



Jodi Thomas

253: Turning Characters into People

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing. Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/253 because it's Episode 253.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of hosting Jodi Thomas on the show. Jodi is both a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of over 50 novels and countless short story collections. Her stories travel through the past and present days of Texas and draw readers from around the world.

In July 2006, Jodi was the 11th writer to be inducted into the Romance Writers of America Hall of Fame. With five RITA's – which is basically the big award in the writing genre – to her credit, along with National Readers' Choice Awards and Booksellers' Best Awards, Jodi has shown her skill as a master storyteller.

Honored in 2002 as a Distinguished Alumni by Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, Jodi also served as Writer in Residence at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas.

When she's not working on a novel or inspiring students to pursue a career in writing, Jodi enjoys traveling with her husband, renovating a historic home, and "checking up" on her adult sons and four grandchildren.

Her latest novel, which we're discussing today and is just absolutely delightful, is a women's fiction titled *The Little Tea Shop on Main*.

Welcome, Jodi. It is such a pleasure to have you here.

Jodi Thomas: Thank you. I'm tickled to be here.

GP: So, I always like to start the episode by asking about the story behind the story. What inspired you to write *The Little Tea Shop on Main* – and, why?

JT: I think part of it was something that I've thought of often, and that is; I think people usually love, women usually love more than one man... and they love – and men usually love more than one woman, but it's in different ways.

You know, a lot of men have best friends that are women that they would say they love... even though it's not in a romantic way. And you grow up with people, we all have people that we grew up with that we love... sometimes they would drive us crazy, but we still love them. You know?

I wanted to write a story about three-- It begins with three little girls, and their mothers have put together a tea party for them because they're starting kindergarten.

So, they have a princess tea party; and they bond in this tea party, and they become best friends in this little town... and there's a little boy standing out watching the tea party.



He, of course, wasn't invited to a princess tea party; and he becomes one of the girls' great love, and he becomes one's best friend, and he's one's next door neighbor that she turns to him every time she has a crisis.

So, this one man has three women in his life; and the problem, kind of, is in the book, that they are best friends, so they talk about him.

[laughter]

JT: It kind of drives him crazy, but I wanted to show that it's not all about jealousy or ownership or anything like that... it's a much deeper kind of thing that happens in, I think, most people. And this one man, cares for these women all the way through his book. The book goes from the time they're five until they're in their 30s.

GP: And you know, what's really interesting is, so the book opens – and obviously, we don't want to do spoilers, but this is literally in like the opening pages of the book – where we have this moment where we know that it's being told from someone's point of view... we don't know necessarily who that person is, although we can infer if we continue reading--- who's sort of an observer.

And so, can you talk a little bit about like that opening moment and what it does to frame the story? Because it would be a very different story if we had started with the tea party.

JT: Right. I wanted to start with an adult viewpoint, and he simply says, you know, that he met these, how he grew up with these three women that he loves. You know from the beginning that something's going to happen to one of them.

And I probably drew, bless my editor's heart, she kept asking which one of them is something going to happen to... and until the next to the last chapter, I did not know.

[laughter]

JT: I said, "I don't know... one is going to have a problem, but I don't know which one." And of course, they're growing up and going through college and starting their lives – and, of course, stuff happens to all three of them – but you don't know to the end, which one.

I wanted to write a story really about love – the kinds of love – and also about friendship that lasts a lifetime. I have one friend that I've known our mothers were friends. And so, we laugh and say we met in the womb... you know, waving at each other.

And you know, every Easter egg hunt, every Halloween we have pictures of us. And now as adults, we've gone through our lives, but we've kept in touch. And there's something very special about someone who knows your entire life.

GP: Yeah, there definitely is. It's funny, I have one friend who we went all the way from preschool and then we ended up in the same prep school... and then we reconnected many, many years after college.

There is something very like, I don't know, there's like a bond that happens when someone's known your history and they've known you since you were really little. It's hard to explain really put into words, but, like, there's that bond that happens that's very unique.

JT: I think it's an honesty too.



GP: Yeah.

JT: You know, you can't lie to somebody that knows your folks, you know?

[laughter]

JT: So, this is an honor, but the first multi-viewpoint I wrote was *The Widows of Wichita County*, 12 years ago. And when I started *Widows*, we had a 16-foot wall in our bedroom and I covered it with butcher paper; and I marked it off by chapters, and by characters so that I didn't lose the character somewhere, you know, for 10 chapters or something.

And as I worked through those chapters and the characters, it took me almost two years. And I remember saying to my husband, "Just shoot me if I ever even think about doing multi-viewpoints again, just shoot me."

And because it was so hard to learn that, and again and again when I was writing one character's viewpoint, I would go back and read every chapter that had her viewpoint... because every character needed a different style of writing because you didn't want them to sound alike.

