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U-En Ng interviews Meg Gardiner

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1. Who is Evan Delaney? That is to say, how much of her character is drawn from your experiences as a lawyer, author, and (in Mission Canyon) a teacher?

Evan is in many ways the girl next door, with a surplus of spunk. She's fun, feisty, and quick witted, a character I think both men and women readers will enjoy. Is she me? No - though of course I drew on my own background to create a life for her. Her experience in law, writing, and teaching (gosh, she does sound like me) really provide a springboard for the adventures she has.

2. What gave you the idea for Mission Canyon? One hazards (personally, I might add) to guess that it might have been the recent lot of corporate disasters (WorldCom, Enron & Arthur Anderson etc)

Yes, in a very real sense. Evan's antagonists in Mission Canyon are corporate high flyers whose failings are hubris and greed. They're people for whom there's no such thing as enough. For them there can never be enough money, enough success, enough love or acceptance to satisfy - their hunger for more of everything leads them to do wrong.

3. Some critics (of China Lake) have said your characters are very much larger-than-life. Do you agree with this assessment, and if so, have you tried to accommodate their views in Mission Canyon?

Certainly some of the characters in China Lake are larger-than-life. Not in the sense that they're supervillains or evil geniuses, but that they're people with grandiose ambitions and a delusional worldview, which leads them to catastrophic violence. The leaders of The Remnant – the militant religious sect that Evan faces – believe that the Apocalypse is upon us, and that they have a vital role to play in it.

This belief is of course mistaken – the book isn't about the end of the world – but *The Remnant's* ability to wreak havoc based on their belief is very real. People like this actually exist, and they're frightening and dangerous. Much of my family lives in Oklahoma City, and were affected by the bombing there. My grandmother helped bring bombing victims into the hospital. With that experience, 'larger-than-life' begins to seem very personal.

Mission Canyon is not a reaction to anything critics have said; it's a different story. It's about greed, the desire for revenge, and blackmail. The antagonists want to hide these things, not shout about their exploits; Evan must expose them. And of course, both books are thrillers, and thrillers should thrill. They're not about little people passively enduring little crises, but about big moments in the characters' lives. The question the heroes face is: when the people you love are threatened, how far will you go to protect them?

4. I trust you will permit me to say that you display an elegant and impish wit in both your books, e.g.: "...a territory of inchoate rage and belief in the rectifying power of kerosene mixed with ammonium nitrate fertilizer" (*China Lake* p. 43); in *Mission Canyon* the horror of Cousin Tater's behaviour at the bridal shower, and *Segue* for a company that moves money illegally. Did you have to work hard to achieve the timing and delivery of these (and other) ideas, or did it come naturally?

Thank you very much. Nothing comes naturally – the trick is to create the illusion that it does. But that's the joy of writing. I wanted wit and humor to leaven the stories in my books. I thought that a good sense of humor and absurdist outlook on life would be integral to the protagonist. I also think it enlivens readers' experience, and gives them a mental break from moments of serious threat and tension in the story. Comic timing is the hardest of crafts to master, so yes, I worked at it. A lot. If readers think I got it right, and enjoy it, I'm thrilled.

5. Anthony Trollope (if memory serves me) used to write a couple of thousand words after getting out of bed and before going to work at

the post office. How has the writing process been for you?

I wish I had Trollope's facility for knocking off that many words so early in the day. When I'm writing a draft of a novel, 1000 words is a good workday for me. Before I get to that stage, however, I spend several months researching and outlining the story.

6. You must get this often also: What advice do you have for aspiring thriller writers?

I offer the same advice I received from a mystery-writer friend years ago: create sympathetic characters and place them in jeopardy. That's the basis of any good thriller or crime novel. Pyrotechnics, gun battles, murder – none of that matters unless readers care about the characters in the story. The writer has to create people who act to resolve a conflict in a way that gives readers an emotionally satisfying experience. And of course: if writing is your dream, let nothing and nobody dissuade you.

7. Finally, will we have more of Evan Delaney?

Yes. She's getting into new trouble as we speak. My next novel, *Jericho Point*, is about identity theft. It will be published in 2004.

Thanks again for doing this e-mail interview with me. Perhaps we'll get another chance to meet, in Singapore or Malaysia.