
WHY WE WRITE WHAT WE WRITE

The lure of jumping genres

By Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

Lately I've been thinking about genres and how we writers land in our chosen genres. This all began when, quite recently, I began to examine my attraction to dark fiction, namely noir. I'd just wrapped up editing and writing a story for *Palm Springs Noir*, an anthology of 14 short stories for Akashic Books to be published in late 2020 or early 2021. Something was going on with me and noir and my fascination with the dark and seamy side of life. I'm not a gloomy person. I have a sense of humor. I laugh at the slightest opportunity. But I like suspense and realism, and when I write short stories, noir is where I tend to go. But why?

My family has been involved in nefarious, and also criminal, acts. My father became a bigamist when he married my mother, and when I was little, my Sicilian dad was rumored to be a honcho in the Western Pennsylvania Jewish Mafia. My half brother, a Chevy car dealer on Long Island, was chased out by the mob, so he resettled his lot in the upscale city of Naugatuck, Connecticut. A relative and a good friend were big-time drug dealers. Another relative was jailed for stabbing his wife—in self-defense, the story goes: she was beating up on him. Then, in high school, as my parents' marriage was going down the drain, I had a meth-head boyfriend who began spending more time in jail than at home. Need I go on?

Maybe all this is why the dark side of life attracts me—and writing noir and literary suspense helps me work out whatever it is I need to be working out. Yet, there are writers of dark fiction who've had perfectly happy childhoods, brought up by perfectly happy parents.

Mystery novelist Patty Smiley, whose latest book is *The Second Goodbye*, the third novel in the LAPD Pacific Homicide series, says she had a great upbringing. Although, she says, "There was a great-great-grandfather who was traveling in winter by troika to a neighboring village to get supplies when he was murdered by horse thieves." When she was a kid, a national kidnapping story got her going, and she planned to be a spy when she grew up. She memorized poetry to keep herself entertained, just

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in case she was captured. In grad school, she discovered Sue Grafton's *G Is for Gumshoe*, and the urge to write mysteries took root.

Crime novelist T. Jefferson Parker grew up in sunny, conservative Orange County, California, where he surfed, played in Little League, and prowled the orange groves in search of snakes and lizards. "The more-than-occasional darkness in my books doesn't derive from the world I grew up in," he says. "Sometimes you see what you want to see. Our imaginations draw from mysterious wells and lead us in unpredictable directions." In college, he wrote an unpublished literary novel, but put it aside and jumped to suspense fiction when editor Morgan Entrekin, then at Delacorte, encouraged him to go commercial. Parker's reading of Chandler, Hammett, and MacDonald made the mystery genre a natural choice. His first novel, *Laguna Heat*, "did extremely well," he says. "So, the genre kind of picked me."

The form also picked Ivy Pochoda, who started out in literary fiction with no intention of ever switching genres. "Once my [second] novel, *Visitation Street*, was deemed to be a mystery," she says, "I realized I enjoyed writing in the genre, if not following all of its rules and conventions. It's liberating not to have to play by the rules of straight literary fiction. Overall, mystery and crime writers are a little more forgiving about playing with the conventions of their genre, whereas the

gatekeepers to the pure literary world are quick to judge."

Novelist, memoirist, and Edgar Award-winning short-story writer Susan Straight cut her teeth on the spy thrillers she found on her parents' bookshelves. Her first short story, written in a city college summer school class when she was 16, opened on an idyllic setting—until a dead body appears near a waterfall. "The professor had me come to his office to ask if I needed to talk," she says. "Now that I've written in every genre, I see how much landscape, death, and violence have intertwined in all of them. My chapters in *Between Heaven and Here* are all about the death of a woman whose body is left in a shopping cart—something my brother-in-law saw in our old neighborhood—but the narrators all miss and love the woman's beauty and presence. In my new memoir, *In the Country of Women*, as I wrote the stories of six generations of women ancestors as they migrated to California from the South, I was stunned to find that bullets were a unifying talisman. Either guns had been pointed at them, or they had witnessed violence; one woman shot an attacker, killing him. In that way, noir has shaded so much of my work, in all three genres."

Many writers migrate from genre to genre. I've written and published articles, essays, poetry, and short stories and am working on a novel that would fall more into the literary suspense category than anything else. Fifteen years ago, I published a book on writing, *Pen on Fire*, that became a *Los Angeles Times* bestseller. It was inspired by a student who kiddingly asked me to move in with her because then she would be sure to write all the time. I told her I would write a book for her instead, which is how *Pen on Fire* was born. When I was obsessed with knitting, I wrote an essay about it for an anthology (*Knitting Through It*). But I mostly write fiction, often inspired by real-life events, and now and then it turns dark. I follow my interests rather than the market.

Novelist and nonfiction writer Karen Karbo, author of the forthcoming book *Yeah, No. Not Happening: How I Found Happiness Swearing Off Self-Improvement and Saying F*ck It All and How*

You Can Too, says she's surprised more writers don't migrate. She cites Virginia Woolf and Joan Didion as two "women of letters" who excelled at both. "After I wrote my first novel," says Karbo, "I really couldn't imagine churning out one novel after the next. And I've always been drawn to nonfiction—biographies, essays, and memoirs. Most of the time when I get a hankering to write a novel, it's because I'm drawn to embodying a character, something that doesn't work in nonfiction. I feel absolutely no fidelity to either genre and go where my interests take me. Possibly this is why I haven't had a more successful career, but really, if the writing doesn't possess you, why do it?"

