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ATG Interviews Jennifer Lohmann, Adult Services Manager, Southwest Regional Library

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Adult Services Manager, Southwest Regional Library, Durham County, NC

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: Jennifer, last October in an online interview in the ATG NewsChannel, we talked about an interesting fundraising idea that you and the Durham Library Foundation came up with. You all hosted an online auction so people could bid on naming privileges for a character in your fourth romance novel, "Weekends in Carolina." What a great fundraising idea! Who came up with it?

JL: The donation of a character name was my idea, but it wasn't an original one. Lisa Gardner and Lee Child have all done auctions for character names with the proceeds benefiting charity. The library's marketing department and I floated a bunch of ideas about how to best "sell" the name, and the auction seemed like the fairest.

ATG: How did the auction turn out? Can you tell us who won and what the character will be named? What part will he/she play in the novel? Will there be a similar auction for your fifth novel?

JL: A couple readers in my romance book club pooled their money. They are naming the character after their dogs (Norma Jean, Sidney). Since characters are usually referred to by their first name and Norma Jean would show up more than Sidney would, I split the winners into two characters. They will be two of the farm's interns.

ATG: Deep down every librarian wants to be an author, but you've actually done it. When did you first get bitten by the writer's bug?

JL: I've always enjoyed writing, though I was never good at finishing stories. In second grade, I used to finish my stories with, "Stay tuned for the next exciting adventures in the tale of..." because I couldn't write an ending. I wrote when I came back from China and got involved in **Romance Writers of America**. Then I got caught up in my library career and fell away from it. After winning the Librarian of the Year Award, I thought, "If everyone here can finish a book, so can I." I gave myself a year to finish a book and start submitting it.

ATG: What were the biggest challenges you faced as a first-time author? How did you overcome them?

JL: Figuring out how to manage my time was difficult. Deadlines change the pressures to write quite a bit, but you can't let it change the spark or fun of writing. I'm not sure I've completely overcome that challenge. I actually think having a full-time job helps, because I can't be focused on the writing all the time. Marketing is also a challenge. Librarians and writers are generally introverted, which probably means I'm doubly so! Recognizing that it's okay to self-promote has been hard. Figuring out how to self-promote effectively has also

been a challenge. Both of those are a process, rather than something I feel I've overcome.

ATG: As an author who has gone through the demanding process of getting published, what do you make of the self-publishing movement? Would you ever be tempted to self-publish yourself? Or are there services that a publisher provides which are too valuable to give up? If so, what are they?

JL: Self-publishing is great, but I think it's something too many authors jump into before their work is ready to be seen by the public. Still, there are a lot of great books that have been self-published and probably wouldn't have been published by a traditional publisher because they are too niche or hard to sell, or what have you. The fact that self-publishing exists and can give readers access to those books is great. I thought about self-publishing my first books and finally decided I wanted to go through the process to see what it took for a book to be market ready. And it's a process! Each book has a round of revisions, a round of line edits, a round of copy edits, and two rounds of proofreading.

I am still interested in self-publishing and am working on the hybrid-author model (being both traditionally- and self-published). Self-publishing means outsourcing all the editing work, and I would probably outsource the cover art and formatting as well. Time is a valuable resource, and I'd rather be writing than messing up the formatting over and over. The distribution to bookstores is something that would be hard to give up as an author, but the increased royalties could make up for it.

ATG: Above and beyond what the publisher does, what role should the author play in marketing their books? How can they arrange for book reviews, promotional tours, etc.? Do you have any tips from your personal experience?

JL: Authors provide the bulk of their own marketing. Publishers concentrate their marketing on their top-sellers, so if you're

not that, you do 99% of the work yourself. Because I write category romance (rather than mass-market or single-title), I have to send my books out to most of the review sources (and just got my first review in *Library Journal*, which was really exciting for this librarian!). I've not done promotional tours, but I have arranged for blog posts on romance blogs and will continue to do more of that. It's important to be out and participating in the community all the time, not just when you have a book out.

ATG: We notice that all of your books are available as eBooks as well as in print. What percentage of sales do they make up? Do you think they are as reader friendly as their print counterparts? How do your fans like them?

JL: Right now print makes up most of my sales, especially because category romances come to many readers by subscription. I don't think readers see a difference between my print and eBook versions. **Harlequin** works hard to put out a quality product without the errors many people have seen in eBooks. It helps that the books start digitally and are formatted, rather than scanned and edited. I've not had comments from fans on the difference between my eBook or print version, but I know many of my library patrons prefer eBooks. I like them for reading at night, especially since I can change the font size and don't have to wear my glasses to read.

ATG: Putting on your librarian's hat for a moment, are you seeing any changes in patrons' reading tastes/habits or in their library usage patterns? How about in the role librarians play as readers' advisors? What adjustments are librarians making to keep pace with the needs of today's patron?

JL: I think discovery is harder for both readers and authors. With so many books on the market, it's hard to sort out the ones you like from the ones you don't and even harder online. Browsing is a treasured reader activity. As bookstores struggle, libraries can really help fill the "discovery" void, both through active and passive readers' advisory. I love a good book and, for some reason, an unexpected book that I enjoy is an even greater pleasure. I'm not sure I can answer any changes in taste, since I don't check the circulation stats of books/authors as closely as our selectors do, but I can say we have a lot of patrons discovering eBooks. This means libraries have to provide the services and books how the patrons want them. We have some books in five different formats (regular print, large print, eBook, and audiobook). If the book was made into a movie, then we might have six! This is just a new way of the time-honored librarian practice of meeting your patrons where and how they need.

