

INTERVIEW WITH KRISTAN HIGGINS

Bernadette: Hello, and welcome to Nice Girls Reading Naughty Books. I'm your host, Bernadette Walsh, and I'm so pleased to introduce my guest this evening, Kristen Higgins. Kristen is the New York Times bestselling author of over 12 contemporary romances.

Her books have been published by Harlequin and have sold over 1 million copies. Kristen lives in a small town in Connecticut and loves to write books about relationships, since the search for love and security is one of the driving forces of life. Her titles include, Read a Winner, Too Good to Be True, and Waiting on You.

So welcome, Kristen, to Nice Girls Reading Naughty Books. I'm so pleased you could join me. How are you?

I'm great, Bernadette.

How are you?

Bernadette: I'm good, I'm good. Well, I'm a huge, huge fan, as I told you before the show started, and I listened to your presentation at my local RWA, and also I listened to that very famous speech you gave at the RWA conference last year. So I'm just beyond thrilled that you could join me today.

Kristan: So thanks so much. Thanks. My pleasure.

Bernadette: Now maybe you could talk a little bit about your writing journey. How long have you been writing professionally, and how did you get started writing romance?

Kristan: Well, you know, it's not the most dramatic story, but like every writer, I was a great reader. You know, I was a very appreciative reader of romance since I was 13 years old and stole my first romance from my grandmother.

And I, you know, I just, I loved to read. I was an English major in college, and I always did have a job as a writer of some kind. So I wrote PR copy and advertising copy, and I worked for a museum, and, you know, writing exhibit copy.

And then I had my kids, and I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom. So I thought, you know, I wonder if I could sell a book, a romance book, because I figured that's the genre I really know. And so I gave it a shot, and I started with a historical, because I thought, oh, I love to read historicals, and, you know, so I'll just, you know, make up some history. Surely it doesn't have to be accurate or anything. And I never finished that book. It was really, it was so bad.

It was so, like looking back at it now, it's so hilariously depressing and melodramatic. It's about an impoverished Irish heroine who makes a deal with a rich Protestant duke because her family is starving to death during the potato famine. So, you know, really not that fun to read and really horrible to write.

In fact, so I stopped writing it. I said, what are we doing? Patty died today. What do you do? Bad news, little one.

But I think I'm in love. You know what I mean? That's very funny. So I thought, how about a romantic comedy? You know, everybody loves to read a book that will make them laugh.

So I went to a conference, a writer's conference. I think it was the New England Romance Writers Conference, and everyone was writing books about very remarkable people, like, you know, dukes and duchesses and billionaires and Navy SEALs and vampires and, you know, really talented, wealthy people. And I thought, well, I'm none of those things.

You know, I don't think I could pull anything like that off. But what about a book like all of us here? You know, like just about an ordinary person who has a job and a family and, you know, is yearning to find the right person and, you know, make it funny. So I came up with the idea for my first book, Fool's Rush In.

And so that was the first book that I finished, and it took me about two years after, you know, I started it to find an agent, and I found an agent, and she sold it to HQN, which is a division of Harlequin, and I've been with them ever since. That's great. And now so many people have copied you.

Bernadette: Like, do you consider your romances small-town romances? Because I know that that's why I was at RWA, I think, a couple years ago whenever it was in New York, and that was, like, you know, a theme. That's what we want to see, small-town romances. Do you think they were kind of copying you because your books have been so successful?

Kristan: Well, I don't think so, no.

I mean, I think that everything goes around and comes around. So if, you know, if I don't know, vampires aren't selling today, they'll be selling again in a few years. And if small-town romance is hugely popular right now, it might not be in a couple of years.

But I was kind of unusual, I think, in the market at the time because everything was chiclet. It was sex in the city, and it's knockoffs. And so everyone had, you know, wrote for a magazine, and everyone had Jimmy Choos and drank Cosmos and stuff.

And I thought, you know, that wasn't what I was interested in writing. And so I think the timing was right more than anything. Robin Carr had Virgin River, and my first book came out in the same year.

And they just kind of struck a nerve. I don't know if it was just Robin and me who were writing the small-town romances. It kind of felt like that at the time, and Jill Shalvis, you know.

