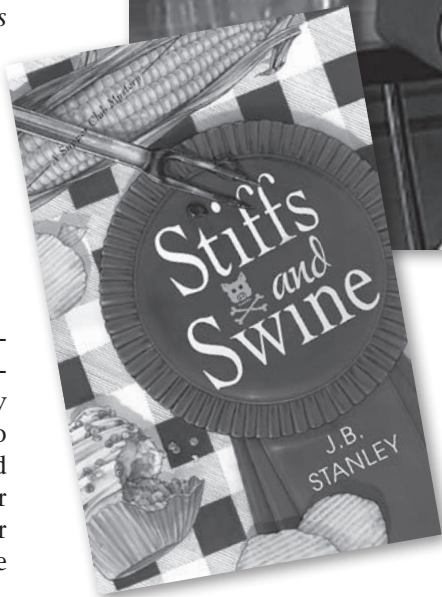


“How to Plot a Murder”: An Interview with J. B. Stanley

by Lyn C. A. Gardner

J. B. Stanley is a mystery author with a special connection to libraries in Virginia: her *Supper Club* mysteries feature a small-town Virginia librarian as sleuth, while Stanley's own love for libraries led her to earn her MLIS. With seven titles in two published series thus far, and another two series anticipated by 2010, Stanley found her start as a novelist upon moving to Virginia, whose various locales—both rural and urban—form the settings of many of her books. Her most recent book in the *Supper Club* series, *Stiffs and Swine*, was released by Midnight Ink on October 1, 2008 (ISBN 978-0-7387-1267-3), and features barbecue recipes that should appeal to the whole family. Throughout her writing career, Stanley has promoted the fun and excitement of the mystery genre through programs at libraries and partnerships with other writers. Her own mysteries provide delightful excursions into the vividly realized worlds of antiques or the Shenandoah Valley, with friendships and family relationships forming the core of characters who are easy to root for and identify with. While murder is a serious subject, these mysteries nevertheless leave one light of heart.

VL Currently, you have two ongoing mystery series: the Collectible mysteries, featuring Molly Appleby, an amateur sleuth who solves crimes in the antiques world while covering shows as a writer for *Collector's Weekly*; and the *Supper Club* mysteries, whose crimes are



solved by a group of friends who dub themselves the Flab Five, with the books centered around James Henry, who's the head librarian of the main branch in Quincy's Gap, Virginia, and formerly an English literature professor at the College of William and Mary. Would you

tell us something about how you came to create these characters, and what it's like keeping up with two series at the same time?

JBS Molly is a bit autobiographical. I grew up surrounded by antiques, had grandparents who collected a variety of things from gems to Majolica, and my mother once owned an antique shop. I've had a part-time job in an auction gallery and have always felt a keen passion for old things.

Strange as this may sound, James and I are a bit alike too as we both share a love of books, fattening foods, and small towns. I began writing about the Flab Five while I was on a low-carb diet. I was so grumpy that I literally wanted to strangle the know-it-alls constantly telling me about their fast metabolisms or what I needed to do to lose the weight I'd gained while pregnant. Once I'd lost a few pounds, I was able to look back on those months and laugh at myself. Assuming that most Americans have been on a diet and shared my feelings of powerlessness and frustration, I decided to create a fictional dieter's support group in the form of a supper club.

VL Both series include fun "special features" that enhance the narrative. The Collectible mysteries include collector's tips, with an appendix that includes photographs and an overview of examples of the type of antique featured in the narrative (such as walking sticks), a prologue that gives a fictional history of the particular antique in question, and quotes about the nature and history of that antique at the head of each chapter. The Supper Club mysteries, with their food-titled chapters, include recipes, nutrition information, serving size, or health club points for the dishes that appear in the novels, located near the point in the story in which that food plays a role. When you initially

conceived of these series, how did you happen to decide to include these tidbits? What role, if any, do they play in shaping the structure of the novels?

JBS In the antique series, the educational tips were the original "hook" that helped sell the series to Berkley Prime Crime. I had to conduct an immense amount of research per book, so I figured I should share the knowledge I'd gained with my readers (while I could still remember it!). I wanted to add the lyrical/historical sections in those books in order to

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really bring the object (whether it was pottery, an antique desk, or a walking stick) to life for the reader. Those are actually my favorite parts of the Molly Appleby books.

