect a person's self esteem – including getting lots of rejections on your manuscripts! – and we need to understand we have the power to reject their rejections. ;-) It's better to get mad vs. sad over a rejection...to say, "What do they know?" It gives you the strength to keep submitting.

WG: Please tell us about your current project.

MJ: I just finished and submitted a manuscript titled *Sex & the Single Therapist*. Set in Las Vegas, this debut book in a comic romantic mystery series features an amateur sleuth heroine whose provocative job as a sex therapist lands her in an adversarial relationship with a cynical police detective. When she launches her own investigation of a client's murder, the heroine finds herself trading heated words and hot kisses with the hunky cop. *Sex & the Single Therapist* is followed by *Death & the Double Entendre* and *Murder & the Ménage à Trois*. I love the characters in this series, and I enjoy writing off my "research" trips to Vegas!

WG: Tell us about plans for future books.

MJ: I'm currently revising my first manuscript about a journalist who goes undercover at a clothing-optional Caribbean resort to reveal "the bare facts" about a high-profile celebrity injury case. Her atypical attempts to disguise her toplessness catches the eye of a P.I., who's there for the same reason. And soon his inability to carry a concealed weapon is the least of his worries. ;-)

WG: And before we close, tell us how your fans can get in touch with you.

MJ: I love hearing from readers! I can be reached through the "Contact Me" page of my Web site: www.MarciaJames.net. I don't have a blog, but I do have a Sex Q&A "written" by the heroine of *Sex & the Single Therapist*. And I'm part of an Ohio romance authors' MySpace page: <http://myspace.com/romanceauthors>

WG: Thanks so much for spending time with me and my readers this month. It was fun 'chatting' with you, as always!

MJ: Ditto! And thanks for inviting me!