

A BSB Interview With Clifford Henderson

by Connie Ward, Bold Strokes Books Consulting Publicist

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What made you decide to become a fiction writer?

There really was no conscious choice, but here's the basic trajectory. I was an actor who was frustrated by the roles I got, (I have, or had, a sweet face so I was always getting cast as sweet characters. Boring!) so I began to direct. But I kept searching for that one play that would really rock my boat. Finally I decided I would have to write it. Of course it turned out to be much harder than I expected it to be, but I never stopped writing. After having several plays and numerous sketch comedies produced, I combined all these skills in a two-woman show that I performed with my partner, *Detour Ahead: The Clifford and Dixie show*. One of the sketches I wrote for *Detour* did what's called "breaking the fourth wall," which is when an actor talks directly to an audience like a narrator. In other words, they can describe things, something one rarely gets to do when writing strictly dialogue. Not only did I love the freedom of writing this way, but also the audience was effusive. Shortly after this high, I came to my writing group empty-handed. "I've nothing to share today," I said. "But if you don't mind, I've brought my laptop and I'd like to sit in the corner and start my novel." I haven't stopped writing fiction since.

What type of stories do you write? And why?

There are two themes that interest me and seem to circle though my writing. One is the healing of shattered souls. Redemption. I love seeing folks work through their emotional baggage. The gift of life is so precious and it's a shame to let heartaches and grudges from the past get in the way of living it fully. I also love to write about what I call invisible people. Hollywood gives us enough beautiful and rich people to envy. I'm interested in the extraordinary lives of ordinary people. Everyone has a life worth writing about. Oh, yeah, and I also love to write about religion. I find it fertile ground.

What do your family/friends think about your writing?

The family I was born into has a history of being cautiously supportive of my artistic endeavors: theater, improv, writing. They worried that I wouldn't be able to get the bills paid. But now that I'm fifty and thriving, they've let go of any worries and support me fully. They're thrilled about *The Middle of Somewhere* coming out, although I'm making them wait for its release to read it. My partner of seventeen years, Dixie, is a rock of support. She believes in me even when I don't. Plus, she helps me work out hard parts in my story line. Bless her! She'd make a great writer herself if she could ever sit at a computer long enough.

And my friends? They're used to me. I've always got some project brewing, and writing fiction is just the latest. I've got a book signing happening shortly after *The Middle of Somewhere* comes out and they're all planning on coming. I hope they don't ask me too many hard questions! That would be just like them.

Where do you get your ideas?

Who knows? I've been asking myself this same question for years. But I've got tons of them. There's just no way to keep up. Here's one thing, though, because I spend so much of my time doing improv, (I run a school of improv called the Fun Institute.) I'm constantly having characters pop up that interest me. And I'll say this: I start with character. Always. I'll be in the middle of a scene on stage and I'll think, I should write about this person. The character Buddy Bud, in *The Middle of Somewhere*, was a character I played on stage, and I just fell in love with him and had to put him somewhere. The characters Piggie and Heifer came from the two-woman show, *Detour Ahead*, that Dix and I performed.

How much of yourself and the people you know are in your characters?

There are pieces of me in every character in the book. There are also pieces of my friends and people I've met. For instance, I did know a woman with a porcelain heart valve that would tick when she was upset, but she was nothing like this character. And my character Eadie thinks a lot like I do, but she's of a butcher persuasion—and younger.

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How do you write; do you plan everything out or just write?

I usually have an idea where I'm going. Of course it can change. A newspaper article I read changed the course of *The Middle of Somewhere*. As for exact plot points? They come to me as I go—sometimes at the most inappropriate time. I carry a pen and a piece of scratch paper wherever I go, and my desk is covered in stickies! I also love to walk and think about the story line. I'll take long walks around my neighborhood or out by the ocean and let my mind open up to the possibilities.

What makes *The Middle of Somewhere* special to you?

This is a very personal book for me because, while it's not autobiographical, it does capture many of the feelings I had about Texas when I first met my partner Dixie, a Texan if ever there was one. The line "Not all Texans are gun-toting, gay-hating fundamentalist Yahoos" gives you an idea about what I thought to be true. But love changed all that! It also touches on some of my ambivalence about organized religion—a hot topic for me. While I feel strongly that churches are awesome in terms of building and taking care of community—I mean, it was many of the churches in Texas who were housing and taking care of the victims of Katrina—I also feel they can be dangerous because they claim to have the last word on God and other mysteries of the universe.

Which lesbian authors inspired you the most? Do you have a favorite of this author(s)?

Now this is embarrassing to admit. I didn't consciously read lesbian fiction when I wrote this novel. I wrote the novel I wanted to write, then had the good fortune to come across an article in *Writer's Digest* about gay and lesbian fiction where Radclyffe was quoted all over the place, and I thought, I have to check this Bold Strokes out. Their Victory Editions was a perfect fit for my novel. (I'm so thankful that Bold Strokes has this line for authors like me who don't write in a given genre.) Since then, I've been devouring Bold Strokes books. Right now I'm reading Radclyffe's *Night Call*, and loving it. Boy, can she weave a yarn! I also enjoyed Jove Belle's *Edge of Darkness*, Lisa Girolami's *Love on Location*, JLee Meyer's *Hotel Liaison*, Ali Vali's *Deal with the Devil*, Jane Fletcher's *Shadow of the Knife*, just to name a few. These writers may not have inspired this novel, but they sure will inspire future ones.

Do you have any suggestions for new writers?

Some days it's hard to keep your butt in the chair and your fingers on the keyboard. Do it anyway. The muse might swoop down and set you on fire. And one more thing: inspiration is everywhere.

When you're not writing what do you do for fun?

Doing anything with my gal pal. She keeps me sooo entertained. And I love to play with my improv buddies. I'm big on hiking in beautiful places. Bird-watching is a minor hobby. I practice yoga and love to garden. And, of course, I read.



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