As for the Supper Club books, I couldn't resist showing readers the difference between the nutritional content of a serving of cheese puffs and a serving of, say, an apple. We all know that unhealthy foods taste so much better, but it can be shocking to see what's in a manufactured food such as a cheese doodle when it's set down on paper. I wanted to include recipes because I love to cook. (Well, I love to bake. I'm a decent cook, but I make a mean cupcake.)

VL You frequently do programs at libraries, including your "How to Plot a Murder" talk, which is heavy on audience participation. Would you describe this program and explain how you developed the idea and how you make arrange-

ments with the libraries who host it? What are some of the more memorable experiences you've had at these sessions? Do you have any upcoming events that our Virginia readers might want to attend?

JBS Oh, the "How to Plot a Murder" talks are a ball! The unsuspecting audience files into the room and settles down, expecting to listen to me blab away for the next hour. Instead, I grab someone from the crowd and introduce that person as "the corpse." I tailor the profession of the corpse based on the event, and all the suspects are pulled from the audience, too. I "hire" a Vanna White to help me present clues to the audience (the amateur sleuths), and together we solve the mystery. This hilarious game illustrates how a writer works in creating red herrings, leaving significant clues, and highlighting certain themes. The best part is the side commentary given by the corpse (who's supposed to be dead, remember) and the suspects. Surprisingly, no one wants to be found guilty of murder—even a pretend murder. I can do this presentation with or without the slide show presentation on my laptop, but it does require an audience of around forty people as so many folks are involved in the "show." I reward all participants with little treats for letting me paint them as thieves, adulterers, and all-around scoundrels.

VL You hold both an MA in English literature and an MLIS. You've taught sixth-grade language arts and worked part-time at an auction gallery, as well as writing articles for *Antiqueweek*. What inspired you to get your MLIS? Have you worked in a library?

JBS When I was teaching in North Carolina, I felt as though I'd like to try a new career. I'd been a teacher for eight years and just wanted to stretch my wings a bit. I've always loved librar-

ies and books and I feel as though librarians are the unsung heroes of education. They assist patrons of all ages and backgrounds and I wanted to do just that. Unfortunately, I couldn't find a job upon moving to Richmond, so I began to work at Barnes & Noble in Short Pump while writing *A Killer Collection* during my free time. So, in a way, Henrico County is responsible for my writing career! Thank you, friends!

VL You have a lot of personal background that informs the professional lives you've created for your amateur detectives. In addition to your own antiques work, your parents and grandparents both taught you to love antiques from an early age, and Molly's knowledge, as well as her relationships with family and friends, clearly draw upon your own love for and experiences in the field. What are some of the library memories or experiences that may have contributed to your *Supper Club* series? Have you ever considered writing a series that draws upon your professional experience as a teacher?

JBS The children's librarian at the Harborfields Public Library in Greenlawn, New York, was a magical woman. All through my childhood, I believed this person was part mind reader, part fairy godmother. She read stories aloud with a melodious voice, found books containing whatever subject I was currently obsessed with, and gave me stickers for each new genre I explored. I would never have begun my love affair with books without this woman, and I don't even remember her name. That's the kind of librarian I wanted my protagonist to be. James Henry cares deeply for each and every patron in his small library nestled in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.

VL One of your online biographical statements explains that you began your first novel, *A Killer Collection*, after your family moved to Richmond, Virginia, in part because you missed North Carolina, including your family, friends, and the antiques world. Your love for your own mother clearly shows through in Molly's relationship with her mother Clara, and your knowledge and love of antiques shines through every page of the *Collectible* mysteries. Before you moved, had you ever given thought to writing such a novel as you

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stored up experiences? How long did it take you to write that first book? Did the writing experience surprise you?

JBS I've wanted to write a novel since I was a teenager. In fact, I wrote two-thirds of a historical romance in junior high and the same amount of a vampire thriller in high school. After that, I focused on poetry for a while, but the lure of a full-length work of prose kept tugging at me. My homesickness was the emotion that forced me to the computer day after day. I really didn't know anyone here and I missed my family. I'd seen my mother and grandmother daily for the past ten years. It was hard to leave them, but I wrote most of *A Killer Collection's* draft in four months. Then I got stuck and didn't know how to finish it. I put it away for a few months and actually had a dream about the ending. And the rest is history.

