

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE FORCE

Bernadette: Hello and welcome to Fearless Fiction, I'm your host, Bernadette Walsh, and I am so pleased today to introduce my guest, Marie Force. Marie is a New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal bestselling author of over 100 romance novels. Marie writes contemporary romance, romantic suspense, and erotic romance.

Her latest title is [In the Air Tonight](#). So Marie, welcome to Fearless Fiction, I'm so glad you could join me. How are you?

Marie: Thanks for having me.

Bernadette: Oh, well, I'm very, very excited. And let's just jump in with, I mean, 100 novels. When do you sleep? Maybe we could start a little bit about your writing journey. What made you start? What made you want to start writing? And why did you choose romance?

Marie: Well, I, the romance part was easy, because I wrote, I write what I like to read. And so I grew up with a mom who liked to read Danielle Steele and Nora Roberts, and we used to, you know, trade books back and forth. And I always thought it would be fun to do.

I was a big fan of Danielle Steele back in the early part of my life. And I thought, oh, God, that would be so fun. And it is.

And so when my mom, who got me into reading and to romance, became ill in 2003, with pancreatic cancer, I sort of felt a sense of urgency to get moving on this maybe someday goal. And I was able to give her a little bit of my first book to read before she passed. So she's missed this whole thing. But I sort of also feel like she's sending me all these good ideas.

Bernadette: I'm sure she's reading wherever she is. It's so funny, because that kind of echoes my, my journey as well. I was always a big reader. My mom used to read romance. She also was from Ireland. So she read a lot of Irish authors. So I got exposure to that as well. But I always talked about writing, you know, as a someday, but it's hard to think that you yourself could really be a writer, right? Like you almost think writing is this mysterious thing or gift.

And you know, I'm only an ordinary person. So what do I have to say that's an interest to anyone? And I think it took something like, you know, when is the time I turned 40? Right? What if not now, when? And that's when, you know, being pushed by my husband, actually, I started writing and, and my first book was awful. Hopefully yours was not awful.

And so when you decided to start writing, like, what was your next step?

Marie: I had a book in mind for a lot of years before I actually started making notes. And, and when you talk about awful, like, I go back and look at those early notes. And you know, the ideas that I had for this book, and it's so funny to look at with perspective of 18 years

later, but that book actually did end up getting published many years later, a much smaller, leaner version of the same story that I but I learned, like all the big lessons with Treading Water, which was my first book.

And remarkably enough, it's still one of my readers' favorites, and I sign copies of it every week. And so it's funny how that book is still with me very much with me present in my daily in my daily life. So but I learned so much with that first book.

And a lot of the mistakes I made with that book, I never made again. And I learned a lot about like killing your darlings, as they say, the things that you think the book cannot possibly survive without, well, yes, they can. So yeah, like, I just dove into that first book.

And it took me, I was working full time, I had two young kids, all the usual stuff that everyone has. And it took me almost a full year from the time I really dove into it. And then I wrote the second book in that series in 90 days.

So I feel like I went through like boot camp with the first book and then came out of it ready to rock and roll. Right.

Bernadette: But even one year for your first first book is not that long, really, especially if you hadn't written before.

I mean, I have people, you know, in writing groups and people you meet, like, it seems like they're working on their same book for like five years. So one year, sounds like a long time, but it's not a tremendously long time.

Marie: No, that was that was just for the first draft, too.

And like, I messed around with that book for years, like I finished it in 2005. And it wasn't published until the end of 2011. So I messed around with that book for a lot of years before it ever saw the light of day with readers.

And it was a much better book when it was published than it was when I first finished it. So I just mean like a year to finish that first draft. Everything is much quicker now.

But it has been for a long time. But it really that was a process of learning how because I was a professional writer before this, but not for fiction. So I've always been a writer and editor and all of that.

So I thought, oh, you know, that will translate. Well, it's a whole different as you know, it's a whole different process, with point of view and dialogue and moving a story forward and timing and all the things that go into it. So, yeah, I mean, it was a big, long process, really the first book.

