

THE TEACHER'S EDITION

After-School Sessions with Our Favorite Teachers—by Ann Charles

Hello, everybody. I've set out to interview some of my favorite writing teachers and learn more about them as teachers, not just as authors.

Today, I'm staying after class to talk with: Emily Brightwell.

Emily Brightwell is the author of the best-selling Victorian London Murder Mysteries featuring the detective team of Mrs. Jeffries and Inspector Witherspoon. She has written twenty-five novels in this cozy mystery series and is busy working on the next.

Born in West Virginia, her family moved to Los Angeles in the early sixties. After high school, she attended California State University at Fullerton and earned a Degree in American Studies. On a visit to England in 1975, she met the Englishman who would become her husband, Richard. Married in May 1976, they lived outside London until they returned to California in September 1977.

Eleven years later, she decided to explore her long-held desire to write and launched a new career as a fiction author. She started out writing romances and joined Romance Writers of America—the Orange County chapter. She was delighted when she became a finalist in an "unpublished authors" contest run by the chapter. That partial didn't sell, but her next manuscript sold to Silhouette's Special Edition line. *Kindred Spirits* was published under her pen name, Sarah Temple.

She wrote two more Special Editions for Silhouette, but she preferred other kinds of fiction, so when she was asked if she would be interested in writing a Victorian mystery series for Berkley, she jumped at the chance to explore her love of mysteries. She contacted her brother-in-law in London and he found old, original London newspapers from the 1880s and a host of books on Victorian households. These books and newspapers were priceless guides to her understanding of the real Victorian world of Inspector Witherspoon and Mrs. Jeffries (this is why *The Inspector and Mrs. Jeffries* is dedicated to her brother-in-law).

In addition to writing the Mrs. Jeffries' series, she has also written six Young Adult novels for Berkley under her maiden name, Cheryl Lanham.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

1. **What is your take on the health of mysteries in today's publishing world?**

That's a hard question to answer. The book business in general seems to be stagnant or even contracting and when you add a recessionary economy to the mix, things don't look promising. I think writers are hurt by the speed at which

used copies of their books appear on Amazon. It's within a day or two of the pub date. It's depressing on two levels. first, you're missing out on royalties and second, they are selling your book – after one or two days! Having said that, I don't think we can expect things to change for the better. The good news is that mysteries are still a relatively cheap treat (\$6.99 to \$7.99 for hours of reading pleasure versus almost ten bucks for a movie ticket) so I think genre fiction will survive. There are millions of people out there who love to read and they're not going away anytime soon.

2. **What attracts you to the mystery genre?**

I'm obsessed with justice. Justice doesn't happen very much in the real world, though I think we've come a long way. A hundred years ago, the whole concept of human rights would have seemed alien to many people. When human rights conflicted with the needs of the state, the state's needs came first! We have moved on since then but we still have a good ways to go. I like to think we are getting better. There is less racism, for example. The wonderful thing about writing is that in my universe, the bad guys always get what they deserve and justice in some way, shape, or form always triumphs.

3. **What is your next class on the slate? What will you be covering in this class?**

I'm doing a class called Cozy Writing 101* and I'll be covering the method that I use to plan, plot, and construct a cozy mystery. The class will focus on mystery basics: plot points, character development, motive, suspects, red herrings, and how to hide your clues.

I don't know that my process works for everyone, but I'm a great believer in exposing people to different techniques and then letting each writer experiment until they find the method that works for them. I hope everyone taking the class will end up a published author. The world needs good storytellers.

*Note: Emily is teaching Cozy Writing 101 to the Guppies in October 2008.

4. **Do you ever teach in person, or do you prefer to hold your classes online?**

Either is fine with me. I've done the online classes because no one has asked me to do a live one – I'd like to try it sometime.

5. **What do you think is the most difficult aspect of writing a mystery?**

Coming up with an idea/solution/characters/twist that hasn't already been done to death.

6. **Do you have any advice for authors who would like to write a long-running mystery series?**

Yes, stay true to your genre. Once you've established your series as a cozy, you've got an unwritten contract with your reader. When they buy your book, they expect a certain kind of reading experience and it's not fair 'to push the envelope' just because you can. I can think of two series done by really good

writers that are no longer being published and in both cases, the writers forgot their first obligation was to their readers, not their egos. Both authors introduced a number of elements into their books that simply weren't appropriate for the genre. I'm not saying a writer can't write other kinds of novels, but it's not fair to introduce those ideas/characters/elements into an established cozy series. Put them in another book because, believe me, there are some surprises that readers don't like. Graphic sex or violence, for example, doesn't belong in my cozy series.

7. **What are the biggest mistakes beginning writers make that doom a mystery's chances of reaching publication?**

Not understanding what it is they want to say. Instead of writing about something they care deeply about, they begin imitating the latest bestseller or a writer they admire. Big mistake. My advice is to go deep inside yourself, find out what it is you really want to say, and marry that up with characters you believe in and a bang-up plot with no logic holes.

8. **Has the cozy mystery genre or market changed since you published *The Inspector and Mrs. Jeffries* in 1993? If so, in what way?**

I don't think so. Cozies are a niche market, they've been here a long time and I think they're going to survive. There are always going to be readers that want a good story without a lot of sex, blood, and gore.

9. **You have been working with Berkley for fifteen years now. Do you have any suggestions or wisdom on how to maintain a healthy, long relationship with a single publisher?**

Show respect to and appreciation for the work of all the people who work at your publishing house. They want you to be successful, too. If the cover is great, call your editor and ask her to tell whoever was responsible that they did a fabulous job. If the line editing made your manuscript cleaner, call and ask her to thank the copy editor. If something is awful and you think it'll impact your sales, telephone your agent and let him/her handle that call. When you call, make sure you're positive and professional. I've been very lucky in that I've had some wonderful editors. Every one of them has genuinely helped to make my books better.

10. **List three of your favorite writing self-help books. (For example, GMC: Goal, Motivation, Conflict by Debra Dixon.)**

- a. *Make Every Word Count* by Gary Provost
- b. *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamotte
- c. *Writing the Breakout Novel* by Donald Maass

11. **After so many books in your series, how do you keep your characters from becoming stagnant and boring? What do you do to keep them changing, growing, and remaining interesting to your readers?**

I let my characters have a past, present, and fantasy life. I never know what they're going to do next. But the most important thing I do is to let the experiences my characters go through in a novel change them. In the course of the twenty-five books in the Mrs. Jeffries series, Mrs. Goodge, the cook, has gone from a hidebound old snob of a servant at the top of the household pecking order to a progressive thinker who actually sends money to the Suffragette movement. This happened gradually as she was changed by her involvement in the inspector's cases – in life, our experiences change us, it should be the same way for the characters in your series as well.

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You can read more about Emily on her website: www.emilybrightwell.com (where you can also go to contact her).

Thank you, Emily, for sharing your time with all of us Guppies; and thanks to all of you Guppies for reading along! If any of you have a particular "teacher" you would like me to interview, please email me with his or her name and any other helpful information.

Until the next after-school session...

Ann Charles
Mystery, Mayhem, and Fun in the Sun!

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