

Q & A with Tess Collins

Q: *A Wave of Breath* is so different from the books you usually write. How did that come about?

TC: Every writer needs to get out of their neighborhood now and then. It lets you grow as a writer and anchors your thinking-cap as a human being. While inspired by the myth of Isis and Osiris and set up as a romance and quest journey, this book dives into some deeply uncomfortable territory—corporate domination, AI merging with religion, the collapse of the systems we trust to hold civilization together, and what happens to love and identity when the world stops making sense. I sought answers as much for myself as for the characters.

Q: There's something almost unsettling about how many things that happen in this novel seem to have come true in the world after you wrote it. Did that surprise you?

TC: Honestly? It scared me a little. I wrote about a nation fractured by a catastrophic event, a ruthless corporation willing to seize any technology that consolidates its power, and ordinary people left to navigate a landscape where institutions have simply stopped protecting them. Then I looked up from my manuscript and the headlines were doing their best to catch up. Corporate consolidation of critical infrastructure, communities losing their ability to think to non-human AI philosophers, the sense that some shadowy interest is always three steps ahead of the public. I didn't feel like a prophet. I felt like I'd been paying attention. I think that's what fiction does at its best: it names what we're already afraid of before we have the language to say it out loud.

Q: Here's one 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 about 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 had the biggest crush on Kyle Macy, who always ate a few tables away from me and didn't know I was even alive. I did have some terrific teachers: Gurney Norman, Ed McClanahan, James Baker Hall. Between 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, me 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"—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 back the Hatfields and the McCoys signed a peace treaty. The 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 you're going to live your life. In San Francisco, I've woken up to a dead body under my window and walked upon shootings in the Tenderloin where I worked—and oddly, even in the city, the fight over who kicked my dog is still really about how you're going to live your 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, Lawrence Durrell, and Tennessee Williams come to mind. But there's a lot of great writers out there.

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 from there and living there, though the poverty-ridden drug culture gets most of the attention. In 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 stories is the beauty contestant who got in a fight in the afternoon and still placed in the 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. (And yes, I'm going to use it.) Many of us who leave the area struggle with who we are in that page of history. It is as bloody and infuriating as it is nostalgic. But don't bad-mouth our hometowns to us. We'll come out most aggressively defending our heritage.

Q: You've worked in theater for many years. Any plans to set a novel in a theater?

TC: I worked day and night in that career—and what an excellent idea. I may have to consider a story that takes place on or off stage. I've experienced a great deal of drama in public and in private during those years. I know where the bodies are buried and who has slept with whom.

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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