Carolyn Niethammer has written the award-winning novel *The Piano Player*, three books on edible wild plants, a cookbook, a nonfiction book on Native American women, two biographies, and a travel book; this fall her book on the culinary history of Tucson will be released. "It has been a wonderful, fascinating life," she says. "But as I look at the careers of other more financially successful authors, I see that I did myself no favors by jumping around. The most successful writers stick with one genre and develop a readership. I am known for my food-related books—a few people have come up and told me they have everything I've written in that line—but I remain a small fish in a small pond of Southwestern-based literature."

You can be a bestselling author for decades and still feel you would have done better if you had stuck with a single genre. Tess Gerritsen has jumped genres, publishing 28 novels—romance, medical thrillers, crime novels, science fiction, historicals—despite being advised not to. On the one hand, she thinks maybe she should have listened, yet says that "if I hadn't gambled and written my first police procedural, *The Surgeon* the TV show *Rizzoli & Isles* would not have been born." She agrees there are advantages to sticking to your brand, but when you get bored or feel stalled, it's time to change. "That's when jumping genres can salvage a career or keep you feeling excited about writing. Yes, it may be wise from a career perspective to repeatedly deliver what your readers expect, but you start to feel like a trained monkey. What do

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—KAREN KARBO

you do with the thrilling new concept that's out of your genre? What if you uncover a historical fact that begs to be turned into a novel? Sometimes you just have to write that story, even if you know it might hurt your sales record. Even if everyone advises you against it."

Kathleen Vyn says she's always jumped genres. She's published children's books, worked as a freelance journalist, published books on ecology, and writes short stories. "As a journalist," she says, "I wrote about every subject matter including engineering. I enjoy learning about different subjects and writing about them. That's the fun of being a writer. You're never bored."

Jeri Westerson, author of *The Crispin Guest Novels Series*, moved from historicals and medieval mysteries to paranormal and Victorian/steampunk because of her fascination with magicians of that time period. "I must write what speaks to me," she says. "No passion, no output. I hope to come up with something my agent can sell, but I can't always afford the wait." As she waits, she self-publishes and she's okay with that. "It's about

keeping my name out there, in front of bookstores and librarians. Libraries will buy the books—I do well in libraries—even if bookstores won’t necessarily stock them. It doesn’t make as much as the traditionally published stuff, but it’s something to promote that’s new. There’s nothing sadder to me than authors who are still selling the same old books from years ago because they have nothing new published.”

Dennis Palumbo’s work as a therapist and his fascination with the human condition and “how a person’s emotional/psychological issues contribute to his/her behavior” motivated him to write his Daniel Rinaldi mystery novels. He believes everyone has “operatic passions,” but most of us don’t act on these passions. “It’s only in crime fiction that readers—and writers—get to vicariously express or experience people acting on these impulses,” he says. “As a therapist, as well as a writer, this more explicit narrative is thrilling to explore.” His novel series “illuminates what really goes through a psychologist’s mind while working with patients, and in a broader context, addresses the current state of the mental health profession.”

In her twenties, Marcia Biederman had a real-life detective experience, something having to do with illegal arms sales to South Africa by a manager at the firearms company she worked for as a temp. She did some sleuthing, wrote articles for newspapers, and based her first mystery novel on the experience. She later moved from mystery novels to biography because, she says, “Instead of creating a detective protagonist, I wanted to be the detective. As I got older, I wanted to write about real-life women who’d left a mark on their era—for better or worse—and I wanted to piece together the missing information about these women’s lives. I can’t tell you how excited I am to put the puzzles together. First, I turned real life into fiction, and now I’m turning facts into narrative nonfiction.”

That old saw, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade,” worked for Christina Adams. In grad school, she focused on fiction, but when her baby son was diagnosed with autism, her focus took a turn. Her first book, the memoir *A Real*

Boy: A True Story of Autism, Early Intervention, and Recovery, was published in May 2005 and was followed last year by *Camel Crazy: A Quest for Miracles in the Mysterious World of Camels*, a memoir of her investigation into the effectiveness of camel milk as a treatment for autism. “I get to use my literary writing skills, which is important to me,” she says, “and blend personal narrative with science and cultural reporting. So, it’s the best of all possible nonfiction worlds for me.”

Sometimes jumping genres gives us a way to exercise and expand our writing chops, which we can then bring back to the genre we started out with.

Erica Bauermeister started out in her early thirties writing memoir, but publishers kept telling her she needed to be more personal. She switched to fiction and was commended for how personal her writing was. “Now, after four novels,” she says, “I have a memoir, *House Lessons: Renovating a Life*, coming out this spring, so I suppose fiction taught me how to be truthful.” Writing fictional characters taught her to dive deep into motivation and backstory. This felt liberating and gave her insights into herself that she didn’t expect. “Here’s what I think the difference was,” she says. “When I was young and writing memoir, I was in control. I was using my experience to craft a message, a way I wanted to be seen. When I wrote fiction, I couldn’t be in control. I had to go where the characters led me, or they shut up and the story shut down. I had to learn to trust, to be vulnerable, and listen. I could control the beauty of the words, but I couldn’t control the story itself.” So, when she circled back to the memoir form, she had “twenty years of perspective . . . and four novels’ worth of practice with the craft of writing. And I knew that a good book follows its story, wherever that leads.” **AG**

Barbara DeMarco-Barrett is a writer in Southern California. She is the host of Writers on Writing on KUCI-FM and teaches at Gotham Writer’s Workshop. Her work appears in USA Noir: Best of the Akashic Noir Series and her book, *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman’s Guide to Igniting the Writer Within* is in its 11th printing.