Bernadette: Right. And did you feel like you almost had to unlearn some of the techniques you used in your whatever your other type of writing was, say business writing? I know for myself, I'm a lawyer, right? So I think, oh, you know, of course, I came into this like, oh, I could write a book. I write briefs. I write, you know, offering documents like contracts. So I

can you know, I work with words. That's that's my toolbox. And that's why my first book was so awful, because it sounded like a contract. And I really had to relearn like, how can I talk like a normal person?

Marie: Well, I do remember my friend who's now my full time assistant said to me when I was writing the first book, she was reading it as I wrote it. And she said to me, like, you know, people when they talk, they use contractions. So maybe you should put that in the dialogue. And I'm like, duh, you know, so like, I had to learn everything, from scratch in that way. But I was also a newspaper reporter so I learned to write lean, you know, I write like I'm not big on huge, long descriptions and descriptive paragraphs and stuff like that. I'm much more about the getting down to the business of it. Like with the I'm a big fan of writing dialogue.

And I love the character interactions and stuff like that. And I don't like long, descriptive passages, like I avoid them like the plague. So in that sense, I still write very much the way I did as a reporter.

Which is kind of funny to think about, because I did that for two years back in the late 80s. But yet those that process has stayed with me.

Bernadette: Right. And that's actually what modern readers want in a lot of ways, the more descriptions are out of favor, I think.

Marie: Right. And it's because we're all of the Twitter generation and the Thread generation where you've only got so many characters to get a point across.

And so it's got to be easily digestible. And so I but I've always written like that. I never have had as a reader, patient for those huge blocks of, you know, just prose. Like my eyes fall back in my head. And I skip them a lot of times. And when I'm reading my own stuff back for editing and proofing and stuff, if I see a huge block of text, it always gets broken up at that point.

Bernadette: Right. But then that puts pressure on your words to really do the work. Especially in a romance, because you're establishing a lot of different things. You're establishing your main heroine, her character, her thoughts, her dreams, and then how she interacts with this hero or how and how whatever you're writing and then all the other things that go on.

So writing concise, and I also suffer from writing concise again, probably because of my day job. So I also sometimes write short and I have to struggle to get to a certain word count. But it means that your words have to be that much more powerful.

And so for you, how do you do that? How do you write in a concise way but make sure that the punch is there in terms of the attraction between your characters and the plot in general?

Marie: I use a lot of dialogue in my books that really kind of delivers the, I don't know, I really feel like that's like where the punch is. And of course, you know, the plotting to like in the romantic suspense novels, there's a lot of bendy twisty plot stuff that keeps the pages turning and, and the pacing is very different in those books than it is in like, just a straight contemporary romance. The romantic suspense there's a lot more urgency in the plot.

So that also allows us to move the story forward. My books are very character driven, versus versus plot driven, big emphasis on family dynamics, whether it's found family, work family, the family you're born into, or the one you create for yourself, like those, like kind of like my core story, if you will. And so those elements are present in all of my books.

And so in that sense, there's a familiarity for me in writing them, even though the stories are all different, the characters are different.

Bernadette: Okay. And so you've now done, I think, what a lot of agents and all the publishing gurus tell you not to do, which is, you've skipped around genres, you've stayed within romance, but you're writing in very different genres of romance.

And so you're breaking some rules there, Marie. How did you do that? How did you have the courage to do that? And what has been the fallout or, or have you had there been no fallout?

Marie: I haven't had any fallout. And I really don't think of it as genre hopping, because it's all romance.

I think of genre hopping, it's being like, you know, writing straight mystery, and then writing a romance, and then writing a historical fiction. And, you know, and it makes it hard for readers to figure out who you are and what you write. There are central themes running through all my books that readers can, if you like one series of mine, you'll find a lot of the similar elements in another series, even though it's a totally different situation, totally different cast, totally different location, whatever.

I think it's the core story that comes through. You know, in my suspense books there's a found family in that, in that group of people. And then in my Gansett Island series, it starts out with a family, and it expands into friends and cousins.

But they're all connected by their fact that they live on this remote island. So there's always like something, there are central themes that apply across. And I don't really think of it as genre hopping, because it's within the same, it's all romance, in a sense.

Bernadette: So then you've been able to, you know, people who like one, a romantic suspense, do you find readers also try your other novels as well?

Marie: Yeah, yeah, I definitely have. I have a lot of readers like that, read everything. And then I have others who are very focused on certain series and, but it just depends.