And I wanted the readers to be able to tell who was talking, even if I didn't name the name. So, I did that... and then when I started, I think it was *Twisted Creek*, about five years later, I called my husband – and he's a teacher – in between classes, I said, "Lock up the guns, I'm going to do it again."

[laughter]

GP: Oh no.

JT: Of course, we don't even own any guns – but I said, because I knew I was going to do this. And it's a challenge to do it and keep in this story, it was a beautiful challenge for me.

I really had fun to not let one of them become a secondary character; I wanted all of them to be people and to travel this journey together. It was-- It's challenging and, you know, it's fun. It's like playing-- It's like playing a hard crossroad puzzle or something. You feel very rewarded when you finished.

GP: I totally, totally agree. So, there is like-- There are a million things in what you just said that we need to unpack. So, we're going to have to go into them like detail-by-detail, because OMG.

The first thing that I really want to dig into was something you actually said earlier, which was, you know, like that framing scene; we know from the get-go that something bad is going to happen to one of them, but you didn't know which one that was going to be.

And obviously; you didn't know, the reader doesn't know, your editor didn't know... like we're all sort of in this state of mystery, but that's actually very difficult to sustain, right? Because that means that there has to be a likelihood that each one of them could be the one. Like you can't have it be so obvious that one of them is going to be the one.

I'm thinking for instance, in *Little Women*, we kind of know that Beth is not the same as the other three sisters. We're not quite sure what's going to happen, but there's a melancholy to her that kind of makes her stand out compared to the other three sisters.



If it's too heavy-handed, in which one kind of has the melancholy surrounding them, then it's kills the mystery. So, how did that play out if you didn't know which one it was? Like, how did you stay in that sense of suspended mystery throughout writing the book until the second to last chapter?

JT: I know people call them pantsers and plotters; I don't even think like that... to me, it's all about the people. And I don't even call them characters. In fact, my sons complains, I'll probably name one of them in the will because I think they're so real.

[laughter]

JT: But they come-- They come to me fully blown; they sit down, and we start talking... and people don't reveal themselves all at once. And my job as a writer is not to make up their story, it's to listen to it; and that's what I do.

And when they come to me like that, and these three girls did, I just listened to their story... and some nights, I write almost all night because I want to see what happens. Does that make sense?

GP: Yeah.

JT: No, probably not.

GP: No, it does. I mean, when I first started writing, I was in first grade... and the reason I wanted to write was because I wanted to know what the ending was. Like I wanted to write the story so I could then know how it ended. So, I totally understand.

JT: Exactly. It's almost like it's there and I'm finding it. I really work. I've set through every course in writing you could possibly do over years – but I don't try to plot, I don't manipulate characters; I just let their story unfold.

And in the years of 50 books, I've probably thrown away one chapter. Sometimes I'll write a paragraph and it doesn't feel right, and I'll do it. And you know, I think you spend a lot of time studying writing at the beginning and you just learn those rules... and they're in the back of your head, and you're going to follow them.

You know, I don't think I could have done it if I hadn't studied writing for a few years before I started writing,

GP: Right. Like building the foundation and kind of knowing what the rules are, and then you just sort of instinctively know what to do... as opposed to like, if you were to consciously do it, then it would probably feel unnatural or whatnot – if you were sort of thinking, Oh, that's this rule or whatever.'

JT: When you do that, then the characters become stiff. And I don't put in secondary characters just so I can kill them off. I don't do anything like that. In fact, sometimes my secondary characters become... they were put in as a secondary character, but they have such a good story; it comes out, and I can't help that – and that's what happens.

I called my editor once and said, "I want to write a book called Harmony about a little town." And I said, "I have five main characters that are going to run all through all the books... and my hero is 42 years old, he's overweight, he's balding, he hasn't had a date in two years, and he's the town funeral director."

And she said, "You cannot make that guy a hero." And it was just such a challenge to do. And Tyler Wright in Harmony got so much mail, people thought he was real because he was a regular guy, but... that was a hero. So, I love that.



I can't imagine picking a mate by the way his abs look, you know? [laughs] Doesn't make sense. So, I love what I do; I always have. And I loved-- I loved writing Tea. The Little Tea Shop on Main just flowed out.

GP: I love it. So, one of the other things that I want to circle back to that you talked about was how when you would write each of the girls – Zoe, Emily, and Shannon – that you then would have to go back and read the parts that, so that you could get the voice right... so that it felt like the characters were unified across their different scenes, their different moments.

So, what were you looking for, like, specifically? Like, how do they sound that's different? How do you know what you're looking for to keep that unity going?

JT: We have an old mission home; and off the patio, is another little room... probably a hundred years ago, was a mother-in-law's room or something. And I go out there and I whiteboarded all the walls.