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ATG: *How did a young librarian/romance writer from the Rocky Mountain West make her way to Durham, NC?*

JL: Via a long, indirect route. I met my ex-husband in college in Chicago, and he came down to Durham for graduate school at UNC. When I moved back to the United States from Shanghai, I came to Durham and eventually went to library school.

ATG: *We didn't know that you had spent time in Shanghai. That must have been a great experience. What took you to Shanghai?*

JL: I went to Shanghai because I didn't know what I wanted to do after college. I'd graduated with a degree in economics, which is a practical degree, but I wasn't interested in the typical jobs for econ majors. I taught conversational English at the **Shanghai International Studies University** in their continuing education program. It was a wonderful experience, and Shanghai is a wonderful city. I have fond memories of the city, the people, and the food. I'm glad I went.

ATG: *You were honored by the Romance Writers of America and named Librarian of the Year in 2010. Can you tell us about that?*

JL: It was such a surprise and an honor! I had just started doing romance programming (a couple romance teas, along with inviting **Sarah Wendell** of **Smart Bitches, Trashy Books** to speak), so after I got it, I felt I really had to live up to the award, and I've done even more programming around the romance genre since. The prize is a free trip to the conference, and **RWA** treats you like a queen. You get picked up in a town car, and **Debbie Macomber** sends you flowers. All the publishers invite you to their cocktail parties, and every author you meet loves libraries. I made a lot of good connections at the conference and met some very dear people, many of whom I've invited to speak at **Durham County Library**.

ATG: *You've written four novels so far. Any more on the drawing board?*

JL: The life of a genre author means you're always working on the next book. I've just started plotting out book five, building character descriptions, doing my research, etc. I've got plans for another series and another stand-alone. What gets written after book five depends on what I can sell to **Harlequin** and what I want to do on my own.

ATG: *How do you juggle the responsibilities of being a full-time librarian and a successful genre author? When do you find the time to think about the next novel, let alone to write it?*

JL: I get up at 5:30 in the morning and write for at least an hour. I usually also write for an hour at night. One of the advantages of a public librarian's schedule is that I work week-ends, meaning I have a day off in the middle of the week. It's harder to find the time to write on my free weekends, but those Wednesdays off are treasured writing times.

against the grain library profile

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BACKGROUND/HISTORY: **Southwest Regional Library** is reopened after renovation three years ago. It had been a very busy, very small location. It is now triple the size and a very busy, larger location.

STAFF: 162 **EMPLOYEES:** 135 FTEs. **BUDGET:** 9.2 million

TYPES OF MATERIALS YOU BUY: We buy eBooks through **Overdrive**, books, audiobooks, CDs, magazines, and DVDs. We also subscribe to many databases, both through the library individually and through North Carolina's resource, nclive.org.

USE OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGY: We do have eBooks through **Overdrive** for people to check out on their devices and use the Library Anywhere app. It's not exactly a mobile technology, but we have this fabulous Website, isthelibraryopen.com (this was an idea of our Board of Trustees, I think) that makes finding out hours so, so simple. You should check that out.

WHERE I SEE THE LIBRARY IN FIVE YEARS: System-wide, the Main Library will be under renovation or nearing renovation by then. That will be a big improvement for the downtown area of Durham and for services to the population around Main. I used to work at the downtown branch, and I can't wait for that to happen. Also, as a system, we will be exploring more mobile technologies and ways to reach our patrons where they are, not just in the buildings. Durham County just finished their strategic plan and the library is working on ours based off of that one, so anything more specific should wait until the strategic plan is completed.

ADDITIONAL ITEMS OF INTEREST TO ATG READERS: Durham is a wonderful place to be a librarian. The local population is so supportive of their library system, and I have wonderful colleagues. There are really great things happening in the **Durham County Library** system, including "First Library in Space" (<http://firstlibraryinspace.org/>), the Durham Comics Project (<http://durhamcomicsproject.org/>), and other inventive, innovative programs for our community. 🌿

Thinking about my next novel happens all the time. Running and taking my dog for a walk are prime thinking times, because I think best about the next book when my mind is allowed to wander as I'm engaged in something else. I'm always on the lookout for the next idea and keep little notes of the little triggers.

ATG: *Do you have any words of wisdom for those librarians who share the dream of becoming a published author?*

JL: Finishing the book was the big hurdle for me. I really had to develop the discipline to sit and work every day. Writing is 99% butt-in-chair and only 1% muse. Also, join a local writing group; you'll learn so much. I'm lucky because the **Romance Writers of America** is the most professional, supportive, and with-it writing organization out there, but you will get good information from all of them. It seems silly to say to a bunch of librarians, but reading is so important. Read in the genre you want to write in to get a feel for expectations, and read in other genres to get ideas on how to play and expand on

expectations (while still meeting them). **Bob Mayer** advises people to read big authors' debut novels (the books that sold on merit alone) and breakout novels (the books where the author went from good to a great seller), and see what it was about those books that worked. And then write, because no matter how much you read, the words don't get on the page until you put them there.

ATG: *Thanks Jennifer. This has been fun. We've really enjoyed talking to you and we're glad the auction was a success.*

JL: Thank you! I enjoyed answering your questions. Usually I'm either wearing my librarian hat or my author one, so it was fun to wear both at once. 🌿