

Interview with Bestselling Author Catherine Ryan Hyde

By Christian Marcus Lyons

Bestselling author Catherine Ryan Hyde is the author of a large (and growing) number of novels, including *Pay It Forward* (1999), and the forthcoming YA novel, *Jumpstart the World* (Knopf, 2010). She has also written “scads of short stories,” she states on her Web site (www.catherineryanhyde.com), which have appeared in quality literary journals like *The Antioch Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Glimmer Train*, to name a few. Her work has won or been nominated for The Tobias Wolff award, The Raymond Carver Short Story Contest, and The Pushcart Prize.

Pretty much everyone knows that her novel *Pay It Forward* was made into a film starring Kevin Spacey, Haley Joel Osment, and others. Of the film version, Catherine says, “Not the world’s most faithful adaptation, but I’m still glad it was made.” And who wouldn’t be? The film was made for \$40M, and has grossed to date more than ten times that, which has spurred sales of the novel to greater and greater heights.

In addition to her writing career, Catherine (never Cat or Caty, thank you very much!) adores hiking, backpacking, kayaking, fishing, photography, and is a professional public speaker.

Despite her incredibly active lifestyle, staff writer Christian Marcus Lyons managed to catch her between writing sessions to find out more about her as a writer and as a humanitarian.

CML: With an impressive and adventurous resume like yours, how do you schedule your writing time?

CRH: Pretty much the way a pit bull holds onto a pant leg. I put a message on my site at the beginning of this year saying I no longer travel and speak on behalf of the *Pay It Forward* concept. And I’ve stuck to it, no exceptions. And since approximately 100 out of 100 people who want me to speak or travel are only interested in *Pay It Forward*, I have lots of time on my hands for writing these days.

As far as my outdoor adventures are concerned, I’ve had my kayak in the center aisle of my motor home for nearly three weeks, ready to go, but the book comes first. Not just out of discipline. I’d always rather write if I can.

CML: What nourishes your writer’s soul?

CRH: Everything that human beings don’t—and couldn’t—make. This includes my dog Ella, the ocean (which is 236 yards from my house), the pelicans that skim on its waves, the seals who poke their heads up out of it to stare at me, the juvenile Cooper’s hawk who sits on the tree in my back yard, the wild turkeys who come rambling through the field behind me. The deer who eat my flowers. I could go on, but I expect you get the idea.

CML: Since your first novel, *Funerals for Horses*, was published in 1997, how have you changed in relation to your writing?

CRH: I spend a lot less time writing things and then throwing them away. This is not to say that I now hit it out of the park every time I step up to bat. On the contrary, it means I spend less time writing. But, more and more, what I write, I keep. I guess I’m learning to tell the difference between what’s worth writing and what isn’t, before I waste too much time on it.

CML: Your second book was *Earthquake Weather* which was published the

following year—an amazing collection of short fiction, for those who have yet to read it. You're one of the few writers in the current market who continues to write short fiction with success. There is talk about that market drying up and disappearing. Do you agree?

CRH: What “continued success” would that be? After *Earthquake Weather*, I compiled a second collection, which I thought was much better. And never did manage to sell it. I finally just decided to give most of the stories away on my Web site. A sort of added value for those who visit. So I made them into audio podcasts and PDFs, both. And it's been like pulling teeth to get people to go out and take them for free. If I put a free new novel on my site, I expect it would garner some attention. But even most of my friends keep forgetting they were going to give the short stories a try.

So, regretfully, I can only conclude that our society as a whole has gotten out of the habit of short stories and thinks it doesn't like them. Maybe the whole “New Yorker story” stereotype has muddied the water. I think people would like them a lot if they tried them, so at any time the pendulum could swing back again. But at the moment I find myself discouraged about the short story market. Me. The one who wrote the damn book on optimism.

CML: How do you perceive the market for short fiction, for established writers like yourself, and beginning writers who are trying to break into the industry using that market as a springboard to publishing their novels?