GP: Oh wow.

JT: And so, you unfold in the room because it's not that big a room, and my desk is in the center of it. And when I begin a character, I have the things she-- Of course, I'll have her hair color and her eye color – but I also have the way she thinks, and if she's shy... and if her philosophy of life is 'Never get involved', whatever it is.

But that board will be packed full when I finish, and I'll have little Sticky Notes out though on the side of it so that I keep her in character. And if she does something brave that's out of character, it's got to make sense because, you know... and I want her to be a full-blown character. So, when I go in there at night and turn the light on, it's like my characters are all around me.

GP: Oh my gosh, I want that room. That's like amazing.

[laughter]

GP: I love it. It's so cool. I love that idea. I think I'm going to-- My husband's going to kill me. I'm going to, like, want to whiteboard my entire office now.

So, I love also what you said about how, you know; if the character does something that's out of character, like if a shy character becomes brave-- And obviously, a statement like that automatically implies that it's okay for a character to be out of character – but it has to be justified, it has to be earned.

And I think that's really important to highlight because oftentimes, you know, in writing, people think that they have to follow the rules. You know, we've talked about like knowing the rules so you can break them or whatever – but we forget the part where, 'Yes, it's okay to break them, we just have to do it intentionally or with a purpose'.

So, what are your thoughts on that? Like how do you know when a character wants to break out of, you know, sort of the rules, as it were, that you've set up for them?

JT: I usually, in my mind I'm trying to say, you know; who we are to the world, is not how we see ourself inside. And so, you've got to climb inside of her and see-- and that's why I like doing multi-viewpoint because you can see this person that is fighting inside, but outwardly they may be, you know, running for mayor and look perfectly fine. So, I like that development of characters.



Another thing I do when I erase the board at the end, those characters go away and the next characters come in; and people always ask me, “Well, if you were writing a book about so-and-so, what happened in their life?”

And the first time that happened, I was at an autograph party, and someone walked up and said this... I think this was my third book, and they said, “What happened to the baby that was born in this book?”

And it never occurred to me that they thought that baby was real and had a-- And so, you know, I wanted to say, “Well, she’s bound to be dead by now because she was born in 1836.”

[laughter]

JT: I don’t know. And so, a few books, I just wrote what I thought would happen to the people at 20, 30, 100 years later... but that tickled me because it really made me feel great because that family was alive to her. They didn’t, the reader didn’t see them as characters... and they made me feel great.

GP: You know, that’s such an excellent point too because it’s the idea that if we craft the character well, their life extends beyond the page. And you know, there’s, in Design--

I have a background in Art & Design; and in Design there’s a concept of closure, which is the notion that, you know, you look at a landscape – like a Monet or something – and it shows you like a picture of a field.

Our brain automatically extrapolates that the field continues onward beyond the edge of the canvas... that it’s not just because Monet happened to choose that little sliver of canvas or the piece of the fields to paint that the rest of it just drops off into, you know, darkness.

And it’s sort of the same thing, like as writers, we’re deciding what the frame is in our story and then we’re telling the story that’s within the frame.

But if we do our jobs, our reader will automatically imagine that the story extends beyond that frame... and that the baby has a life and grows up and does things, and that the grandfather goes off and does something else – and the characters expand beyond what the frame can hold.

JT: It’s very good point. Yeah, I like that. And you know, one of the best compliments you can give a writer is to say, I thought about the book for days--

GP: Yeah, I mean, when your characters are getting fan mail, that’s kind of a good sign.

[laughter]

GP: Because it tells you that people think these are real characters, that they’re real people.

JT: Oh, yeah, definitely. I loved that. It was funny.

GP: So, you were talking about how the three young women and sort of, you know, how you kind of mapped your way through them and used your amazing whiteboard room that I’m super jealous of now.

And then you-- One of the things that we were talking about earlier was the idea of how they are all kind of the same weight of character, that there’s no one protagonist.



And this is something I actually ponder a lot because, you know, whenever I'm reading a multi-point of view book, sometimes there's that feeling that even though there are multiple points of view that the author kind of wants you to have one of them be the one that you sort of side with as a reader.

And then sometimes there's a sense that like it's kind of up for grabs and whoever the reader chooses to kind of latch onto, becomes the protagonist, as it were. And in this book, it feels like they all are equal.

So, in terms of how that operates, like when you were writing this, what did you imagine the reader's experience would be? Were you hoping that the reader would kind of attach to one of them or did you want all three of them to sort of sort of be of equal weight? And if so, how were you crafting it so that we didn't kind of attach to one over the other two women?

JT: The hard thing was one of the women was very strong, and one started out weak. She got started-- She started out as a timid character, and she came into her own.

