

JEAN LEE: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS DATABASE

How does Wisconsin inspire you as a writer?

Wisconsin breeds the fantastic.

We are home to peculiar, toothsome beasts like the Hodag, devourer of all-white bulldogs.

HODAG PIC: *Hodag picture from <http://explorerbinelander.com/what-is-the-hodag/>*

We are home to unique, word-some writers like Neil Gaiman: “There’s that tiny off-kilter nature in the Midwest that’s in the details,” he says when asked about writing here. (<http://www.startribune.com/neil-gaiman-says-american-gods-is-rooted-in-minnesota-wisconsin-weirdness/420666163/>)

We are home to hidden towns, small growths of community where railroads and highways meet, places that no one finds unless they mean to find it. Picturesque, perhaps? Plainfield was indeed picturesque once—until Ed Gein was arrested in November of 1957. You may know the rest. Basically, Gein inspired many of the fictional horror icons we know today: Norman Bates, Leatherface, and Buffalo Bill are all rooted in the reality of Ed Gein.

We drove through the wild patches between the hidden towns often when I was a child. I never tried to occupy myself with books or toys in the car. There was too much to see, out there in those scattered homesteads, too much to wonder about. What happened inside that dying barn? Why is that gravel drive roped off, and where does it lead? Where are all the people for those rusted cars littering the field?

This is the Wisconsin I live in now. The land dips and rises in unexpected places. The trees may crowd a rural highway so much you can lose yourself driving, only to have the tunnel burst open to sunshine and a white-crested river running beneath a bridge you’d swear had never seen a car before. In the small farming town of my youth, I could stand on the lone highway through town and hear snowflakes land beneath the orange street lights.

OR

How does the American Midwest inspire you as a writer?

It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.”

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches”

The adventures of Sherlock Holmes resonate deeply with me for two reasons. First, they were dearly loved by my father, who would, on a rare evening when he could delay his church work, read a story aloud to me at bedtime. I still remember the thrill as he described Dr. Roylott’s fate in “The Adventure of the

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Speckled Band,” or the sadness in his voice when Watson discovers Holmes’ note by Reichenbach Falls. I devoured these stories, despite my mother’s attempts to interest me in more child-friendly works such as the Little House books. Nothing doing, especially after I read “Copper Beeches,” for that brings me to my second reason: our town, our state, really, fit the description Holmes gave of England’s picturesque countryside.

Wisconsin is filled with hidden towns, small growths of community where railroads and highways meet, places that no one finds unless they mean to find it. Rock Springs was a town of 600 when I was a child, a little grain-fill stop for the railroad. We didn’t even have a gas station until I turned 5, and our library, a small portion of the town’s community center, could fit in a utility closet (it probably *was* a utility closet at one point). Farms and wild wood filled the gaps between towns. Unless, of course, you went towards Wisconsin Dells, where the wilderness is trimmed and prepped and ready for its mandatory close-up before the tourist rushes to the proper civilization of water parks and casinos.

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This is the Wisconsin I live in now. The land dips and rises in unexpected places. The trees may crowd a rural highway so much you can lose yourself driving, only to have the tunnel burst open to sunshine and a white-crested river running beneath a bridge you’d swear had never seen a car before. In Rock Springs, one could stand on the lone highway through town and hear snowflakes land beneath the orange street lights.

WRITING TALES OF THE RIVER VINE

The short stories began as a writing experiment last year. My husband had been listening to [John Carpenter's *Lost Themes*](#), and a story began to shape in my head of a child dying at the hands of a cuddly creature before a dark skulking *thing* gets involved. When I showed the short story to my publishers, they encouraged me to write more short stories as little introductions to the universe of Charlotte and these imprisoned shapeshifters. Thus [Tales of the River Vine](#) was born, with stories following both antagonists and protagonists across the years.

The challenge with such “prequels,” as they are, was to find emotional centers without chipping away at the emotional arc of [Fallen Princeborn: Stolen](#). Take the last story of the collection, “Tattered Rhapsody.” Originally I intended the story to be called “Dirty Charlie,” featuring Charlotte the Wise-Ass taking on some gang members at her high school for profit. Girl’s got to earn bus money somehow, right?

But the story felt wrong. I couldn’t pin it at first. Charlotte’s there, she’s showing her strength, her protective instincts for her kid sister. And yet, the story felt...heartless.

Then it hit me: Charlotte’s heart doesn’t speak with her fists. It speaks with her music.

And just like that, the story’s heart found a pulse, a rhythm both despairing yet defiant. Just like Charlotte.

