



PATRICIA BRIGGS: HOWLING AT THE MOON

Already renowned in the US, Patricia Briggs brand of Were Creatures are soon to reach the UK shores as they're printed in successive months by Orbit. Just having to get to grips with her female protagonist and to give readers a "byte" of the mind behind the tales (or perhaps it should be "Tails") we just had to interview her to find out exactly what we have in store from the fiery female mechanic.

Falcata Times: Writing is said to be something that people are afflicted with rather than gifted and that it's something you have to do rather than want. What is your opinion of this statement and how true is it to you?

Patricia Briggs: Whether I write books or not, I doubt I could stop the stories. Writing allows me to tame, organize and give those stories depths I couldn't hold just in my head. So certainly writing allows me to make my "affliction" more fun, at least for me.

FT: When did you realise that you wanted to be a writer?

PB: When I started reading, maybe when I was five or six years old. I didn't believe I could be a published writer (a different thing entirely) until I held my first book in my hands.

FT: It's often said that if you can write a short story you can write anything. How true do you think this is and what have you written that either proves or disproves your POV?

PB: I don't know if that is true or not -- certainly poetry or plays take writing a different place than short stories go. However, being a novelist (and not a playwright or poet) I can say that I find short stories more difficult than novels. The metaphor I use is ice skating. Short stories are like figure skating -- every move, every line counts. Novels are more like hockey playing -- a little rough and tumble is all right as long as you keep the impulsion in the right direction and make the goal. Does writing terrific short stories make you a better novelist? I think the answer is -- about as well as being an awesome figure skater makes you a good hockey player.

FT: If someone were to enter a bookshop, how would you persuade them to try your novel over someone else's and how would you define it?

PB: Oh, now this is a wicked question. I'm infamous for recommending other people's books while I'm doing a signing for mine -- I'm not very good at pushing my own books. How about this: If you like to read about dark worlds, tough people who can laugh at themselves, a little action, and a little romance, then you'll probably like my books. I don't write great literature, but hopefully you'll find my stories entertaining.

FT: How would you "sell" your book in 20 words or less?

PB: You do know that I took longer writing the proposal for one of my books (Raven's Strike) than I did writing the book don't you? This is a skill I am sadly lacking. Even so, for Moon Called:

When the werewolf-next-door is attacked, coyote-shapeshifter and VW mechanic, Mercedes Thompson finds herself in the midst of a supernatural brouhaha.

Hah, twenty -- even if I did have to hyphenate a couple of words.

I DO USUALLY HAVE AN OUTCOME IN MIND BUT I'M NOT VERY UPSET WHEN THINGS CHANGE.

FT: Who is a must have on your bookshelf and who's latest release will find you on the bookshops doorstep waiting for it to open?

PB: I read a lot. At least a book a day and usually two or three. I love books. I have about thirty auto-buy authors in various genres and any given day I'd give you a different answer. In science fiction and fantasy, a partial list would include Lois McMaster Bujold, Anne Bishop, Jim Butcher, Laurell K. Hamilton, Stephen Brust, Carol Berg, Lynn Flewelling and half a dozen others.

FT: When you sit down and write do you know how the story will end or do you just let the pen take you? ie Do you develop character profiles and outlines for your novels before writing them or do you let your idea's develop as you write?

PB: I start with the world mostly built and a couple of good characters then I see where they take me. No outlines for me if I can help it (that is, if my publisher doesn't demand it). I do usually have an outcome in mind, but I'm not very upset when things change.

FT: What do you do to relax and what have you read recently?

PB: I read, go horseback riding -- or chat up my husband (especially if I've just finished a tough book). I've been reading quite a few ARC's lately (Advanced Reader's Copies) -- one of the perks of being a writer <grin> I've read several excellent books that are going to be out soon or are just out: Anne Bishop's Tangled Webs, Jim Butcher's Small Favor, Black Ships by Jo Graham, and Madhouse by Rob Thurman. All very good. I also enjoyed Nalini Singh's latest, Mine to Possess -- which is more paranormal/sf romance than strict sf/fantasy. Anne Aguirre's Grimspace was terrific. Hmm. Mark Ferrari's The Book of Joby is awesome. See, I told you I read a lot.

FT: What's your guiltiest pleasure that few know about?

PB: In January I got stuck in an airport for most of a day -- and taught myself Sudoku. Now, I'm an addict. It is

Not relaxing. It is frustrating, especially when my computer is timing me. Maybe I just need more practice.

FT: Lots of writers tend to have pets (mainly cats.) What do you have and what are their key traits (and do they appear in your novel in certain character attributes?)

