

## Q&A with Andrea Brunais

### **Why did you write this book?**

When Jesse-Ray Lewis entered our lives, I recognized a blockbuster of a story. He emerged from family violence and neglect in a region awash with drugs – a region currently the object of a national obsession: Appalachia. He turned out to be a freakishly talented writer capable of poetic rhythms and vivid turns of phrase. My husband and I determined to help him turn his life around, and I believed our mutual struggles would make for a compelling story line.

### **What was your motivation?**

Jesse-Ray Lewis wrote verse reflecting trauma and violence, shame and love and despair. I saw in him more than just a sweet-smart boy with a flair for poetic expression. I saw a soul who could be saved from a downward spiral. But would he accept the help of strangers? That was the intriguing point for me. Now that the saga has ended, I hope this book series will help not only Jesse-Ray see the possibilities ahead but also provide guidance and inspiration to others who are working with troubled youth.

### **How long did the writing process take?**

Jesse-Ray spent five-and-a-half months with us, and during that time I saw him almost every weekend. I talked with him at length, taking notes that helped shape my book as well as guide the creation of his book of poetry. After that, working nights and weekends, I'd completed a draft within five months. Trusted beta readers gave me great advice during that period. Then it took three more months to revise and polish, during which the work of a developmental editor was invaluable.

### **What were the obstacles?**

I couldn't write everything I knew about Jesse-Ray's childhood because he made accusations against people who are still living. Also, Jesse-Ray popped up only twice during the writing process, and then he disappeared again, so I was unable to check back with him on any further questions that I had.

### **What other books have you written?**

My first novel, *Night of the Litani*, was set against the civil war of Lebanon of 1975. I wanted to keep readers enthralled while helping them learn about the Middle East in a way that did not vilify ethnic groups including Arabs, who were horribly stereotyped

then and still are. I strove to make a page-turner but at the same time earn critics' respect. I'm happy to say I succeeded on both counts, though I must admit the book did not make me a household name!

In my 2014 novel, *Mercedes Wore Black*, I created a contemporary scenario where readers can experience the changing face of journalism as well as be introduced, up close and personal, to some of Florida's gorgeous and fragile environments. I'm blessed to have visited many of them as a journalist. I've flown 10,000 feet above Crystal River with a federal wildlife agent counting manatees, and I've also been out in the shallow, glittering waters of Tampa Bay where seagrasses and tiny shrimp and other sealife gain footholds. I've also seen some old Florida pols in the Legislature wheel and deal, so that's another setting I wanted to share with readers. Finally, I've witnessed the puppet-masters control the Florida Legislature – the special interests who spread big money around and thwart the public interest. That novel, by the way, took a silver medal in the annual competition of the Florida Authors and Publishers Association.

### **What writers inspire you?**

My inspiration comes from those authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, whom I once met, who subscribe to the school of thought that “writing is easy. You just open a vein and bleed.” The best writers eschew the easy, clichéd strings of sentences that often pepper one's first drafts. I love authors whose prose is so lyrical you must stop and read certain lines again and again just to savor them. In high school, I was hugely influenced by Robert A. Heinlein and Pearl S. Buck and Truman Capote and Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, and I read Gwen Bristow's *Jubilee Trail* again and again – not so much for the writing but because the story and characters enchanted me. Another favorite: John D. MacDonald's standalone novel *A Flash of Green*. I love the poets Mary Oliver and David Whyte. It's such a treasure to discover new (to me) writers – one is Daniel Skach-Mills, author of the delightful book of poetry *In This Forest of Monks*. I appreciate contemporary songwriters who produce captivating lyrics: Melody Gardot, Robbie Fulks, Todd Snider, Paul Thorn, Iris Dement.

### **How did you get published?**

By working hard, honing the craft, writing and submitting! All during my newspaper career, I wrote freelance articles on the side for magazines and national newspapers. I also wrote short stories and worked on novels. I remember a professor's advice on book and short-story publishing: Keep submitting until you have “enough rejection slips to paper a wall.” Then give your work another look and, if you still have faith in it, submit it again.

**What advice can you give other authors?**

I was lucky enough to learn, early on, that a good writer isn't expressing himself or herself; the best writers express the reader. Do not believe that every word of yours is a jewel. As my most influential professor (the late Thomas E. Sanders, author of *Discovery of Poetry* and *Discovery of Fiction*) used to say, "There is no great writing, only great rewriting." Find the best editor you can to criticize your work.

**What has happened to Jesse-Ray?**

Sadly, we don't know. He popped up to send an email while he was in a homeless shelter in Beckley, West Virginia, in September 2017. Then he emailed once from a private location in January 2018. He professed to be trying to stay off drugs and avoid involvement with the gang. He never maintained contact long enough for us to meet up.

**What are you doing now?**

I am what's laughingly termed a "recovering journalist," and after many years in newspapers, I now oversee strategic communications in higher ed, writing news releases and creating video news stories. More than just a marketable skill, writing has been a way for me to satisfy a drive for creative expression while expressing certain truths about the world. I'm plotting a podcast and contemplating other book ideas, which are percolating.