But I felt like, well, you don't have to live in a small town to appreciate one, and you don't have to live in the city to appreciate a book set there. So I do think that the successive writers like Robin and Jill and myself show publishing what readers respond to. And it's always readers setting the tone and setting the pace.

Like, we like this book. We'd like to see more of them. And then I think those kind of books are acquired.

So it's really in response to the readers that the market changes. And that's what's so great, you know, that the readers have all the control. We want to see more of this, and that's what comes out.

And the self-publishing has definitely affected that too. There's so much to choose from now.

Bernadette: Now, do you feel that because it was something that you knew so well, it helped you to really develop these stories? Because in some ways you didn't have to research what it was like to live in a small town, because you grew up in a small town, and I believe you live in one right now.

Kristan: I live in my hometown, yep. And, you know, I definitely do think that if you don't know your subject, then you'd better learn it quick. Because I think readers can appreciate when something feels honest and real, and they can also sniff out a fake.

So you can't just say, well, I'm going to write a small town romance, because they're selling really well. You have to really understand what a small town is like, the pros and the cons, the complexities, you know, the wonderful things about living in a small town. So, yeah, I wrote about a small town because that's what I knew and that's what I loved.

And, again, I really wanted to write a story for the average woman, you know, because my take on the average woman is that she's extraordinary, but it's not maybe so noticeable right away. She's not Paris Hilton. She's not an opera singer or a movie star or a billionaire or a senator.

You know, she's just us. And that was such a joy for me was to write these extraordinary stories of ordinary people. And it was just really gratifying to give someone like a diner owner on the coast of Maine this wonderful love story that, you know, that kind of like becomes so much bigger than like just a couple in the town, because every couple has a great story, you know.

Bernadette: Right. Well, it's funny that you say ordinary people. I don't know if you've read Alison Dermot, but I think she's a fairly well-known Irish-American writer.

And, for me, she's really, when I first started writing, I almost wanted to emulate her because she wrote about where she grew up. She grew up on Long Island. She was older than I am, but she wrote about a certain generation.

And that's what I've also done. All my books are about typically Irish-Americans and people living either in Long Island or Ireland, where I have a lot of ties, because that's what I knew. And I actually tried, when I came home from that RWA conference, I tried to write a small-town romance, and I got about, I think, 25 pages in, because I don't know anything about

living in a small town, you know what I mean? Like, I originally was born in Brooklyn, and, you know, Long Island has trees, but it's not a small town.

And so, you know, that's when I was like, well, this isn't really working for me. And I actually read something that Alison McDermott had in an interview, and she had said, you know, I like to write about Irish-American people because I know what their houses look like. I know how they turn a phrase. And so she can get the outside right, and then she could really focus on, you know, digging into the character. And so that's what made me say, okay, you know, even though I think my life is not all that interesting, you know, it may be interesting to somebody else. And like I said, I can get the outside right.

So I think there's a real benefit to writing about what you know and also focusing on the ordinary person and making them show how they're extraordinary. So, you know, that's one of the things I love about your books as well. And another thing I really love about your books, and I love the Blue Heron series, and we'll talk about that in a little bit, but I love your heroes.

You know, so often, you know, in a romance, the hero is almost like a cardboard cutout, right? Like they're what the heroine kind of projects onto them. But your heroes to me really feel like, you know, full three-dimensional people, and they also like tend to be outsiders, I think. So maybe you could talk about, you know, how you come up with your heroes.

Kristan: Well, thank you, first of all. That's really flattering. You know, I think that one of the ways that my heroes feel three-dimensional is because I really do fall in love with them. You know, I mean, I really think about them. I mean, I've heard authors who say like, oh, I write a book in a month, and I think, oh, my God, I could never do that. You know, I can barely do two books a year.

And I think part of that is because I live in the skin of my characters, and it takes some time to do that. So I could say like, okay, I want like an alpha male hero. But what does that even mean? You know, is that a job? Is that, you know, a guy who's, you know, doesn't talk a lot or something like that? And then I ask like, well, why is he like that? And how did he get to be like that? And what's his family like? And what's his past romance history like? And so I really try to develop them.

And as far as them being outsiders, you know, I was kind of going through the list of heroes in my mind. And, you know, sometimes they are, you know, that they are the guy who comes to town. And my heroine is usually the person who's in the town.

