

Q & A
with Tess Collins

Q: Here's a question that always gets asked, but readers always want to know: how did you get started writing?

TC: Around the age of 13 I wrote teenage angst poetry about escaping my life of pain and misery in deepest, darkest Appalachia. I also daydreamed of kissing cute football players who never looked my way. Playwright Paul Green sent me the most encouraging letter after I poured my heart out to him in a nine page handwritten diatribe about my ho-hum life, and I thought, damn, I should be a writer.

Q: Was college any better?

TC: My years at the University of Kentucky were filled with worry over landlords who ripped me off, and basketball players who never looked my way either, much less kissed me. I did have some terrific teachers: Gurney Norman, Ed McClanahan, James Baker Hall. From among the three of them, I got the romantic notion of running away to California. I was so eager I graduated in three years, and took off.

Q: To California?

TC: In a cast-off '68 Buick Electra my father gave me for graduation. My best friend and I had a Kerouac-ian journey across the country, she as Gypsy Woman and I as Princess Knight, on our search for the Holy Grail. And if you ever ask which of us made the midnight phone call to a well-known writer in Butte, Montana, I'll never tell.

Q: What has been the most important influence on your writing?

TC: It's a who: James N. Frey, author of HOW TO WRITE A DAMN GOOD NOVEL. He's part evil Santa Claus and part fascist taskmaster, with a glint of satanic elf about the eyes. If you don't have conflict in every scene and drama in every line you get "Freyed" (fried), as his students say behind his back. Write a static scene and he's apt to vomit in your lap. Jim's influence helped me develop into a professional.

Q: You're a small-town girl living in a big city. Differences much?

TC: I grew up in eastern Kentucky where you learn to duck bullets before you're out of diapers, where only a few years ago the Hatfields and the McCoys signed a peace treaty. Only time I ever got shot at was in my hometown of Middlesboro. You come to realize that the fight over who kicked my dog is really about how am I going to live my life. In San Francisco, I've woken up to a dead body under my window, walked upon shootings in the Tenderloin where I work and oddly, even in the city, the fight over who kicked my dog is really about how am I going to live my life.

Q: Do you have a favorite author?

TC: I lean toward writers who tell stories and invent characters that stay with you for a lifetime—Thomas Hardy, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, John Irving.

Q: Maybe this is an obvious question, but did growing up in Appalachia influence your writing?

TC: How could it not? It's a place of contrasts that lives in your blood. There are many successful people living there though the poverty-ridden drug culture gets most the attention. In the everyday life, people battle for justice as they see it, and if that means a knock-down fistfight breaks out on election day, then there's gonna be a fight. One of my favorite true stories is the beauty contestant who got in a fight in the afternoon and still placed in the beauty pageant that night with a black eye. It takes me hours to make up a story with that much energy, passion and a touch of pathos. Many of us who leave the area struggle with who we are in that page of history that is as bloody and infuriating as it is nostalgic. But don't bad-mouth our hometowns to us. We'll usually come out most aggressively defending our heritage.

Q: Your writing often has mythological structure. How does this fit in?

TC: I believe all human beings respond to a mythic structure, whether they know it or not. Myth is an obsession of mine because it delves into our collective psyches. In fiction my characters will have as much inner struggle as outer, and this affects their psychology, giving the story more depth.

Q: You've worked a day job—or is it night job—in theater for many years. Any plans to set a novel in a theater?

TC: Day and night, and what an excellent idea. I may have to consider a thriller that takes place on or off stage. After all, with over thirty years of theater management under my belt, I've experienced a great deal of drama in public and in private. I know where the bodies are buried and who has slept with whom.

Q: HELEN OF TROY is a little different from the kind of books you usually write. How'd that come about?

TC: Glad you asked that because I'm known for darker stories. HELEN OF TROY, while it has its dramatic moments, is a quirky, light-hearted retelling of the Greek legend. Its origin was in a personal experience of being torn between two wonderful men, but as I wrote the book, Helen's circumstances inspired me to delve deeper into what many married women face. Getting lost in a marriage and searching for oneself, having feelings for another person, and how she handles those challenges morphs Helen into a hero of sorts, a strong woman who overcomes a tragic past.

Q: One last question—is it true you were born in a crater?

TC: Born and raised. Google it. Middlesboro, KY is one of the few cities built in a meteorite crater. Maybe that explains some things, I'm just not sure what things.

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