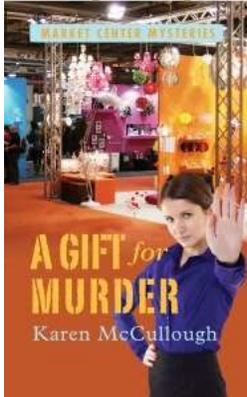


Wednesday, January 26, 2011

Today's Mystery Author Guest: Karen McCullough



As promised yesterday, fellow mystery author **Karen McCullough** is visiting my blog today to answer my interview questions and ones asked by my blog readers. To read her bio and see her photo, please page down to yesterday's post. Above is the cover photo for her February 9th release from Five Star, ***A Gift For Murder***.

Misplaced shipments, feuding exhibitors, and malfunctioning popcorn machines are all in a day's work for Heather McNeil, assistant to the director of the Washington DC Market Center. She's on a career path that should someday make her director of the center. She's smart, competent, and trying hard not to be frazzled by the Gift and Home trade show, the biggest event of the year. Finding the body of a murdered executive on the first day of the show tips Heather into personal and professional havoc. The police suspect the victim's wife killed him, but Heather doesn't believe it. She's gotten glimmers of an entirely different scenario and possible motive. Her attraction to the Market Center's new security officer, Scott Brandon, adds to the chaos. Despite opposition from some of the exhibitors, her employers, and the police, Heather seeks to expose a murderer before the show ends and all hope of finding the killer disappears.

You know, that Gift and Home trade show is precisely the kind of show that my gift basket designer sleuth, Claire Hanover, would go to. This should be a very interesting read! See what Karen McCullough has to say in response to my questions below, and feel free to ask her additional questions in comments.

1. Who or what inspired you to start writing and when did you start?

I wrote my first mystery story when I was about ten, inspired by Nancy Drew, but I didn't start writing seriously until many years later. My husband had read a couple of short things I'd written and thought they were pretty good. He suggested I try writing a short story or two. So I did, but I found I had a hard time containing the plots I wanted to do in the short format, which led to my writing my first novel.

2. What tools and process do you use to "get to know" your characters before and while you're writing the books?

Actually the only tool I use for my characters is my brain. My initial idea for a story generally involves a character with a problem they have to deal with. I may not know much about that character at the outset, but I do know why the situation is a challenge for them, and as I go through the process of writing the book, I learn more and more about them, discover what makes them tick, what they fear, what they love, etc.

3. How do you construct your plots? Do you outline or do you write "by the seat of your pants"?

I'm a seat of the pants, but I have learned how to do brief, general outlines for my publishers. I usually start writing a story with a basic idea of who the main characters are, how it starts and how it should end. I frequently write the first few chapters with very little idea of how the rest of the plot will go, but once I'm a few chapters into it, I have to get some direction, so I'll sit down and make a fairly long list of possible events, encounters, and other things that might or should happen in the course of the story. With that I do a basic timeline situating those things on it and use that as a guide for writing the rest. Of course, I also frequently find the story taking unanticipated twists and turns.

4. In the age-old question of character versus plot, which one do you think is most

important in a murder mystery and which one do you emphasize in your writing? Why?

In the words of an almost as age-old song: "You can't have one without the other." To me, the very definition of a good story is an interesting character trying to solve an interesting and compelling problem. The fact that your character is who he or she is needs to be integral to the story, but the story has to have interesting development. I try not to emphasize one or the other unduly.

In my February Five Star Mystery, *A Gift For Murder*, my heroine, Heather, is able to identify the culprit mostly because she knows her job, because she's intelligent and persistent as well as observant, and because she's a good listener in an environment that encourages talking rather than listening.

On the other hand, plot is equally important in a mystery. I've read—and I'm sure you have too—so-called mysteries where the solution to the crime simply falls into the detective's lap. That doesn't work for me. I want my detective character to get the payoff through his or her own efforts. I want them to face challenges in the course of solving the mystery and have to work through those. And ultimately I want them to win because they're smart, persistent, and effective, not just because they're lucky.

5. What is the biggest challenge you've faced as a writer and what inspires you and keeps you motivated?

Finding the time to write is the biggest challenge. I have a family who want to see me occasionally and a day job that pays for the electricity to run my computer. Add to that, I'm not the type of writer who can pick it up and write a paragraph here or there. I have to be able to sink into the world I'm creating in order to get it out.

On the other hand, if I go too long without writing, it feels like my head is going to explode. There are characters and stories swirling around out there and they all want to see daylight. There's no real question of motivation. I just HAVE to write.

6. What is a typical workday for you and how many hours a day (or week) do you devote to writing?

To support my writing habit, I have a day job that involves running my own web design/development business. Because that work pays the mortgage and puts food on the table, it gets the biggest chunk of my time.

And because I need blocks of time to get into my world, I tend to be a binge writer, sometimes writing all weekend long or using days off or even long evenings. If business is slow, I'll sometimes give myself a day off to do nothing but write.

7. What advice do you have to offer to an aspiring author?

Persistence, persistence, persistence. You'll need to grow a thick skin and learn how to deal with rejection and then keep going if you're serious about getting published.

8. Now here's a zinger. Tell us something about yourself that you have not revealed in another interview yet. Something as simple as your favorite TV show or food will do.

Hmmm... Well, here's a shocking truth about me: I'm not a food person. On the "Eat to Live – Live to Eat" scale, I'm way over on the Eat to Live side. In fact, I may have fallen off it. I've been known to forget to eat when I get involved in a project, and when the rumbles from my stomach finally get loud enough to remind me I need fuel, I'm most likely to grab a few crackers and a hunk of cheese or a carton of yogurt. Whatever's handy. One obvious side effect is I'm a terrible cook.

9. What are you working on now and what are your future writing plans?

I'm currently working on the sequel to *A Gift For Murder*. My title is *Wired For Murder*, but I have no idea whether that title will stick. I also have a novella in the same world in progress, but no title for it as yet. I hope to write a few more books in the "Market Center Mysteries" series. I also have a couple of urban fantasy mysteries making the

rounds at the moment.

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell my blog readers?

Please visit me [my website](#) for more information about my books. More information on *A Gift For Murder* and the coming additional Market Center Mysteries can be found at my [Market Center Mysteries website](#). Of course, I'm available to talk to book clubs or other writing groups, either in person if they're in the NC, SC, VA area, or by phone elsewhere.

Thanks, Karen! Fire away, folks, and remember that you're entering a contest for an ARC when you leave a comment.

*Posted by Beth Groundwater at **6:00 AM 19 comments*** 