VL Your website (<http://www.jbstanley.com/>) describes your early experiences as a writer, composing stories with your grandfather and later showing him the work you completed on your own. Do you feel as though you're carrying on a gift from your grandfather?

JBS I couldn't have been anything successful without the support of my maternal grandparents. In every letter and during every visit they'd tell me I could grow up to be whatever I set my mind to. From the age of eight, I'd decided on being a writer of some sort. "Fine," my grandfather answered seriously. "Then we'd better get started now."

VL The *Supper Club* mysteries, in addition to featuring a small-town librarian hero, are set in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley region of Virginia. Would you tell us something about the experience and research that have gone into writing these novels? As much as I love reading about this lovely area (and you do a great job of conveying both the lifestyle and the grandeur of the scene), I was curious to know what inspired you to choose this setting rather than your current home, Richmond.

JBS I truly discovered the heart-warming majesty of the Shenandoah right after the tragic events of September 11th. Mourning the loss of innocent lives, I wanted to flee the city and spend some time surrounded by natural beauty. I headed west on I-64 until I hit the scenic overlook near I-81. I found what I was looking for and have been back to the area many times since then. In fact, whenever I get stuck on a plotline, I drive west and all my problems seem inconsequential.

VL Do you have any favorite libraries or bookstores that you'd like to share with us?

JBS I love all the Henrico County Library branches as well as the Library of Virginia. My favorite independent bookstores are Creatures 'n Crooks Bookshoppe, The Fountain Bookstore, and The Black Swan. All of these are in downtown Richmond. But honestly, I love all tiny book stores across America, even more so if there's a resident cat in the shop!

VL Your latest novel, the Supper Club mystery *Stiffs and Swine*, was just released on October 1. Would you tell us something about it?

JBS The fourth book in the Supper Club series is my favorite thus far. The blurb says it best: "The supper club members are invited to be guest judges at a regional barbecue contest and they accept the invitation faster than you can say 'hog heaven.' But the barbecue festival's family-oriented, finger-licking fun turns sour when a contestant is found dead. Things go from bad to worse when one of the five friends is accused of the murder and lands in jail. The strained relationship between James and Lucy is still no picnic, but the supper club members must stick together to find the real killer. This title includes authentic barbecue-friendly recipes!"

I thought I'd better write a book in which the recipes would be welcomed by men as well as women! My husband loved having to sample all the oven barbecue brisket attempts. Plus, I felt as though James and friends needed a change of scenery. They'll be back in Quincy's Gap for the next book, *The Battered Body*, which is due out March 1, 2009.

VL You've developed discussion questions for all your books, available through your website. You're also a member of Cozy Chicks (<http://www.cozychicks.com/>), a group of seven women

who write cozy mysteries and offer monthly contests to reward faithful readers with prizes such as "an adorable Cozy Chicks tote bag ... stuffed with our books (all signed of course) as well as other goodies like candles, lotions, notepads, tea, etc." You put on many programs in libraries, and offer to provide a free prize to any book club that you attend in person or via phone. In addition to the need to market your own books, you clearly love to promote mysteries and reading in general, and you've discovered some delightful ways to appeal to

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readers. Would you tell us how you got involved with the Cozy Chicks and got started on some of these marketing concepts? Do you have a definite sense of promoting reading and inspiring a new generation of mystery readers?

JBS The writing community is quite intimate. It only takes a few conferences before you recognize fellow writers and become friends with many of them. We depend on one another and we truly try to help one another get a leg up. Promotion is a fuzzy business and I have no experience in the world of PR, but it seems as though every author now needs a website, a blog, and an arsenal of self-promotion techniques. We're in an age of Information Overload, so it's better to work as a group. Frankly, I asked the Cozy Chicks if I could join theirs, and they welcomed me with open arms. Since then, we promote one another as much as possible, but I will blither on to anyone willing to listen about

dozens of mystery authors. And why not? It's what I love to read!

VL How do you balance writing with raising two children? How long does it take you to write a book, and what percentage of that time is spent on research? Has it gotten easier the more you've written?

JBS Yes, it's gotten easier with each book. I have about six months to write a book and it looks like I'll have six to nine months per book in regards to my upcoming series beginning with *The Haiku Murders*. This series, which is being published by Berkley Prime Crime, is set on the North Carolina Coast in the small town of Fog Horn and features a group of fiction writers. The first book should come out in early 2010. I write every day, mostly in the mornings while my kids are in school, and I try to research and/or edit in the afternoons. I answer emails throughout the day and do my best to respond to readers within twenty-four hours. I can only keep this schedule by being organized, healthy, and having plenty of coffee on hand.