And sometimes they're both, you know, like I did a friends to romance love story with Trevor and Chastity where they've known each other their whole lives, and they both grew up in that town. Faith and Levi in the Blue Heron books have known each other since third grade. They're both very entrenched in the community.

But we all have that feeling sometimes of being the outsider, whether we were, you know, we're in the bosom of our family and town, or whether we're really someone who's completely new to the environment. You have this feeling of being other and being separate.

And that's a big part of romance, I think, is finding the person who makes you feel a part of things and who brings you home, you know.

So it's very fun to write those kind of scenes where they kind of circle each other thinking, you know, is this what I want, not just in the person but like in the pantheon or, you know, the environment of this character, you know. So for example, in Until There Was You, we have Posey who's kind of like grounding Liam and kind of pulling him back from where he's been and emotionally and geographically and everything. And he has to think like, is this the life that I want? And at first the answer is, I don't know, I'm not sure, you know.

And then, of course, being a romance, the answer becomes yes, absolutely.

Bernadette: Yeah, no, like I said, I love the way that your heroes, like I said, are three-dimensional. And as you said, you kind of know in a romance where things are going to wind up.

And that's the great thing about a romance, it's the journey of getting there. And I also like your heroines because they're the good girls but they always have like either they're a little awkward or they have like one big flaw. But, you know, in terms of your heroines, like how much of yourself is in those heroines?

Kristan: Well, you know, there's something of me in every character.

And I think especially in the heroine because, you know, I have to fall in love with the hero but I have to be the heroine in order to really express her emotions and be honest about them and really understand where they're coming from and what drives her, every action and every phrase in the book. Nothing is thrown in there by accident, you know. So a lot of my heroines are like me.

I think every one of them with maybe one or two exceptions shares a characteristic of mine and that's we're very honest about our feelings. So there's not a lot of pretense of like, no, no, I want to be alone, I'm a loner, you know. All my heroines kind of know what they want, they just don't know how to get it.

And they also know their flaws. So it's not like they don't know that they're, like in the case of Harper from My One and Only, she's a divorce attorney, she's been through the ringer with her childhood and her romantic life and she knows that she's repressed and emotionally stunted and she accepts that about herself. You know, she thinks, well, this is just how I am and who can blame me? But during the course of the book, she has to overcome that.

And I think that's true in every great romance novel, that it's not just a story of getting the guy or getting the girl. It's a story of becoming the person who deserves the guy or the girl. And to do that, that's an internal, personal journey. That's not just, you know, getting him to the altar.

Bernadette: Do you think then in your books, do you think they have, they're kind of crossing the line with women's fiction? Because they do focus so much on the heroine's

journey, not just on getting the guy, but, you know, becoming a better person or getting through various things.

Kristan: Yeah, absolutely.

I think they cross the line. And in fact, I'll be writing a women's fiction for next year, a release for next year, 2015. And it will be very much like my romances. It will be very familiar to my readers, but the classification will be slightly different because it's more about life and less about life and him. So there's definitely romance in there and a relationship is very important and it will have the emotionally satisfying ending. But it might not be, and we get married and we have babies, you know, that kind of thing.

It will be the right ending for these characters. But I do think that that's one of the things I really love to write about is all this extra stuff. You know, I'm not, as a reader, I'm not as fond of books that only deal with witty banter and sex scenes. You know, I mean, they can be really fun and really gratifying, but I tend not to remember them. And it's the books that have a lot of personal growth or a lot of heartache sometimes. You know, secondary characters who are very important to the story and the character, not just because of how they affect the relationship, but because they're important to that person.

Just the way, you know, in real life, you might have a sister or parents or grandparents or your best friend and their struggles matter to you. And they're not just there to say, oh, Kristen, you should definitely go for it with that guy.

Bernadette: Yeah, they have motivations of their own.

And also, I think, and do you feel that that's a good transition? Because I know a lot of romance readers also like to read women's fiction, obviously. That's a great segue. And, you know, it's sometimes hard to tell what the line is. I know for my first book, Gold Coast Wives, which is about a woman who's going through a divorce. Her husband left her and he had made some bad investments and lost all their money and she got fired and, you know, lost her job as a lawyer. And she went on TV and, you know, went on a schlocky version of *The Real Housewives*. And it's funny, but it's also, and there's a love interest, but it's also about a woman's journey. Like, how do you get yourself out of that situation? And, you know, the reason why I classified it as contemporary romance is because I submitted it to a romance line. I could have just as easily called it women's fiction, you know.