I don't feel like that they're turned off by one thing or the other at all. Like, I feel like they, you know, they like what I do, they tend to like most of it, if they, you know, if they can venture into 100 books at this point.

Bernadette: Right, right. Well, that is music to my ears, because I also genre hop as well. Well, what I call genre hopping, but I probably is a little more, you know, I write a lot of women's fiction. I started off contemporary romance, but my women's fiction, it's so hard, like, what is the line between contemporary romance and women's fiction? You know, I think there's always a lot of romance. I mean, that's part of a woman's life. So the romantic relationship is definitely a part of it. But the focus may be a little different.

So I've done that. I've also done paranormal romance. So I did all the things that they tell you not to do.

So I feel very, very good that I'm now in good company with you, Marie, because you've obviously had a lot of success.

Marie: Well, I will say one thing. One thing I'll add, though, is I do think of paranormal as being very different from, I mean, all of my books are straight contemporary.

I have two historical romances that are, I kind of think of as off to the side, but all of my books are contemporary romance. It's just whether there's an element of suspense or erotic elements or whatever. I do think of paranormal as being, would be a complete departure from that.

So in that way, I would say that's a genre hop. Because, I mean, I find that readers either love paranormal or they hate it. And there's not a lot in the middle.

And I'm one of those people who, I think I was born without the suspension of disbelief button. So paranormal and fantasy, it goes right over my head. It just doesn't even register with me.

I can't read it. I don't watch it. It doesn't hit me at all.

So I think it just depends, too, what interests you and what you like to read and how you can bring that into your books. But the more diverse that your genres are, the harder it is to connect with a broad audience. I will say that.

That is definitely true. You mentioned that agents and editors talk about that, and it's very true. If the books are all wildly different from each other, then it does make it difficult to bond with an audience.

Bernadette: Right, right. Well, and I also think people have preconceptions, especially you're right about paranormal romance or paranormal books. I think my books are more like paranormal women's fiction.

And so a lot of my readers will say, oh, I love all your books, but I haven't read your witch books. And I'm like, you should give it a try. Because in my view, a lot of it is, it really is about the character, as you said.

They're about women, a lot of women in midlife. So there's a lot of themes that go throughout it. But let's move a little bit into your publishing journey.

And I'm going to apologize to everyone in advance. My husband is coming home. My two dogs are barking like crazy.

So you may hear stuff in the background, but we're going to just power through. So you had started off, well, let's talk about your first book, how you got that published, and where you are now in your publishing journey.

Marie: So my first book was the seventh, the first published book was the seventh one I wrote.

And it was with Sourcebooks in 2008. And I was with Harlequin for a time, I was with Berkeley for a time, I was with, I did two books with Kensington. So, you know, kind of have been around the publishing landscape a little bit.

And also, in 2010, self-published my first book in November 17 of 2010, I published one of my single titles. And within six months, that move had changed my whole life. So I was lucky that in the sense that all the books that hadn't sold back in the day, when there was only one way to get to readers, were not only finished, but they were polished, because I had continued to work on them for all the years that I tried to get published.

And they were ready to go. So when the door to KDP swung open, I was in a really good spot, because I had a bunch of books ready to go, including the first three books in my Gansett Island series, which has gone on to sell like, that's my biggest selling series. You know, it's been a juggernaut.

It's changed my life. I can't even, in so many ways. And then my Fatal series, which was originally with Harlequin.

And, you know, also that series too has been really big for me. And then the follow on First Family series, which is self-published. And that is now my biggest seller.

So it's like, it's just been a little bit of everything. And In the Air Tonight, which came out in September, is with Blue Box Press, which is an amazing group of women who are dynamic powerhouses. And I really have enjoyed that process with them.

In the Air Tonight is a slightly different book than I normally write. It's got like a mystery thriller element to it. There is romance and there are trigger warnings on this book. So make sure if you want to check it out. But that one is a little bit of a departure for me. And so it was fun to do it with Blue Box and to do a single title for the first time in five years, because I'm like the series girl.

And sometimes I feel chained to them. So to do something different was really fun.

Bernadette: Well, sometimes to do something different, you need to like clean your palate a little bit.

