

A Q&A with Steph Broadribb about her book *Deep Down Dead*

1. What inspired *Deep Down Dead*?

It was a couple of weeks before I was due to start the MA in Creative Writing (Crime Novels) at City University and I was in America visiting with family and travelling around. I'd had an email from the University, setting a pre-course assignment – I had to write a chapter from a novel that introduced a new character and email it around the group before we met for the first lecture, so that was on my mind – what would I write? It was while I was driving from the mountains of West Virginia and into rural Virginia that I had the idea – inspired by the realisation that the taillights on my hire car weren't working! When I checked the nearest place I could get them fixed I discovered it was over a hundred miles away, so with no lights I stayed overnight in a rather rundown motel and from then on only drove in daylight. But it got me thinking – what if you had to keep driving and your taillights were out? And what if you got pulled over by a State Trooper because of it? And what if when they leaned into the car to take your licence they heard a banging noise in the trunk from the person you'd put in there? It got me thinking about what sort of person might travel with a person in their trunk and why – and that's how Lori Anderson came about!

2. How does it feel to have your first novel published?

It's exciting! It's also kind of scary to think that the characters and story that have been in my head and on my computer screen for so long are actually going out into the world for people to read. I've been overwhelmed by the feedback from people on the book so far, and it was a truly fantastic feeling to hold the finished book in my hands for the first time.

3. Tell us about your journey to publication.

I'd written a couple of practice novels (stories that will never see the light from my bottom drawer!) before I started the MA in Creative Writing (Crime Fiction) at City University London, but that's where it really all started. I'm a massive crime fiction fan, with a particular love of action thrillers, and I really wanted to learn as much as I could about the genre. What I loved about the course was how practical it was – you wrote chunks of fiction every week, which you then workshopped with the tutors and the rest of the group. It was a great way to see what worked and what didn't, to experiment with different characters and ideas, and also deliver a set number of words every week to a deadline. I'd also started my blog www.crimethrillergirl.com at the same time. I met a lot of writers and bloggers online and I started going to festivals and got to know people socially too. In fact, I met Karen Sullivan from Orenda Books at the Bloody Scotland Crime Writing Festival in Stirling – she was playing football in the England vs Scotland Crime Writers match and I was

pitching an early version of *Deep Down Dead* in the Pitch Perfect panel session. Later, when my book was finished, she asked me to send it to her. I was totally thrilled (there was squealing involved – even though I was on a packed train at the time!) when she said she'd like Orenda Books to publish it. I went around in a daze for weeks afterwards!

4. Did you find the editing process difficult?

I loved the editing process. Having the input of Karen Sullivan and West Camel from Orenda Books has been invaluable. You get so close to a story when you're writing it and re-working it, and through the editing process you get other perspectives of how the book and the characters come across that help you refine it and polish it. I love the collaborative nature of it, and learnt a lot from both Karen and West that I can use in writing the next book. The editing process helps make the book as good as it can be for readers and that's my aim – to write the best, most entertaining book I can.

5. Tell us about your writing day. You have a fulltime job and you are an active member of the crime community with your Crime Thriller Girl blog. How do you juggle it all?

I don't sleep much! But seriously, I tend to write early in the mornings during the week – getting up around 5.30/6am and writing for a couple of hours before going to my day job. I'll then do the blog in the evenings, or go to writing-related events, or do a bit of editing. At the weekends I get to write in longer chunks, maybe four or five hours at a time. If I'm editing I'll often book a few days off work so I can devote a long weekend to it and really get absorbed in the story and the changes. And I always carry a notebook around with me to jot down ideas for the next chapter and lines of dialogue.

6. The early reviews suggest that *Deep Down Dead* is not only incredibly authentic, but your characters are so 'alive' that they almost climb out of the pages! How did you achieve this?

Gosh, thank you, but I don't know really! It was important for me to really get into the head of the characters and so I trained as a bounty hunter so that I could understand Lori's world better and get a feel for what it's like being a woman working in the dangerous and male dominated profession of bounty hunting. I also did a lot of location scouting – I drove the route from West Virginia to Florida that Lori does, I kayaked through the Everglades and got up close and personal with Gators (who get a rather rough deal in *Deep Down Dead* but are actually pretty chilled out most of the time), and hiked through the Blue Ridge Mountains in the dark, cooked on an open camp fire and slept under the stars there.

