

JUDY CLEMENS: AUTHOR, BIKER, WIFE AND MOM
For *First Draft* by Lorraine Bartlett

Judy Clemens' first published novel, *TILL THE COWS COME HOME*, is now available from Poisoned Pen Press, ISBN 1-59058-082-6. Judy recently took time from her busy schedule to tell *FIRST DRAFT* (newsletter of the Sisters In Crime Subgroup GUPPIES) about her book and her writing life.

FD: A frequently asked question by non-writers is, "Where do you get your ideas?" From my own writing, I know the answer lies with what interests me and my own experiences. "Till The Cows Comes Home" touches on farming, land development and Harleys. Can you tell us how these subjects became the basis of your book?

JC: I have notes from a dozen or so years ago that seem to be the beginning of *Stella and COWS*. At that time Stella was a small-time farmer, as I was growing up. Somewhere along the line she changed to a dairy farmer, but for the life of me I can't remember why! I was living in Pennsylvania at that time, about 25 miles north of Philadelphia. In that area, as in many places around the country, family farms are a dying breed. Open space is at a premium, and land is sold for a ridiculous amount. There is so little farmland left in Pennsylvania; most of it has been covered with impersonal tract housing. It was a very personal and painful issue for me, living there. My parents grew up in that area, and the beautiful old farmhouse that was my father's childhood home is now the clubhouse that serves the development surrounding it.

As for the Harleys, I was at a point where I was getting disgusted -- every book with a biker portrayed that person as the villain. Bikers always stink, they sell hard core porn, they produce meth, they beat up the protagonist... The list goes on and on. My husband and I ride Harleys, and our experience has been anything but negative. In Pennsylvania we rode with a wonderful group of people who would give you the shirts off their backs (not that you'd want some of them to!). Our group stuck with us when we got a flat tire coming home from Maine, a Harley store stayed open late to help us out once when we broke down, and our club even threw us a baby shower! So anyway, I decided to write a book where the protagonist was a biker and a GOOD guy.

FD: Once the book was written, did you try to find an agent?

JC: For ages! I have rejection letters dating back to January of 2001. (For this book! For other books we're talking rejection letters from the early 90s.) In March of 2001 an agent seemed very enthusiastic about *COWS* and offered representation. Since I was so excited to have an agent show interest, I didn't do as much research on him as I should have. He sent the book to five publishers, then conveniently had a "personal family matter" that forced him to "curtail his list of authors." I say this snidely because I've talked with other former clients of his who got the same letter, but at different times. So either this agent has lots of crises, or uses this as a lame excuse when someone doesn't sell immediately.

So, after reading that letter and bursting into tears, I got myself back together and started sending out queries to agents again.

One agent was very interested in COWS but finally said no because it wasn't a "traditional" mystery and she didn't think she could sell it. (My book does not have a body in Chapter One with the rest of the book devoted to figuring out whodunit.) She was very disappointed to not take it on, so when she saw it was published and getting good reviews she sent me an e-mail telling me how pleased she was. I guess I know who I'll be sending my next project to!

FD: What made you decide to go the small publisher route?

JC: I never actually "decided" to go the small publisher route, but the whole agent hunt got so tiring. I'd heard about Poisoned Pen Press and knew they had a great reputation. I looked up their Web site, and when I saw their submission guidelines did not require an agent, I submitted. This was in May of 2002. At the same time I was working with them, I was still trying to get an agent. Some were very interested, but I ended up just getting the contract without one, which worked fine. I hired a contract consultant to look it over, and he was great.

I'm extremely happy with Poisoned Pen Press. One agent I talked to said they're just about the best place to start these days. They have a great rep, they send out Advance Review Copies to lots of people, and they produce very attractive and well-made books. I was lucky enough to get wonderful reviews in Publishers Weekly, Booklist, Library Journal, and the Chicago Tribune! I think a big reason those places even looked at the book was because of PPP's track record.

FD: Now that the book is out, tell us about your promotional activities.

JC: I've been talking at a lot of libraries, especially ones where I have some kind of connection. My hometown, my childhood hometown, the library in Pennsylvania where I went during the years I was writing COWS, my parents' library. Libraries are great because they send out a lot of promotional materials, and while I don't often get a large crowd or sell a lot of books, I've gotten newspaper articles and photos every time I've appeared at one.