So it's sometimes hard, you know, where is the line there?

Kristan: You know, it's interesting. I was having this conversation with Huntley Fitzpatrick, who's a wonderful YA writer. And we were talking about, you know, why do we have to divide up literature and fiction, you know, to say, like, well, this is women's fiction and this is literary fiction and this is YA romance and this is contemporary romance and this is new adult romance, you know. Why can't it just be a book that people want to read? And, you know, I understand, you know, romance fans want that happy ending where the couple is together and the focus is primarily on that couple. But a lot of women's fiction fits that description too. And I love the blurred lines, you know. As a reader, I really enjoy it. It's not

just in contemporary, you know. There's historical writers like Sarah McClain and Anna Campbell and Eloisa James who really have very big books. It's not just witty banter and a ball, you know. And, you know, I think the trend is going towards women's fiction. I think that society kind of tells us writers what to write intuitively.

So when times are really bad, happy stories sell. And when times are a little more stable, it seems to me like readers are a little more interested in maybe something that's more emotionally complex, you know. So after September 11th...

Bernadette: That deals with more media issues, something more, you know.

Yeah, but you can take it now. You know, we're not at war. The Twin Towers haven't just fallen.

Kristan: But like when the Twin Towers fell, romance sales shot through the roof. You know, people wanted a happy ending and they wanted a guarantee. And that's when that escape romance came.

You know, the vampires and the shapeshifters and that was really popular because it was a total escape. And now that we're a little steadier, I think we're looking for a story that maybe is a little bit more, I don't know, a little riskier maybe, but that can engage in things like unemployment and divorce and bankruptcy and stuff because, you know, we can take it now. Yeah.

Bernadette: You know, like I wrote a women's fiction. I actually just got the rights back, so I'm kind of rewriting it. But it sounded like a real downer, you know.

But it was about a woman whose mother was dying of cancer and how they resolved things. And you knew in the first page for this character it's not going to be a happy ending. But that doesn't mean it's not an important story to tell.

Right. So I agree with you. Yeah, and I think there's a place for both.

Like you said, sometimes you are in the mood for an escape and then there are other times when you can take it, you know. So that's very interesting that you're moving to women's fiction. I can't wait.

What's the name of that book that's coming out, the women's fiction?

Kristan: I don't have a title yet. I just suggested a title to my editor today.

Bernadette: Oh, okay.

So it's still in the works. So we don't have anything yet.

Kristan: Yeah, I still write romance, but I'll do like a women's fiction and a romance or two and then a women's fiction and kind of see how that goes.

Right. Like I said, I think it will be – it's just a question of marketing. It's really not a different genre for me.

Bernadette: Right. Yeah, you're not doing something completely – like you're not all of a sudden doing like a paranormal, something completely out of the realm.

Kristan: Right.

Bernadette: So maybe you could talk a little bit about your Blue Heron series and how you got started on that and how many books are in it currently and how many more are coming down the pike.

Kristan: Sure. You know, that's another – a series that was born out of the response of readers because I do really love to write those towns.

People said, you know, God, I love this town. I wish I could stay here. I wish I could visit it.

And I love your family so much that I wish you'd write a series. And so I thought, all right. You know, I really didn't know how to write a series.

I asked a couple of friends, Susan Mallory and Robin Carr, I said, how do you start this, you know? And one thing I knew was that I wanted a business or a center, I don't know, like a pinning point that I could really enjoy. And I was thinking, well, you know, I like to eat. So maybe I could do a restaurant.

But I'd actually done a story that centered around a family restaurant, the next best thing. So then I thought, well, okay, what else do I like? You know, baseball. I can't really do a baseball book.

That would be too big. You know, how about wine? So I picked a vineyard and I was talking to my brother about – he owns a wine shop and he's very knowledgeable about wine. And I said, I'd like to write a book about a family-run vineyard, but I don't want to go to California. Because as we were talking earlier, you know, you want to write what you know. And I'm a Yankee, you know. I understand the northeastern sensibility and how we are. I'm from New England. I'm, you know, like a seventh generation New Englander. And so I –

Bernadette: And even the weather, right? I feel like the weather really is almost like another character in your books, like snow and all that stuff.