So it sounds like maybe that's what it was for you. In terms of series then, how many books do you typically have in a series? Like what do you think is the sweet spot in terms of series length?

Marie: Well, I have trouble finishing series. I have one series that's at 27 books and going strong.

I have one that's at 24 books and going strong. I finished one at 15 books. I finished one and two of them at five books.

I finished one at eight books, but that one's getting another one five years after I finished it. So I don't know. And then I have another one that's at four books, but that could go on forever.

So yeah, I don't know. So it just depends. It depends on like my readers are so crazy about Gansett Island still at 27 books.

I can't seem to quit them. So sometimes I'd like to because there's other stuff I want to be doing, but I've also learned the value of giving the people what they want. And that's what they want from me.

And so after a while you start to figure like, okay, I could go off and do this, this and that. And it would be really fun and this and that and the other thing. But the readers that come back time and time again, they want this certain thing from me.

And as long as I keep giving it to them, obviously with variations in all the books, I mean, none of them are exactly, they're not similar. They're just, well, some of them are, but there's one series, my Fatal First Family series has the same couple in every book. And that's kind of an interesting story because when I was first starting out and I wanted to write this series, my editor at the time told me it's simply not done in romance.

And I have proven otherwise. So, and it's been a juggernaut. That series has just been unbelievable for me.

So, and it continues to be. Even with a spinoff series now, I did 16 books in the original and now I'm at eight books in the follow-up series. And it continues the same couple, 24 full-length books and two novellas.

And the readers, that's the one that is my, that's my biggest series right now.

Bernadette: How old are they now? Have they aged?

Marie: No, they're, it's the whole 24 books covers just over two and a half years of their lives.

Bernadette: Oh, wow. Okay.

Marie: Yeah. Because every book picks up almost exactly where the last one left off, which is why, like, you know, she's a DC homicide detective.

He's a politician and he bullies, he starts off as a chief of staff to a Senator and ends up, the Senator is murdered and he's tapped to take his place. And so like, you know, here he is now on this up and coming political journey with a girlfriend slash Beyonce slash wife, who is the homicide commander in Washington, DC, in the Metropolitan Police Department. So those two careers could fuel a hundred books, you know?

Bernadette: Yeah. And do you have to do a lot of research? So do you have any background in your real life about that or did you have to do, do you have to do a lot of research for these, for these books?

Marie: So I was just telling the story to somebody today that when I was a little kid, so just in two and a half years, his trajectory, and it's believable. The way that it goes down is really crazy, but he ends up going all the way. And I was taking books out of the library about US presidents when I was like nine years old, like the biggest, world's biggest nerd.

I've always been super interested in the presidency, in politics, in media, in all the things. And so, and I worked in DC for, for a company in DC for 16 years. So I was, some of it was a big chunk of that was remote, but I was in and out of DC all the time, you know, very tuned into what was going on there.

And then I feel like everything, like I was a journalism poli sci double major. I have a master's in public administration. I feel like all those things, I worked for 16 years for accountants who did financial management and government.

I feel like all those things were like leading to this series, you know? So at the crime element, I had to bring in, I have a police officer, a retired captain from a local police department who was a homicide detective who helps me with the police details. And then of course, you know, there's a ton of resource in all of them for that, that portion of it. But all those other things, I feel like were preparing me without me even knowing it to write this series.

Bernadette: Well, everything does, right? I mean, really what everything in your life, I think, prepares you. And it, because it influences what interests you, right? Where your, where your eye goes. And so, you know, I think where sometimes people get into trouble is they're like, romances in Iceland are hot right now. I'm going to write a romance in Iceland, even though I hate cold weather, I know nothing about Iceland. And I actually don't even like romance, but I want to sell a lot of books.

Like, that's not, that's not going to be natural, right? You're not going to create a, maybe you'll create a great book, but chances are you won't. So I think like people who are

successful write what's passionate to them, because, you know, you have to spend more time with this book than anyone else.

Marie: I also find that if everybody's doing something, I, it's the last thing I want to do.

That's always been my, and it's not necessarily like even something I actively think about. It's just like, if something is all the rage, like I tend to be like, where's the opposite pole of that? So I just, I like doing my own thing. I don't like, you know, like I have, I hear like all this stuff about tropes and of course, you know, I'm not opposed to using that and marketing and all that stuff, but I fear that tropes makes, starts to make romance all sound alike, you know? And I, I don't know.