I've done some bookstore signings, too, but have found they don't necessarily bring out the numbers like you'd expect or hope.

I had two book launch parties -- one here in Ohio and one in Pennsylvania. They were great successes. I sent out invitations and sold lots of books at each one.

FD: What promotional strategy/event has given you the biggest bang for the buck?

JC: I think the best promotional strategy, even though it is the most expensive, is going to fan conventions. I don't think they're great for direct sales, necessarily, but it's a way

to get my name in lots of printed material, show up on a panel in front of roomfuls of people, get introduced as a first-time author, and make lots of contacts. And besides that, the cons are a lot of fun! Already with this book I've been to Bouchercon (before I even had a book to show!), Left Coast Crime, and Malice Domestic. Coming up later this summer and fall are the Midwest Book Fest (an Ohio book festival not just for mysteries), The Great Manhattan Mystery Conclave (in Kansas), Bouchercon, and Magna cum Murder.

FD: Tell us about the next Stella Crown adventure.

JC: While the theme of COWS is land development, the theme of the second book, IF TWO ARE DEAD, is the difference between regular bikers and outlaw bikers. The title comes from a Hell's Angels motto: "Three can keep a secret, if two are dead."

FD: When will the book be available?

JC: Hopefully spring 2005. We don't have a date set yet. The ms. is on my editor's To Be Read pile while she works on getting the fall line-up going.

FD: As a mom with small children, have you found it hard to carve out writing time?

JC: Extremely. The first draft of COWS was written in six months after my son Tristan was born 4 1/2 years ago. Since he took morning and afternoon naps at that point, that's how I used them. (Forget about that "sleep when they sleep" crap!) Now, since neither Tristan nor my daughter Sophia (2 1/2) nap anymore, my writing time is mostly after they go to bed. So I never get enough sleep, but that's the sacrifice I'm willing to make. Sometimes, when I'm really lucky, my husband will be home in the afternoon when I'm more awake, and I can have some time then.

FD: I understand you've written a one-act play and seen it produced. Please tell us about it.

JC: Recently my one-hour drama, ATTICS, premiered in Indiana. My high school had its 50th anniversary celebration, and the board commissioned me to write a drama for the weekend. Not the right setting for a murder mystery, though! The play is about three estranged siblings who are tricked by their mother into showing up at the family home at the same time. When the siblings meet at the house, they are forced into conversation and discover that their recollections of the past are not the same, and the way they view their childhood has very much affected their adult lives.

I also wrote and published a one-act play, YOUR HONOR, which involves a couple in divorce court who realize through their testimony that perhaps they do have a chance of working things out. Since writing the play I've been through a divorce myself, and would write things a bit differently!

FD: Have you always been drawn to the mystery genre?

JC: Yes. My first mystery memories are of Agatha Christie and of watching the PBS mystery series with my parents. I also fell in love with Dorothy Gilman's Mrs. Pollifax series, and read all of the Dorothy L. Sayers books.

FD: *Do you have plans for another mystery series?*

JC: I have finished a first draft of a book which has been critiqued by writing friends (Guppies!) and is now undergoing another work-through. This one is called BECOMING BLIND, and the protagonist is a professional stage manager in Philadelphia. I am a professional stage manager and find writing this book a way to still be involved in the theater world while taking a leave from it to stay home with my kids.

FD: *What one piece of advice would you give to a novice writer?*

JC: Be persistent. No one gets published by sending their first effort straight out to agents. (You know as soon as I say that it will happen to somebody) It takes years of work to become good at the writing craft. I have two novels in my desk drawer (actually in a box in the attic) that will probably never see the light of day. BUT they were the best way to learn. If you want to write a novel, you must write one. It's a different beast than any other kind of writing. Also, be persistent in sending out those queries. Most of us have a notebook full of rejections, but it just takes one person to make all the difference.

FD: *As a writer, where do you hope to be in five years?*

JC: I hope to be working on and publishing different kinds of projects. I really don't want to be the kind of writer who writes one series forever. For some people that works, but I need different characters and situations to think about in order to keep the old ones fresh. I always have several projects going at the same time, and I hope that in five years some of them will have hit the bookstores!

Lorraine Bartlett has been writing for more years than she wants to count, has completed six novels which she hopes will one day sell, and has had nine short story sales. Check out her Web site at: www.lorrainebartlett.com