

Q & A with author Alexandra Sokoloff

So how did you start writing?

I think almost every writer I know has the same answer to this question: I just always wrote. Long before I ever thought of being a writer. I kept journals, I wrote pages and pages of random thoughts during math classes, I wrote in the car during family road trips. It was how I thought. When I wasn't writing, like every other writer, I read. We had one of those houses that had hundreds of books in every room, stacked to the ceiling, overflowing bookshelves. You were never more than an arm's length from a book. I could read walking home from school – another sure sign of a writer-to-be.

I didn't start out thinking I'd be a writer, though. I got the acting bug first, which is great fun, total instant gratification. I did musical theater from sixth grade all through high school, and majored in theater at Berkeley.

But I quickly realized I was more interested in the big picture, the actual telling of the story. Theater was a fantastic training ground for writing. I worked my way through acting, which taught me how to create character and connect with an audience; dance and choreography, which taught me rhythm and pace, fearlessness and sensuality and seduction (and oh, yes – discipline!); then directing, which taught me design, structure, theme. Writing was the next natural step - the ultimate expression of all those things. But the moment I said – “That's it, I'm going to write”? That was when I saw my first one-act play, one that I'd written for a class at Berkeley, performed. The characters I'd created walked out on stage, live, and it was like I imagine heroin has got to be. I was God. That was it – hooked. It was all about writing from then on.

Okay, I get that musical theater is good training for writing. But - you write all this dark stuff.

Oh, right. You mean, where did the dark stuff come from? Well, I was always attracted to ghost stories – my dad used to tell them around the campfire and he loved horror and suspense - books, movies, plays, anything. I developed a taste for being scared senseless. But also from the time I was a very young child I was very sensitive to the fact that there's a lot of weirdness out there, and a lot of danger from unstable people. My family did quite a bit of traveling, so along with all the good stuff - great art, ancient cultures, different mores and political beliefs - I was exposed to disturbing images and situations: poverty, desperation, oppression, madness. Also, I was almost abducted as a child, so I was aware that there are people out there who have something terribly wrong with them, who actively want to hurt and destroy.

Also when I was a teenager I experimented with the paranormal, as teenagers do – ESP, dream interpretation, Tarot, Ouija, spending the night in graveyards. And, you know – there's a lot more in heaven and earth, Horatio! It never ceases to fascinate me. I have to admit, though - to me those otherworldly experiences are never as horrifying as the evil that people can do.

But the great, cathartic thing for me about good mysteries, thrillers, horror, suspense - is that you can work through those issues of good and evil. You can walk vicariously into those perilous situations and face your fears and – sometimes - triumph.

How did you get into screenwriting?

After college I was writing and acting in an improvisational theater group in the Bay Area. But we sort of imploded from youth and an excess of backstage drama, and I'd already been to New York and was not at the time interested in being a traditional playwright (after years of improvisational training I found Broadway staged productions programmed and flat. Now I love

them!). And all I'd ever done was dramatic writing, so I wasn't drawn to novels at the time, either. I had to write, but I decided on film writing basically through a process of elimination.

So I pretty naively moved to Los Angeles (I call those "the oatmeal years"). I read books on film, saw a lot of movies, and wrote while doing a bunch of seriously odd jobs – I worked part-time at the great metaphysical bookstore, the Bodhi Tree, (<http://www.bodhitree.com/>) I taught in the LA County Juvenile Court system (blonde twenty-something teaching incarcerated teenage boys – think about it!) and I worked as a reader for various film companies (one of the best ways to learn the business).

But it's a natural transition from theater to film, and it didn't take me that long to get established. My first screenplay won a UCLA Diane Thomas Award and was optioned. My second screenplay, co-written with David Arata, sold to Twentieth Century Fox in a bidding war and I've been lucky enough never to have a day job since.

The great thing about film writing is that you can make a living writing! And there's no question, Hollywood is a seductive place to work. But it's a sad fact that screenwriters have less and less creative power in an increasingly corporate industry. And of course – vertical integration is the enemy of art. When it's all about box office, and corporate executives are making story decisions, what you get is what we've been seeing on the big screen for years now – a mind-numbing parade of sequels and remakes.

And that was really what drove me to start writing novels.

What was the inspiration for *The Harrowing*?

The Harrowing is based on real incidents from my high school and college years. Very early on in life I noticed what seemed to be a correlation between mental/emotional illness and paranormal events. Emotionally disturbed people seem to have a high level of psychic awareness, and they attract synchronicities and even weirder occurrences. That's a theme in a lot of my writing (and reading).