That's sort of a little concerning to me.

Bernadette: Well, that's why a lot of people are down on romance, right? A lot of people like, why don't you read, you know, I've heard this from people like, oh, why don't you write a real book? Well, okay.

Marie: People who are down on romance, people who are down on romance have never read one.

Bernadette: That's my experience. I mean, they think they know what it is.

Marie: Yeah, exactly.

Bernadette: They think they know what it is. Exactly. And I think romance has evolved.

Like, romance is a little different from, you know, the books I used to steal off my mother's nightstand. Like it has evolved. It has.

Marie: It's so much more than people think it is. And I mean, I've often had like, especially even some of the guys in my life who will be like, razzing me about, you know, my sexy books and all this stuff. And then I'll challenge them to read one of them.

And this recently just happened, actually, a friend of my brother-in-law's came to my reader weekend this year, and he was his first real submersion into my world. And he went home and read one of the books and wrote to me and was like, wow, okay, I get it now. So yeah, and it was just like a totally different experience than he expected.

And I think that's true whenever a lot of times people say some really dumb stuff. And I mean, I can name a few people who I see once in a while who are just always have something stupid to say to me, you know? And it's like, it just doesn't even bother me anymore. I've been writing romance since 2003.

So what's the math on that? Like 19 years or something like no, I don't know.

Bernadette: 21 years now. 21 years.

Marie: Yeah. So I don't even defend it anymore. It's just like, you know, anybody who's going to disparage it doesn't understand it and doesn't know, you know, like, why wouldn't you want to write about love and hope and optimism and all the things that people want in their life? You know, everybody who's disparaging it is after the same things that happen in a romance novel.

So, you know, it's ironic to me that people think they know what it is. And then when they venture in, they're like, oh, okay. Wow.

Okay. Way more than I expected. I'm like, you think?

Bernadette: Right. Right. Now, in terms of your marketing, maybe you could talk a little bit about what you do in marketing and how your approach to marketing has maybe changed, you know, since you first started to now.

Marie: Well, I'm the rare author that really likes the marketing.

Like that, it makes me very weird among my peers because most of my author friends hate it. I love it. It's something that I used to do in my day job.

And so like a lot of the stuff, like I was my old job, like I was there when we developed our first website, you know, so it's like I've been doing stuff like I don't do my own website, but I mean, you know, I've been involved in stuff like that for 25 years, you know, so to be able to do it for myself is super fun. And I'm big into Facebook ads. I'm big into, you know, Facebook posting and Instagram.

And I like Threads. I haven't been on Twitter in 10 years, but I'm, I'm very, I really like Threads. Threads is what, what Twitter was before it lost its way.

And so I just do all that stuff. And, you know, Facebook ads are a big part of my, my daily life. And I have some Amazon ads too. I seem to do better with the Facebook ads than the Amazon ads right now. So I go back and forth. I also have some books in Kindle Unlimited. Some are wide, some, I have a booming business with my own store, selling paperbacks from there every day. And now also eBooks and audio books and bundles and all those things that are new to the store in the last year, which has been really amazing. And one of the things I'm doing too, that is I'm releasing all my new books a week early in my store.

And one of the things I love about that is I get customer data from that, that I wouldn't have from, that I don't have from the retailers, you know, so I've sold something like 14 million books and most of those were on Amazon, but I don't have access to any of that customer data. And now I do. So that has been really amazing.

Bernadette: Yeah. And a lot more people are doing, well, I guess as the technology improves, it's easier for people to do it.

Marie: Well, I've had the store for 10 years, so it's not new to me, but what some of the things we're doing with it now with what we needed and what eventually happened was a safe delivery method for the digital books.

And once BookFunnel developed that, my objection initially was that when you bought a book from BookFunnel, you also got the EPUB file attached to an email. That was a no-go for me. I have so, you know, we have so much trouble with piracy that I'm not going to hand somebody, I don't know, a digital copy of my book and hope that they're going to do the right thing with it.

So once that was addressed, I was all in with selling eBooks and audio from my store.

Bernadette: That's great. That's great.