I hope you enjoy reading “Tattered Rhapsody” and the other *Tales of the River Vine* and telling me what you think. They’re all FREE on Kindle, Nook, and other publishing platforms!

JUGGLING WRITING, TEACHING, AND THREE KIDS

Three years ago, you may as well have asked what it's like to juggle three bowling pins with spikes on fire.

Back when I was trying to [write in bedlam](#), I stole whatever time I could before dawn. The television usually bought me at least an hour in the day to outline, draft dialogue, or keep up with my blog. The children's naptime never felt long enough, but I made due.

Once the boys began preschool, I could at least promise myself one hour of writing time a day. Doesn't sound like much, does it? But that's the thing about writing *and* keeping a job *and* running a household: every minute to write's a blessing. Sometimes those days [crash and burn](#). Other times—like when the boys didn't have school—we found [other ways to be creative](#).

Now that Blondie, Biff, and Bash are in school all day, I always have time for writing, be it for the blog, editing, drafting, etc. Granted, summer's [still a trial](#), but because I didn't give up on writing when time was scarce, I have many stories to share here in the daylight hours.

Does writing energize or exhaust you?

Writing's a must. When I write, I channel the depression away from my family and into a universe where my characters can fight it.

It's never completely gone, you know, depression. We can slay it, burn it, bury it—but it never dies. Only by spinning stories can I transplant some of that darkness into villains, heroes, and worlds. From the darkness grows the adventure and the hope.

What literary pilgrimages have you gone on?

Honestly, not many. I studied in Ireland for a summer, and checked out important places in James Joyce's life. While this was definitely cool, I was downright ecstatic to drive to Illinois and see the wardrobe that helped inspire C.S. Lewis when he wrote *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Nostalgia played its part, I'm sure, but it was also a real thing connected to a *fantasy*. How often does one see and touch real doors to another world?

What are common traps for aspiring writers?

Research can feel like a big time-suck, but when it comes to publishing, DO YOUR RESEARCH! There are so many scammers out there with their "author services" and "exclusive anthologies." They're going to talk you up, make you feel amazing, and before you know it you've paid four digits for lousy editing on a slap-dash affair no one's going to see. Scope out the small presses. Join author groups online to gather recommendations for editors, book designers, and cover artists. Your story deserves to be seen, but when it's ready.

Yes, an author platform really does help. Don't think of it as yet another time suck; rather, treat it as the regimented prose exercise. Reading countless other voices, writing tight posts on a regular basis—all helps the craft, not hinders it. No, it's not the novel you dream hitting the best-seller list, but making a website, commenting on social media—these simple actions give your name an author's history. Other writers/publishers/agents/readers can trace your name back to studies, comments, and whatever else you write. You build that platform, you build a writer's resume for the publishing business to see.

What is your writing Kryptonite?

When my sons' principal calls. Nothing f***s over the creative mindset when you have to come and talk about one son, or the other, or both. Again.

Did you ever consider writing under a pseudonym?

I *do* write under a pseudonym, actually. When you're a preacher's kid, all your actions and talents are scrutinized—"you play piano just like your mom!" "You sing just like your dad!" "You write just like your father." "You should be just like your mom and become a teacher."

There comes a time when you get sick of all the comparisons, and just want to be known for something YOU do, not what your parents do. So when I started my site [*Jean Lee's World*](#), I wanted to see who'd like my writing for my *writing*, **NOT** because of who I am or whomever I'm related to. Writing under another name's also allowed me to work through [past traumas](#) and current depressions without bringing any family members under fire, which is important to me. These are my demons, not theirs.

MUSIC AND WRITING

Music is HUGE for me as a writer. As a working mom, there really isn't a place in the house that I can set aside solely for writing. Music helps me leave the boundaries of my reality and walk into worlds alongside characters I could never otherwise hear. I find music to be so important that I maintain a regular thread of posts on my site *Jean Lee's World* to discuss composers and songs that help me write. Here are a few sample posts that tie to *Fallen Princeborn: Stolen*:

- “Opening Credits” by Richard Harvey for *A Taste for Death*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGfTu7LATGE>

I love having theme songs for characters when I can. When music embodies the spirit of the character, it's much easier to take on their persona and write with their language. Take Arlen, the mentor character in *Stolen*. While kind and fierce when need be, he is also a tragic character, struggling to maintain hope while his nephew's in exile and his student is cursed. Richard Harvey's theme for the Adam Dalglish mysteries embodies tragedy, hope, and sadness in the cello's melody. Eloquent and heartbreaking, just like the imprisoned gardener.