So, yeah, you know, you don't have to –

Kristan: Yeah. All of a sudden you're a Googler. Yeah.

Yeah. So he said, oh, you go to the Finger Lakes. I'll hook you up with some people that I know up there and you can go visit. So I went up there and I toured a couple places, and one vineyard in particular really spoke to me, Fulkerson Vineyard in Dunby, New York. This eight generations of farmers turned winemakers, and I just thought this is perfect. And the towns up there are so beautiful. So I decided to do a family with grown children, and three of the

four of them are single. And I thought, okay, I'll do three books, and then we'll move on and see how that goes. And so I wrote Faith's story, and I knew that Honor's would be next.

And so I wrote The Best Man and then The Perfect Match. And then I was going to do Jack, their brother. And I wasn't really ready. You know, it's funny. I loved him as their brother, but it was hard to transition him in my mind to a romantic hero because he's just, you know, the brother. He's the one boy with the three sisters, and his sisters are merciless with him, you know, always calling him names and telling him about their periods and stuff. And I wasn't really quite ready to see him as this romantic, sexy guy. And so the character that really did interest me at the time was Colleen, who is the best friend of Faith and runs the little tavern in town with her twin brother. And she was just a blast.

You know, she was a woman who was always advising people on their love lives and is a great matchmaker and is always helping people up and get married and stuff. Yet she's single, and she's 32. And I thought, why is she single? You know, why would someone who knows everything about men be single? And she's funny. She has this thing for older men, and she says she's always looking for a sugar daddy. And I thought, something's going on there. And it's always funny. You know, you know Bernadette as a writer. You know, you put something in the book that you don't think is important, and then you find out it's hugely important. You know, it just kind of pops out of your head. So here's Colleen who's single, and she's not looking for age-appropriate men. And the only reason could be that her heart was broken. So that's where Waiting on You came from.

And the books have been really popular. My readers really like them. The reviewers seem to like them. So I am going to write – I have written Jack's book. That's called In Your Dreams, and that comes out in September. And I think I'm going to write one more because there's another character who became really interesting, and that's Colleen's twin brother, Connor. And I've gotten a lot of mail from people saying, I loved Colleen, now when's Connor?

Bernadette: Yeah. You know, he was a great guy, even though he was a small character in them. You're right.

He was very vivid. That's actually – that's interesting. It will be fun to read, you know.

Kristan: So that's where I'm planning to go, you know, with five books. And then we'll kind of see. You know, my friend Robin has written 20 books in Virgin River, and I think she's working on her ninth, Thunder Point.

I don't know that I can sustain a series that long, but we're just going to kind of wait and see, you know.

Bernadette: I think you know when it's done.

Kristan: Yeah.

Bernadette: You know, I started – I did a standalone, Devil's Mountain, which originally was supposed to be contemporary romance. It was about a woman who, you know, kind of – one

of the characters was supposed to be kind of mentally ill, and she thought she was a witch. But I kind of had fun writing about witches, so I just completely rewrote it and made it a paranormal romance.

But it's kind of almost women's fiction as well because it talks about mothers and daughters. But anyway, that was supposed to be like, you know, a standalone. And then I tried to write that infamous small-town romance that went nowhere.

And I still – you know, there was one – it was a small character. I was like, you know what, I wonder what her story would be. And it was the daughter.

So it became a two book. It became a three book. And then it became four books.

But you know what, now it really is the end. Like I said, everything I wanted to say about, you know, the world that I created about this family of Irish witches. And so now I'm done.

So I really did – in the fourth book I said, this is it. I had a great time here, but I'm done now. Right.

So you'll probably feel the same way, you know, when you've said everything you wanted about the Blue Heron people.

Kristan: Yeah.

Bernadette: But it's hard to leave them, too.

You know, like it's – you become very attached. And you become attached to the locale, you know. Right.

And also the fact that in some ways writing in series, the second and third and fourth book are easier because you don't have to set the stage. You've already done that. And so you can just like jump into the middle of it, you know.

Kristan: Yeah, that's definitely true.