7. Although there are scenes of violence, you have avoided anything

gratuitous. Is this something that matters to you?

I think everything in a book needs to earn its place – if it doesn't tell you more about the character or move the story forward then it shouldn't be there. I guess that's how I approach writing scenes with violence in them too. If Lori's in a tough spot and cornered by hostiles then she's going to need to fight her way out – for me it's about how can she quickly and practically get out of this and on with the task in hand. She's not a super hero, so it needs to be realistic – and sometimes things get messy!

8. Lori is a courageous, tough-as-they-come bounty hunter, and yet we see huge tenderness in the love story at the heart of this book, and in her feelings towards her daughter. How hard was it to write her?

It was really important to me that Lori was self-reliant and didn't have to rely on a man to solve her problems. It's nothing against men (I like them very much) more that in action thrillers it often seems like the woman is the sidekick, and I wanted Lori to be the lead character in her own story. I also wanted her to be realistically human and flawed – she's tough and courageous, but she's also stubborn and has a very complicated relationship with JT her ex-mentor and ex-lover. She's been hurt in the past, trusted the wrong person with devastating consequences, and she doesn't want her daughter to experience that or get caught in the cross-fire – she's fiercely protective of her. In terms of writing Lori it was a careful balance to try and show all the aspects of her personality and, as the story unfolds and she's forced to make increasingly difficult decisions, having her make choices based on her own world view and motivations.

9. Similarly, you write very convincingly from a mother's perspective. Are you a mother yourself?

I'm not, although Dakota is actually modeled a bit on my Goddaughter when she was younger.

10. Is there any of you in Lori?

Probably more than I realise! Although I think there's a bit of me in all of the characters, they've all come from me somehow, my experiences and my emotions. If Lori and I are alike, I'd say she's a sassier, tougher version!

11. You trained as a bounty hunter as part of your research for *Deep Down Dead*. Can you tell us a bit about this?

I did. I went out to California and trained in bailbonds and bounty hunting with a great group of people. It was a fascinating experience – learning everything from the legal aspects of the job, through to tracking and locating your fugitive, safe restraint and transport methods, and how to stay safe. As part of being out there I got to meet some really experienced bounty hunters

– male and female – and hear about their stories from doing the job. It really helped me get a feel for Lori's world and I hope that I've managed to share it in *Deep Down Dead*.

12. Many of your readers have already fallen in love with JT! Who would you see playing him in the film version of *Deep Down Dead*?

Well, when I was writing JT, I had Robert Redford in his mid forties in mind, but if I had to pick an actor to play him now I'd say the front runner contenders would be Charlie Hunnam, Josh Holloway and Michael Fassbender. What do you think?

13. This is one of the most exciting, action-packed thrillers we've read in a long time, and there isn't a word that doesn't ring true or fail to carry the story forward. Who are your inspirations?

It's books by John D MacDonald, Michael Crichton and Lee Child that really got me into loving the action thriller genre, and I'm also a huge fan of Zoe Sharp's Charlie Fox series, and Mason Cross's Carter Blake series. Wider than action thrillers I'm always super keen to read the next Ian Rankin and Mark Billingham, and love the dark noir of Rod Reynolds's Charlie Yates books.

14. Did you set out to write a series, and will we see more of Lori?

I set out in the hope of writing a series! So yes, Lori will return in the second book in the series – *DEEP BLUE TROUBLE* (there's a sneak peep of it in the back of the paperback of *DEEP DOWN DEAD*).

15. What are you reading now and what would you recommend?

I'm a multiple book reader, and so at the moment I'm finishing *FEVER CITY* by Tim Baker (it's stunning), and have just started two 2017 books – *THE DAMSELFLY* by Susi Holliday (it's totally gripping) and *BORN BAD* by Marnie Riches (loving its dark grittiness). My top reads of 2016 are *TALL OAKS* by Chris Whitaker – think small town American noir, very *Twin Peaks*-esq – and *REACHER SAID NOTHING* by Andy Martin who observed Lee Child as he wrote *Reacher #20 MAKE ME* – it's a fascinating insight in the author and his writing process, and highly witty and entertaining too.