CRH: Okay, good. Now I get to be positive again. In that respect, I think the short story marketplace is brilliant. Even if your stories are never published in book form, there is a healthy market among literary and small circulation magazines. And if you can get even a couple of small placements in that arena, it makes an enormous difference when approaching an agent or editor. I almost can't stress too strongly how much that type of publication credit will help your chances.

CML: In each of your novels, you portray very emotionally complex characters without overloading the narrative or bogging down the momentum of the story. What influences do you draw from in your life to depict such beautifully complicated and flawed people?

CRH: This is where I have to be careful to say that I don't put my family and friends into my novels. You have to stress that, otherwise your family and friends start behaving strangely. I think I'm just fascinated by human nature. I study it because it never ceases to amaze me. I'm interested particularly in what we don't say. I find stories by following the fear in people. We all have it, but we don't want to say we have it. Either that or we don't even know. And from that crucial disconnect springs a waterfall of flaws and complications that can be quite beautiful if you let them be.

CML: You write for both the adult and young adult fiction markets. At what point in the writing process do you determine which direction the current project is headed? How do you make that determination?

CRH: I almost never know. I am probably the lamest person on the planet when it comes to judging. I wrote *Becoming Chloe* for adults, then edited it for length and sold it to the YA market. I wrote *Chasing Windmills* (but only from Sebastian's POV) for YA, but my editor thought it was too adult. So I added Maria's POV to make it much more cleanly adult, and sold it to the adult market, and it immediately became a YA crossover. Everybody seems to think there's a nice clean line between the two, but they just don't know where it is. Trust me. It doesn't exist. So, I throw it at what I think is the right

wall. If it sticks, then that's what it is.

CML: Are you more drawn to writing for one audience over another?

CRH: Yes. The YA is closest to my heart. If I had to choose tomorrow, my adult career would be toast. But it wouldn't matter, because my adult readers could just go on reading my YAs. Most adults will do fine with a good cutting edge YA if only they are willing to give it a try.

CML: You're currently represented by the Andrea Brown Agency in California. Can you tell us what it was like for you— what your process was—in attracting such a reputable agency?

CRH: I was actually pretty well into my career. My first agent closed the doors of her agency to go into a new line of work. She was willing to contact Andrea Brown for me to see if she could help set me up, but they had been playing phone tag. Right around that time I was teaching at the La Jolla Writers Conference, and so was Laura Rennert, a key agent at ABLA. So I decided to drop in on one of her workshops. I hadn't met her. Didn't know what she looked like. So I'm standing waiting for an elevator with this woman, this stranger— there were two elevators, and they both started down from the top floor at exactly the same moment. So just to be funny, I turned to her and said, "Are you a betting woman?" Then I read her name tag and it was Laura. I told her on the elevator ride up that my current agent had been trying to contact them on my behalf, and asked if I could pitch her a couple of projects over the course of the weekend. After dinner that night I asked if it was a good time and briefly pitched *Becoming Chloe* and *The Year of my Miraculous Reappearance*.

Of course it helped that I was on the teaching staff. But if she hadn't liked the sound of the projects, I'm sure it wouldn't have helped enough. That was October of '03 and by February of '04 she had sold them both to Knopf. I've always had good experiences with Laura and feel very lucky to have her.

CML: After writing such an extensive number of books, do you still get nervous when pitching a new project to your agent? Do you still experience writer's self-doubt?

CRH: I don't exactly pitch them anymore. I tell her what I'm working on, and when I'm done, I send it.

Interesting timing on asking this question, though, because I actually just finished the draft of the novel I've been working on. And I printed it out this morning and gave it to my mother to read. She's always first. And yes, as the very first person reads it, I'm always a little on edge. Usually I have a gut sense that it's okay (or I wouldn't have printed it out), but until the first reader confirms it, there's doubt. By the time I send it to Laura, three or four other trusted readers will have weighed in. By then I'm pretty sure what I've got. Which is not to say I don't feel better after hearing from her...

CML: What type of work did you do before you became a writer?