- “Heroes,” covered by Peter Gabriel for *Scratch My Back*
<https://jeanleesworld.com/2015/02/27/writers-music-mychael-danna/>

Ever since I first drafted this story, I imagined a scene of magic creation with this song. Liam is an artist, and with this song I could imagine his magic and heart's memory coming together to build a piece of beauty for Charlotte.

- “Hanging/Escape,” by Craig Armstrong for *Plunkett & Macleane*
<https://jeanleesworld.com/2018/10/04/writing-music-medea-i-mean-craigarmstrong/>

When it comes time for Charlotte to face The Lady of the Pits, she's totally out of her element. All seems lost, and her sister's surely a goner. Yet Charlotte fights back. This track helped me feel that.

Other music inspiring *Stolen* includes the following:

- “Bus,” by Mychael Danna for *The Sweet Hereafter*
<https://jeanleesworld.com/2015/02/27/writers-music-mychael-danna/>
- “Princes of the Universe,” by Queen for *Highlander*
<https://jeanleesworld.com/2018/06/14/writing-music-queen/>
- “Overture,” by Daft Punk for *Tron: Legacy*
<https://jeanleesworld.com/2017/04/13/writers-music-daft-punk/>

When did you start writing *Fallen Princeborn: Stolen*?

2010. Yup, that's a while ago, but life tends to fill the years, and in my case, I had just become a mom. [Postpartum depression hit hard](#). Very, very hard. I felt very cut-off from life. I couldn't feel the joy of motherhood. I found myself often staring out a window, trapped in walls yet somehow exiled outside of feeling. I'd look upon my sleeping baby and feel nothing but guilt because I couldn't feel *complete* with motherhood.

Then a friend introduced me to the awesome challenge that is [National Novel Writing Month](#). From November 1st-30th, you are to write 50,000 words of a story not yet started (that's cheating. Outlines are permissible, though.). The story may need more than 50K words, but what matters is that you reach that length in thirty days.

I swung it that year, and felt AMAZING. I was escaping the trap, driven to feel with characters outside of this world. I couldn't just sit and dwell on individual lines or plot points—I *had* to keep going, and because I had to march on in the narrative, I found myself marching on in real life, too. I wasn't staring out the window waiting for minutes to pass. I was...I was *back*, you know? I felt a part of life again, enjoying the touch of my daughter's tiny hands around my finger and her boundless grey-blue eyes. I reveled in these things. I felt...complete.

What would you say influenced you as you wrote *Fallen Princeborn: Stolen*?

This might sound hypocritical, but *Stolen* is heavily influenced by the films and television I watched as a child, not by books.

See, I actually spent my childhood reading mysteries, not fantasy. Save for *Chronicles of Narnia*, I was usually sticking my nose into the pages of Hercule Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, and Nancy Drew.

What I *watched*, however...

...[Something Wicked This Way Comes](#) introduced me to the Autumn People, to those hunting across the land of our reality, granting our wishes in return for our lives.

...*She-Ra* proved a girl can be just as bad-ass as a guy.

...[Highlander](#) brought me to the world of immortals who duel in forests and cities, carrying swords across time in the quest to be princes of the universe.

...*Labyrinth* showed me how far a girl will travel to rescue the family stolen from her.

...*Beauty and the Beast* explained how two souls can fit just so when given the chance. But for me, these souls have jagged edges with a thousand points. They may pierce, even draw a little blood, but the closer they come together, the more these two souls realize: they fit.

So when I read, I read for the mystery of the unknown menace, and to ensure that menace brought to justice. But when I watched, I watched to *see* unknown places and witness unique characters do impossible deeds.

How did you figure out the names of your characters?

Charlotte's name came from a baby book in the long, long, LONG process of choosing a name for our firstborn. After weeks of highlighting and crossing out names, we had narrowed ourselves down to Charlotte and _____. Well, we went with _____ for our kid, so I kept the name Charlotte for my heroine. I'd grown attached to the name over those weeks. It carries both feminine and masculine traits, both delicacy and strength. A perfect fit.

Nature was ripe for names, since this small society has been cut off from the rest of the world for centuries. From this I uprooted names like Poppy, Ember, and even Campion (it's a kind of rose).

Many of the other names I chose after studying [*The Writer's Digest Character Naming Sourcebook*](#). I loved having this broad overview of names across various cultures. It's through this book I discovered names that fit some aspect of my characters' nature, such as Dorjan—"Dark Man" and Liam—"strong-willed warrior." It's important to have names that *matter*. Be it the history, the meaning, or because my child almost carried it—the name needs to matter.