PB: Yep. I do have cats -- three of them. I also have six horses, a dog, a bird, a snake, and 150 gallons of African cichlids (fish). We've just lost our aged bearded dragon. I don't think we'll get another reptile -- I worry about them too much.

I've always mined the horses (mine and others I've ridden) for characters in my traditional (medieval) fantasies. My dog is a mutt (Corgi cross), but he's built a lot like a coyote, including the ears. I figure anything he can do, Mercy can do -- and he climbs trees, jumps eight foot fences, and all but speaks English. As far as the cats . . . well, we have a manx that bears a startling resemblance to Mercy's cat, Medea. If a werewolf came to our house all the other animals would run and hide, and our cat would jump on his lap. The jury is out on whether she is very self-confident, stupid, or simply thinks that being petted is worth any risk.

My sister-in-law also used to have a wolf-hybrid that was something like 15/16 wolf. He was fantastic -- and his little habits and abilities have played in most of my wolf characters throughout my writing career.

I haven't used the fish . . . yet.

FT: Which character within the book is the most fun to write and why?

PB: Mercy is my favorite from Moon Called. She's the best kind of character to write: underpowered, smart, and capable. She is willing to risk herself for the people she cares about -- and she cares about most of the people she knows. Fun stuff. I also like Ben quite a lot -- he's not really a nice guy, but he has unexpected depths.

...I THINK WRITING CHARACTERS HAS A LOT IN COMMON WITH ACTING...

FT: How similar to your principle Protagonist are you?

PB: Well, I'm not half Blackfeet, thirty, or a mechanic. I don't turn into a coyote and I don't know any vampires, fae or werewolves. My daughter tells me I am not funny -- "unless you have a few months to think about it, Mom." -- though, I tend to disagree with her. I don't cook when I'm unhappy, but my bedroom's a mess just like Mercy's.

More seriously, I think writing characters has a lot in common with acting -- I'm pretending to be someone else while I write the story, but I can only pull out things I have inside of me. I can't write about people I don't understand. Even so, I don't tend to think of Mercy as an alter-ego, but more like a friend.

FT: What hobbies do you have and how do they influence your work?

PB: My favorite hobby has always been reading. Just as good musicians spend hours listening to other musicians play, reading is a terrific help in honing a writer's craft. It's also good fun.

Horseback riding (in the summer, right now we have snow drifts) is another hobby. Even in the winter there is grooming and feeding and mucking. I like having something that gets me out into the real world doing something physical. Riding clears my head so I can work better when I get home.

I used to play saxophone a lot, but now I mostly sing. I am a better sax player than a singer, a lot better. Not that I'm a good saxophonist. My husband sings and plays acoustic guitar -- and it sounds better if I sing with him than if I take out the sax and drown him out. I also fetch tools for my husband while he fixes the cars or builds hay barns and horse shelters. If it hadn't been for my husband's ability to tinker with our old VeeDubs, Mercy would never have turned out to be a VW mechanic.

IF I KNEW WHERE THEY CAME FROM I COULD GO HUNT THEM DOWN -- BUT THEY GENERALLY SNEAK UP ON ME FROM AMBUSH.

FT: Where do you get your ideas from?

PB: I have writer friends who say they have so many ideas they'll never get stories written around all of them. I'm not an idea person which is probably the biggest reason I'm a novelist instead of a short story writer. Ideas come very slowly to me and I grab on to them with both hands when they do. If I knew where they came from, I could go hunt them down -- but they generally sneak up on me from ambush.

FT: Do you ever encounter writers block and if so how do you overcome it?

PB: There are several types of writers block I've run into, and what I do about it generally depends upon the cause.

The easiest one for me to deal with is when I've been writing just fine for a few days and then sit down -- and stare at the blank screen. It baffled me at first and I lost whole days to it before an artist/writer friend of mine told me that I was trying to work. Work uses one part of the brain and play uses another -- guess which one you use to write? So instead of sitting down to work now, I sit down to play with my imaginary friends <grin>.

The Middle Passage Doldrums is another type of writer's block. You get the beginning of the book written, and the end of the book in mind, but don't have the faintest idea of what to do with the middle. I used to

think I was alone with this, but have since found a number of other writers who talk about the same thing. Early in my career, I'd sometimes sit for several months before I could work it out. Now I have several strategies to combat that -- but mostly it's just a matter of experience, and acknowledging that sometimes you have to take time to think things through.

Another form of "writer's block" that I've run into happens when I try to force the characters to do something that was perfectly logical when I started writing, but, now that I understand them or the situation better, is no longer viable. I'm also better at seeing those than I used to be so I seldom lose more than a couple of pages to that malaise. In the beginning, sometimes I had to dump a hundred pages or better before the book would run on track.