CRH: It would save space to just list what I didn't do. I have one of those classic funky writer's resumes, the kind that just screams that a person is moving from job to job trying to avoid the unavoidable. I had my own dog training business for many years. I worked as a dog groomer, then as a baker and pastry chef. I even did some free-lance auto mechanics. And I was a tour guide at the Hearst Castle. The last real job I had was as a barista at a local coffee house. That was my proverbial day job. I quit it.

CML: Did any of those jobs influence you as a writer in some small or great way?

CRH: Yeah. They proved to me that I'm essentially unemployable and gave me

great incentive to never have a day job again.

CML: The novel *Pay It Forward*—did you imagine the concept would take off and become so successful when you were writing it?

CRH: In a word, no.

CML: Writers may not set out to write such an amazing story like *Pay It Forward*, but it obviously happens. To what do you attribute the amazing success the novel has brought you?

CRH: I think it's just a case of the right idea in the right place at the right time. What Daniel Keyes (author of my favorite novel of all time, *Flowers for Algernon*) calls capturing lightning in a bottle. I believe it's always accidental, no matter what someone tells you about their lightning-in-a-bottle after the fact. It's always one of those things you couldn't do again if you tried.

CML: What does your typical writing day look like?

CRH: I have to start by stressing that not every day is a writing day. I should be so lucky. But if it really is a writing day, I'll get up, brush my teeth, do 15 minutes of Yoga, and then sit down in my comfortable recliner with a cup of tea nearby and my laptop on my lap. By evening I may have 10 first-draft pages. If it's a banner day, the number might be up in the high teens. This makes up for the fact that so many days are not writing days. If it isn't flowing, I don't push it. I do something else.

CML: What's one interesting thing about the space you write in—or maybe about your writing process—that you have never told anyone?

CRH: I don't think I've ever told anyone that I have something of a “talisman” for every one of my novels, mostly up in my studio. For example, for *Chasing Windmills* I have a photo of Fred Astaire dancing on the wall in Royal wedding. For *Love in the Present Tense*, I have a stuffed giraffe like Leonard's. For *Funerals for Horses*, a potted cactus out on the patio outside the window.

CML: Did you have someone you considered a mentor early in your writing career?

CRH: I had a couple. I belonged to the Cambria Writers Workshop, and we had some pretty well-published members, such as children's author Elizabeth Spurr, and Jean Brody (*Gideon's House*, *Cleo*, *A Coven of Women*). I was lucky to have them. I was in the process of receiving the 122 short story rejections that I had to weather before placing my first story. And they told me it happened to all writers, and that I was good enough.

CML: What's the hardest lesson you've learned thus far in your career?

CRH: I've always been a big believer in the theory that if you do what you love, the money will follow. But in the years directly following what I call “the whole *Pay It Forward* phenomenon,” I had to learn that if you stop loving what you do, the money will dry up. And that was a weird and confusing time, and I did not love it. Fortunately, I switched to a YA career before I went bankrupt. But not much before.

CML: Thank you for taking the time to chat with me! As a bestselling author, what advice do you give to aspiring, pre-published and published writers?

CRH: I guess the best advice I can give is this: be the one who doesn't give up and go home. The world seems to be ordered something like a retail outlet—the really good stuff has high price tags. It's like the Universe saying, “Okay, but how badly do you want it?” There are so many hard knocks between here and there (although, if there's really a “there,” I haven't found it yet) that most people give up and go home. Which

leaves all the spoils for the abnormally brave souls. So be one of the brave souls. And no matter what happens, if you really want it, don't give up and go home.

Christian Marcus Lyons is a four-time Pikes Peak Writers Conference Fiction Competition award winner in novel-length fiction, short fiction, creative nonfiction, and screenplay. He has also been a finalist in the RMFW Colorado Gold Conference Fiction Contest, Ploughshares Literary Magazine's Award for Emerging New Writers, Glimmer Train's Short Story Award for New Writers, and the Asian International Film Festival. In 2009, he joined the PPWC Fiction Competition judging panel and is on the judging panel for the Crested Butte "Sandy." He lives in Lafayette, CO with his three ginormous dogs, where he's at work on his latest novel.

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