

Author Interview: Kat Richardson

By Fleur Bradley

Kat Richardson describes herself as a cross-genre writer, writing Urban Fantasy/Science Fiction Mysteries. Her first novel and beginning of her series featuring PI Harper Blaine, Greywalker, was published by Roc in 2006. Poltergeist followed, and Underground came out in hardcover August 2008.

Did you make a conscious decision to write urban fantasy/science fiction mysteries?

Not really. I just wanted to write a detective novel that happened to have ghosts and monsters intruding on the PI's client list. It never occurred to me that that I'd crossed a genre line or two.

Does straddling genres make the writing harder? Easier?

Both. I can write whatever takes my fancy, but I have to make sure I kept the readers clued-in to the non-traditional parts (be it the mystery elements for fantasy readers or the fantasy elements for mystery readers) and that I always play fair with both. That's a lot of extra work, but it's also a lot of fun and offers a lot of flexibility in the stories.

Take us back to the days before Greywalker was published. Was it a long journey?

Oh yes! This wasn't my first novel-length manuscript, just the one I cared enough about to push—I've been writing since I was eight. I wrote the first draft of Greywalker in May and June of 2000—the fastest I've ever written any novel-length manuscript—but it didn't find an agent for five years and had to go through six drafts before it was ready for publication. Then it spent 14 months in the publication process. Realistically, that's fast for a first novel, but it felt like a long slog through a swamp of editorial torment. I did get very lucky every step of the way—nutty as that may sound in light of what I've just said—but I had and still have very good first readers, agents, and editors who helped me improve the first book and keep on going even when it seemed like there was no end in sight. And my husband who kept saying I should do it even when I wanted to quit and give up this crazy idea that I could write books.

Your novels are very tight, especially in their plotting. Tell us a little about your process. Do you outline?

I'm the Outline Queen. I hate flimsy mystery plots with rabbit-out-of-the-hat solutions, so I'm compelled to get the clues, timing, and details down pat before I start writing. Usually I go through two to five long, detailed outlines—just like the ones you had to submit with term papers in high school and college—with the equivalent of footnotes that include all sorts of additional information that may never appear in the story, but helps me keep track of why something is happening in the story and series and how it relates to the rest. I start with ideas for scenes, settings, characters, clues, and plot points ... then I start shuffling them around until I have the chronological sequence of every point. Then I start filling in holes and bridging gaps, adding things, taking them out, moving them around, until the whole plot makes sense to me. Usually, I have my agent or (advanced) readers look that over and they catch the remaining holes, slow-downs, logic disconnects, character disappearances, dead ends, bad subplots, and so on and then I do it again, creating a new outline that fixes those problems... Then I write the

story. This year I did most of my writing without outlines or with minimal outlines and it was a lot harder and considerably messier than my usual process. I think I'm going back to outlining.

Your novels are set in Seattle, a real city readers will know. Your research must be thorough.

I try, but I still make mistakes, even though I live here. Things get torn down or I misremember them and then I get notes from locals saying “hey, you got this wrong” and I'm embarrassed. Because it takes about 16 months from the time I start actual writing until the book hits the shelves, things can change and there's nothing I can do about that. Most of the time, however, I'm able to go out and walk around and ask questions about existing things and places. When I'm dealing with historical events, people, and places, I'm lucky in that Seattle has a lot of good documentation about its past that's easily available online and in the libraries. Of course, it helps that I'm a history fiend and find all that sort of information- digging fascinating.

Harper Blaine is a pretty cool heroine (with an even cooler ferret). Any qualities she has that you wish you had?

I wish I had Harper's patience and cool. I'm a wound-up, fussy, insecure lunatic with a compulsion to do things other people think are totally loopy—like sitting in front of my computer writing for up to 14 hours a day, or reading books about history and physics because they are fun. I mean—really—what normal person does that?

Now that your novels are so successful, what are some of the challenges you face as a writer that are different from when you first started out?

One thing certainly remains the same and is the biggest challenge for any writer: write better. I want each book to be better than the last. I challenge myself to do something new and more difficult each time and I hope I pull it off. Now that the series is established, I have to keep track of everything so details remain consistent over time—fans are much more observant than writers are and they'll catch every discrepancy. And of course, I don't want to let the readers get too comfortable by never challenging them, either. I want to keep on slipping things in that I hope will get at least a few people thinking about things or in directions they haven't given much time to before. I like tickling people's minds into wondering “hey... what is that thing I see out of the corner of my eye?” or “what does happen to the homeless in the winter?” or “what if the cops hadn't caught that guy who...?”

What does your typical workday look like?

Really dull. I do housework and take care of my ferret, check mail and paperwork, and do errands during the morning and early afternoon. Then I start on the writing chores and work until I've reached the daily word count goal or whatever goal I have for the day if I'm in research or editing mode. I'm essentially in touch with the writing gig all the time. Even vacations are usually involved with research or some other writing-related business. Since I live on a sailboat, I'm also not able to get away from my office, since it's also my couch and my dining table and my kitchen counter. About the only part of my home that hasn't been invaded by bits of my job is the bunk—and that's got my contract paperwork files around it.

Any advice to writers still in the trenches?

Don't write to a specific market trend. By the time you're ready to sell it, the window will probably be closing. Write something you care enough about to stick with

for five to ten years because that's how long that first book or series may take to complete the publication cycle. If you don't feel strongly enough about it to keep on taking the criticism, rejection, rewrites, frustrations, and waiting around that comes with the breaking-in process, you'll either never get published or you'll start to hate the work. This business is hard and heartbreaking enough without that. Oh yeah, and read the agent/publisher query information on their website before you submit anything. Don't look like a lazy twit who can't be bothered to do the research—that'll kill you.

What's ahead for Harper Blaine (and for you)?

There are currently three more Harper Blaine novels under contract, so I'm just finishing up the fourth—that takes place partially in London—and planning the fifth and six. I also had a Harper novella released in January 2009 in the collection *Mean Streets*. Beyond that, I've got a couple of other ideas rattling around that I'd like to get onto paper and out to my agent and (advanced) readers to see what they think: a science fiction forensic thriller that features a detective who is his own walking forensic lab; a possible YA idea about a school librarian who wants to be a superhero and one of her students, a geeky misfit who is interning with the Bad Guy of the Month Club; and there is a little interest in an old SF noir graphic novel I was collaborating on a while back that might or might not come to anything, but it's fun to dream. Eventually, I'd like to see the Greywalker books move into other media, as well, but that's largely not up to me. And I'd like to travel a bit farther afield and find some new creepy things for Harper to explore. Now that she's been to Mexico and England, who knows where else she could find ghosties and ghoulies and long leggity-beasties to deal with?

Find out more about Kat Richardson and her novels at www.katrichardson.com.

Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume VIII, Issue 4, July, August 2009