VL Your Collectible mysteries are published by Berkley Prime Crime (<http://berkleysignetmysteries.com/>), an arm of the Berkley Publishing Group/Penguin Group—a well-established publisher. Meanwhile, your Supper Club mysteries are put out by Midnight Ink (<http://www.midnightinkbooks.com/>), a relative newcomer that bills itself as "a fresh new voice in mystery fiction." How do you happen to be publishing with two different lines at the same time? Has there ever been any conflict about this? Have there been any notable differences in your interactions with the two different publishers?

JBS Midnight Ink is a smaller press, so while my books aren't on as many shelves as I'd

like them to be, the trade size and covers are fantastic. I've felt very involved in every step of each book and that's been a wonderful experience. Berkley Prime Crime is one of the mystery publishing giants. It is an honor to be able to write two series for them. They are aggressive about getting their books on the shelves and are experienced professionals in every aspect of the publishing business. (By the way, I also have a series coming out with St. Martin's in late 2009/early 2010. It's a Bible study mystery series and is set in Richmond, so I'll have had a dance with three publishing partners by 2010. What fun!)

VL Given the season and the theme of this special issue of *Virginia Libraries*, I wanted to allow our readers to share one of my favorite images in *Carbs & Cadavers*: the library float in the Halloween Parade, "entitled 'The Magic of Words.' The Fitzgerald Brothers had created several books the size of small cars. Standing on top of one of the open books was the Headless Horseman. ... The fearsome rider, astride a real black horse, held a menacing jack-o'-lantern in the crook of his arm as he pointed an accusing finger at the townsfolk. On top of another book was the monster from *Frankenstein*. ... [B]olts of electricity seemed to be jolting the figure right off its metal lab table. The last book was what excited the crowd the most. Standing upward, so that people behind the float could read the title on the spine as well as on the front cover, the text was the much beloved *Harry Potter*. On top of the pages, Francis had dressed himself as Harry and sat astride a broomstick. Waving to the cheering masses, he flew in an arc around the book, dispensing Tootsie Pops as he pretended to chase the Golden Snitch. ... James noticed tiny pieces of paper wound around the lollipop sticks. Apparently, each lollipop

came with a recommended read for those who 'dared to be scared'... All of the spectators were pointing at their slips and discussing the book titles written there."

I think that's a marvelous concept and an exciting way to draw new readers. Do you know any real-life libraries who are doing things like this? It makes me think we've lost a valuable community outreach librarian when you became a novelist!

JBS I don't think libraries have a budget for the things I'd

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like to see them do! If I had my wish, they'd all have coffee bars, rooms where books were brought to life through virtual reality, and the most exciting book clubs ever! They'd be places that members of the community flocked to *en masse*, but this won't happen without more funds. Let's hope the new president is a library fan!

VL Many of your author photographs feature cats—both living and decorative. Would you describe how your cats assist you with the creation of your mysteries?

JBS I'm just a sucker for all animals. I even like spiders. The only animal I truly fear is the shark (and if I'm going to be honest—caterpillars). I grew up with cats and dogs and couldn't imagine a home or a book without pets.

VL I love your characters—your protagonists seem like people I'd love to count my friends. You've got a deft touch in creating realistic, likeable characters—sleuths whose foibles keep them human and whose heroism requires the kind of struggle many of us would face. You do a great job with subplots, too, keeping readers in suspense as much with the details of the characters' personal lives and relationships as with the crimes themselves, and getting the two to intersect in believable yet surprising ways. Did you discover these strengths as you wrote? Did they play any role in your choice to write about amateur sleuths?

JBS You're making me blush! When I create characters, I want them to have the foibles and endearments that we all possess. Otherwise, no one will connect with them. Strange as it sounds, I create problems for them, but then I root for them to come out on top. Sometimes authors claim their characters take over and I can attest that they certainly do! I'll have planned a scene and as I begin to write it, the character will silently protest and I'll have to make adjustments. I love and respect these folks, which also sounds a bit crazy, but all writers are a bit odd!

