

A Talk with **Beth Tashery Shannon**
Author of *Tanglevine*

Kentucky regional fiction is usually contemporary or historical. Why did you choose to set a speculative fiction novel in Kentucky?

I love to tease the mind, my own and other people's, to tickle it into unclenching and letting in the unforeseen. All fiction is a kind of imaginative fantasy. *Tanglevine* came to me when I moved back to the creek where I'd grown up after living for a decade in California. The first image came in a dream: Jihan and Windland riding toward a wooded hill with a brooding sky behind it, looming darker than the trees. But the dream only hinted at what was happening, or what the darkness was. Most of the story worked itself out as I walked by the creek. When I got stuck, I asked the water, or the trees, or the rocks by the spring, and the next bit always came. It was as if the landscape told me the story. At the very least I'd call it a partnership. *Tanglevine* couldn't have been set anywhere else.

At the story's end the conflicts seem resolved, yet there are hints that the resolution is only temporary. Can we trust that all is really settled?

Yes, and no. Jihan has learned things he can't deny and is too smart to ignore. But the ambition and family duty that drives him haven't disappeared. And Windland's loyalties are as divided as ever. *Tanglevine* is a complete story, but I'm writing a sequel. I plan a four-story cycle: *Tanglevine*, *The Heron*, *Frogtown Race Meet*, and *Windland's War*.

Tell us about a discovery you made as you wrote Tanglevine. What most surprised you?

It seems strange to me now, but I had no idea who Fern was or how much of the story was hers. Yet I found that though I didn't see her in that first dream, she was always there. I think gradually discovering her was as much a mystery for me as it was for Jihan. You'd think that for a woman writer the most intriguing woman character would always be at the story's center, but finding Fern was like finding and reclaiming some lost part of my soul.

Are the conflicts between the Domeses and Bluegrass people just an imaginative framework for your tale, or do they reflect issues facing Kentuckians today?

Not just Kentuckians. Kentucky does have a unique history as a legendary promised land for pioneers and as a battleground, but I hope *Tanglevine* will resonate anywhere there's conflict between people who respect the land and aim at a sustainable balance, and people want to use it for their own profit until it's used up. But in a way, *Tanglevine* is very specifically about an issue facing the Bluegrass. For central Kentuckians, there's an odd disconnect. We pride ourselves on the beauty and unique culture of the Bluegrass, yet without the attention that surrounds mining or river damming, the farmland, the Bluegrass itself, is steadily being destroyed due to urban growth with no kind of foresight or sustainable plan. All my life I have endured the destruction of loved places. Of course, it's also contributing to our slowly losing our horse industry, a major factor of Kentucky's economy.

Tanglevine begins like a poem, then an adventure fantasy, but settles into a murder mystery. Yet by the end, something else emerges. Did you set out to blow holes in the entire idea of literary genres?

Not all stories want to live in easily labeled pigeonholes. Now, I'm not arguing against form. A story should have internal coherence. It should be "all of a piece," as people say of well-conformed horses: the sound, strong ones. But form should grow from within. It should allow a story to lead an author to push boundaries, to dig deeper into what fascinates or disturbs. That's where the vitality of a story is. Big publishing houses want books to fit into neatly labeled categories because that makes their work easier. Besides, the unfamiliar is risky, and in these hard times most big publishers are avoiding risks. But readers don't think like marketers. Most readers accept a story on its own merits. That's why small presses are so important. Many are willing to venture into fresh, risky territory. More than ever, small presses are on the all-important cutting edge.

Is that where Tanglevine is? On a cutting edge?

Probably not. It's got a cave in it. What could be more typical for a Kentucky legend? And is Windland completely free of Daniel Boone? I watch machinima vids on YouTube, but *Tanglevine* came out of a snake hole along West Hickman Creek.