I wanted to take a bunch of misfit, troubled college kids and put them into a situation similar to Shirley Jackson's great *The Haunting of Hill House*, and play with the idea that the emotional dynamic between them attracts an equally troubled spirit – or that the whole thing is just psychological or a prank that gets out of hand and builds its own momentum.

And the Thanksgiving weekend part – well, I spent a stormy Thanksgiving weekend in the dorm my freshman year at Berkeley. It was a natural setting for this kind of thing – I knew exactly what it felt like!

Was it hard to make the transition from screenwriter to novelist?

All writing is impossible, so in a way writing a novel was just a different kind of impossible. I knew how to tell a story, and about character and dialogue and theme and suspense - it was the device of narration that was the brand new thing I had to learn: authorial voice, I guess I mean. And you have to use a lot more words! Honestly, I have so much more to learn, it's completely overwhelming. But I keep thinking of a quote - I wish I knew who said it: "You would not have had the idea if you did not have the capability of executing it." Something like that. I try to hold on to that. There's a funny thing about being a writer - you have this enormous sense of responsibility about your characters and worlds – this urgent drive to bring them to life. So you keep knocking yourself out to somehow get good enough to do them justice.

How did you get your agent and publishing deal?

My extremely patient and supportive film agent, Frank Wuliger, gave the book to my agency's book acquisitions agent and she loved it, and she gave the book to several New York book

agents, and Scott Miller at Trident Media Group read it within a week or two, and loved it. A month later we had a two-book offer from St. Martin's.

It all happened so incredibly much faster than you always hear about, but remember, I'd paid my dues for years as a screenwriter - they don't call it development hell for nothing.. Believe me, I've suffered enough!

What advice would you give aspiring writers?

Oh, there are so many ways to answer that question. The first that springs to mind is – Don't do it! Which is what I heard from so many writers when I was an aspiring writer, and of course you see how well I followed that advice. The thing is, if you're a writer, you're going to write, and nothing anyone can say will talk you out of it. You will take the advice that makes sense and ignore the rest and fight it out, whether it's good for you or not, whether it makes you happy or not – you'll do it.

But there's so much truth to that old saw – If there is anything, ANYTHING else you can do and be happy – do that instead.

The second bit of advice is the best and truest I've ever heard about becoming a writer, from Saroyan: "Find a small room in a big city and put your desk in front of the window and sit down in front of the blank page. And when you stand up ten years later, you will be a writer."

The trick, of course, is that you have to STAY in the chair.

The third, and probably the one that people want to hear, is – Find a system. Read a lot of books on writing, take a lot of classes, and when you find a writing system that makes sense to you, follow it. And then expand on that. There are some very, very good teachers out there, and some not so good, but you have to decide for yourself who is the best teacher for you at a certain time. I cannot recommend John Truby's Story Structure (<http://truby.com/>) classes and CDs highly enough. I am also indebted to the late, great Frank Daniels for letting me audit his USC classes on screenwriting and story structure – I wish his taped lectures were available to the public.

I guess I have a fourth bit of advice, too. Learn everything you can about how to manage your money wisely. Professional writing is a feast or famine rollercoaster. Being smart about money will make you free to do the kind of writing you want to do. Try The Motley Fool, (<http://www.fool.com/>) The Complete Idiot's Guides, any basic guide to money management. Make sure you understand the miracle of compound interest. I could not be more serious about this.

What is your life like now?

A little frenetic! I'm currently living in both Los Angeles and in Raleigh, North Carolina, with my double-extra-large Alpha male boyfriend Michael – we're both adventure travel junkies and met on a whitewater rafting trip (<http://www.raft-colorado.com/>) on the Colorado River. I'm finishing my second novel, *The Price*, another supernatural suspense set in the great city of Boston, which will be out from St. Martin's next year; and sketching out my third, *The Traveller's Tale*. I go to a lot of writing conventions – I love the traveling and I love meeting people.

I practice my Berkeley political activism on union and creative rights issues in the Writers Guild of America, west, (<http://wga.org/>) where I currently serve on the Board of Directors. I'm also the founder of WriterAction.com, (<http://writeraction.com/>) a large and unruly cyber-community of professional screenwriters. And I'm still a dance addict! Jazz, ballet, (<http://studioadance.com/>) salsa, Lindy, swing (<http://musicanddance.com/main.php?mc=1>) - I do it all, every chance I get.