VL You seem to have so many creative ideas about getting readers involved with books, as demonstrated not only by your own marketing ideas, but also within the Supper Club mysteries themselves, with the characters devising innovative ways to fund their struggling library and get the public excited about reading. Do you have any advice for other writers and libraries who want to do the same?

JBS I think libraries need to shake things up a bit. Instead of having one author in to speak, ask a group. Create a panel in which readers and hopeful writers can get involved instead of listen-

ing to a lecture. Add food. People love food. The Tuckahoe Library handed out door prizes at my event and patrons wore silly necklaces, pins, and other paraphernalia to honor my book, *Chili con Corpses*. These little touches created a festive air, and the wine didn't hurt either! Books should be celebrated, and the notion of a stuffy literary event doesn't sound as appealing as wine, desserts, and a group of people plotting a murder!

Writers can often be hermits.

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After all, we're typically introverts, so we need to join together to succeed. Get involved with listservs, national and local writer's organizations (such as James River Writers or Virginia Writers Club), and try to be a part of a group blog. Mingle with other writers and ask them questions. They are an approachable, friendly lot, I promise you.

Thank you for reading this interview. I am truly honored to have been included in a publication read by librarians. You are my heroes! ❖

Finding Virginia Authors

Looking for local authors for programs or to improve your collection of Virginia writers? Here are a few good places to start.

- Virginia Commission for the Arts, Directory of Writers in Virginia: <http://www.arts.state.va.us/directories/writers/search.asp>.
- The Virginia Writers Club, Inc.: <http://www.virginiawritersclub.org/>. Member websites, publications, and events. View writing clubs by region: <http://www.virginiawritersclub.org/chapters.html>.
- The Poetry Society of Virginia: <http://www.poetrysocietyofvirginia.org/sys-tmpl/door/>. Includes member websites and publications, workshops and readings, "Meet Virginia's Poets," and more.
- James River Writers: <http://www.jamesriverwriters.com/>. Richmond-based group that hosts conferences, contests, and literary events. Remember to find out if your area hosts a local writers group!
- Mystery Writers of America, Mid-Atlantic Chapter: <http://www.mwa-ma.org/>. There's a librarian membership category for those who wish to keep up with publications, events, and authors through listservs, newsletters, and invitations to local events.
- Sisters in Crime, Virginia Chapter: <http://www.sistersincrimere.org/chapters.html#VA>
- Romance Writers of America: <http://www.rwanational.org/>. Search the Speakers Bureau by author, state, or genre: http://www.rwanational.org/cs/speakers_bureau. There are librarian memberships, a library-oriented webpage, and a list of author websites.
- Poets & Writers: Connect with Others, By Area, Virginia: <http://www.pw.org/connect/state/va>. Directory of Writers: <http://www.pw.org/directory/featured>.

Don't forget the bookstores in your area. Chain stores

may have a section of local interest. The independent stores often have robust sections devoted to local writers, many of them online (check out Richmond's Fountain Bookstore: <http://www.fountainbookstore.com/NASApp/store/IndexJsp;jsessionid=abcLCMNchvRz1f9CLEeBr?s=localauthors>). University bookstores provide sections by faculty and alumni, many of them Virginia writers. Browse websites of local colleges (particularly the English department) for faculty, literary magazines, and events. Library staff who are alumni of local universities can check newsletters for publication announcements.

Remember to check your newspaper for literary events and awards. There are many literary events at local bookstores, as well as other libraries (some have email announcement lists). Pay attention to local and state literary awards like the Library of Virginia Literary Awards (<http://www.lva.virginia.gov/whatwedo/awards/>), VLA's own Jefferson Cup Awards (http://www.vla.org/cyart/jefferson_cup/Jeffersoncup_index.html), or the York County Public Library Annual Literary Competition (http://www.yorkcounty.gov/library/literary_contest/literarycompetition.htm). (Look to judges and finalists as well as winners.) Attend local conferences and festivals, like the ODU Literary Festival (<http://www.lib.odu.edu/litfest/30th/index.htm>), the CNU Writers' Conference (<http://writers.cnu.edu/>), or the Chesapeake Poetry Festival (see p. 49; <http://www.chesapeake.lib.va.us/>). Check out Virginia arts organizations like the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (<http://www.virginiafoundation.org/>), including their Center for the Book (see p. 14; <http://www.virginiafoundation.org/bookcenter/>). Finally, sites like BookTour (<http://booktour.com/readers/search>) can be searched by state for writers and literary events. ❖