Right now, the one I run into most is caused by fatigue. I've been writing a lot more, a lot faster in the past few years. That means that sometimes I am just out of the energy and drive to write. The best cure I've found is reading good books -- and watching good movies. The Lord of the Rings trilogy (the Peter Jackson movies) are a fantastic cure, but I'm careful how often I use them lest they lose their magic.

FT: Certain authors are renowned for writing at what many would call uncivilised times? When do you do write and how do the others in your household feel about it?

PB: Midnight used to be my time of choice. As I've gotten older, I started to notice that, although I can still write at night, writing when I'm tired means more typos and silly stuff that can be murder to clean up in edits (like malapropisms). With an office outside of my home to write in forces me to keep a more sane schedule. I drive my daughter to school and then go to the office to work. However, as deadlines approach, sometimes I go back to writing at night after everyone else is asleep.

TO THAT END I HAVE A PLAYLIST OF MP3S OF ABOUT A THOUSAND SONGS I WRITE TO...

FT: Sometimes pieces of music seem to madly influence certain scenes within novels, do you have a soundtrack for your tale or is it a case of writing in silence with perhaps the odd musical break in-between scenes?

PB: I use music to drive out the bustle of everyday life so I can write. To that end I have a playlist of mp3s of about a thousand songs I write to -- mostly folk and classical with a touch of New Age and Opera. Lots of local groups as well as Clannad, Bocelli, the Irish Rovers, and the Clancy Brothers. It's all music I love, but I've listened to it enough it can just be pleasant background noise.

FT: What misconceptions, if any, did you have about the writing and publishing field when you were first getting started?

PB: I didn't know anything and was just barely smart enough to realize it. I can remember being pretty arrogant when my first books was published -- fortunately, stuck in the backwoods of Montana, there was no one to offend. By the second book I'd been properly humbled <grin> and was less likely to make a faux pas.

FT: If music be the food of love, what do you think writing is and explain your answer?

PB: The "whine of wit"? Seriously, though. I think this question can only be answered with a book -- so I'll take a pass.

HERE IN THE US THE WORDOS ARE INFAMOUS IN THE SF COMMUNITY FOR TURNING WRITERS INTO PUBLISHED AUTHORS.

FT: What can you tell us about the next novel?

PB: In the UK, Orbit is publishing the Mercy books I've written so far -- Moon Called, Blood Bound, and Iron Kissed each a month apart. I'm also working on another series in the same word. Cry Wolf, which I've just finished, is the first of the books about Charles who is the brother of one of the major characters from the Mercy Thompson books. I don't know if that will be picked up by Orbit or not. The next Mercy book is about five pages on my hard drive right not -- but I left Mercy in a pretty shaky situation with the vampires and I expect that this book will deal with that.

FT: What are the last five internet sites that you've visited?

PB: Wikipedia so I could make sure I was spelling faux pas correctly (I was). Amazon to double check titles of my recently read books (as I don't always pay attention to them when I'm reading). Arabianhorses.org so I could check out today's sales list. I don't need another horse -- I don't want another horse, but I like to window shop. dearauthor.com because they do a nice job of keeping up on (publishing) industry news. And Ebay, because my cell phone just died on me.

FT: Did you ever take any writing classes or specific instruction to learn the craft of writing a novel?

PB: No. I've taken composition classes in college, of course, but nothing focused on fiction. Taught a few though <grin>. That doesn't mean I haven't learned a lot

from my fellow authors.

The most useful thing I ever did was join a writer's group in Eugene, Oregon. Here in the US, the Wordos are infamous in the SF community for turning writers into published authors. I'd already had three books or so out when I started going -- but they taught me not just how to write, but why some things work better than others. When I moved back to the Tri Cities a few of writer friends of mine continued my education.

FT: How did you get past the initial barriers of criticism and rejection?

PB: By remembering that most criticism and rejection is aimed at the story -- not the writer -- and the story can be improved and changed, sometimes with very little effort. Critics who aim their attack on the writer are not useful and should be ignored. Experienced, professional editors and reviewers, the people who know what they are talking about, know better than to direct their criticism at the writer. Remember not everyone is going to like your story even if it is perfect because tastes vary.

My husband has always been my first editor. He likes to read the kind of books I want to write -- and he's honest. He doesn't say he likes something just to save my feelings. So his opinion is important to me and outweighs almost everyone else's. If he's happy, I don't worry too much about other people.

FT: What are the best and worst aspects of writing for a living, in your opinion?

PB: The best thing is that I love my job. Writing is really, really a lot of fun. I get up every morning excited to go to work. The worst thing is the business stuff -- taxes, cash-flow, things like that..