But the thing that surprised me was the mother and father of the girls; their story, I hadn't planned that at all. It just developed, and I thought I cut, I can't let this take over the story. [laughs] So, okay. I say, "Okay, you characters, you'll wait for another book."

GP: That brings up an interesting question as well because, you know, so you mentioned like with the secondary characters and when they kind of want to step in and take over or, and kind of, you don't want them to feel like they're just in there for a plot twist.

And you know, one of the things I always do is I never talk about them as secondary characters. I always refer to them as supporting characters because I feel like secondary makes them feel like they're kind of not important or not valuable; and I think that they are valuable.

So, can you talk a little bit about the supporting characters and what they're doing to support the journey that is the story of these three women? Particularly Jack, the guy, how does he play in to support this journey?

JT: He starts out as a strong father because he's delivering his daughter to a tee, the day his wife leaves him. And he's very much a man who dedicates his life to his daughter. But I want him to find love too.

He supports her in that, he gives her that base that some parents are able to instill in their children, that; whatever she does is right, if she's trying her best. You know?

And he gives her that strong-- He's there for her, the whole book. He's there for all three of them, if you notice, he's there for all three of the girls. And it was just so in his character to ride that metal bull as he got older.

And he was just-- He's not real spontaneous, but he did. But he was a interesting character to put in with the younger generation, because you're dealing with two different generations in the way they think. But I wanted to want to have a strong father in there.

GP: I mean, for some of the girls-- One of them, the one who has the father... and then another one doesn't have the father, but her mother's a strong character. And then the other one, her mother's sort of domineering and her dad, I don't know, he's sort of not really there, but sort of there.

So, like, how did the-- How does that dynamic of the sort of imbalance of their own, the girls'-- I mean, I would imagine that the fact that they have very different experiences within their family units, that that contributes to their relationship to each other, their friendship. Can you talk a little bit and unpack that a little bit for us?



JT: Through the whole thing, they're supportive of each other, but they go through very different experiences. The one that I found interesting was how Jack becomes the best friend of his next-door neighbor. And then she comes in and crawls in bed with him, and he goes, 'This isn't quite right.' He's only 13, but he didn't really think this is quite right. But I just wanted to show the different way people love people.

GP: Well, and Jack is interesting too because like you've mentioned before, his connection to each of the women is unique and sort of different. But the fact that, like, the story is framed where we get the sense that he's, it's almost like he's an observer.

Like when we are in his point of view, we're getting almost like the not neutral viewpoint, but like we're getting the outsider view of the three girls as a unit, which is different from seeing the story and the connection between the three girls or the three women when it's from one of their perspectives.

So, I feel like Jack also adds that extra layer to their friendship because we get another perspective on it.

JT: It was a fun book to write. I can't write the same book again. You know, I moved to the next... moved to the next thing, and it's kind of, it's been fun.

And I think when I wrote Historicals years ago, you know, it was easier to write... the Western movement, and that was easier to write. But sometimes, I think my fans don't, sometimes they don't know exactly what to expect, because I change over and over again.

GP: So, the shifting from, you've written Historical Romance, you've written Contemporary, like you're kind of writing different areas within the romance space. So, how does that work in terms of like, connecting with your readers and also like the writing process?

Like, is it a similar process regardless of which genre or sub-genre you're writing? Or do you have to get into a different headspace?

JT: When I write Contemporary Romance, when I write Historical, it's a different process definitely, because when I do that-- In fact, if you go to YouTube, you'll see a little clip called Walking the Land.

I have to feel like I walk the land. I have to actually-- Even though it happened 150 years ago, I'm going to go to that place and I'm going to walk that land. Whenever I write Contemporary-- The next book coming out is a contemporary story about a ranch.

I spent six months driving 45 miles every day to a ranch and watching everything that happened, and listening to the way the people talked, and getting a sense... I was so wrong about how a rancher feels about his land; he does not see him himself as the Lord of the land, he sees himself as the caretaker. And it's fascinating to see the way those ranchers love their land; I wasn't expecting that.

GP: Did you have a similar experience with The Little Tea Shop on Main? Like, was there sort of the equivalent of that – but like, kind of discovering that kind of, you know what I mean? Like, did you-- How did you walk the land, as it were, for The Little Tea Shop? Like, were you trying all these different teas?

JT: Yes.

[laughter]

JT: I tried lots of teas. I bought lots of teapots and tea, different kinds of things like that. And every day when I was working on tea shop, I drank tea. I have a, and I think all writers do; we have a ritual, whether it lasts a minute or 10 minutes, to get in out of ourselves... and into a story.



And you know, we set up our office, we get our drinks, we read a certain thing, we wind the clock, whatever we do... but we have a ritual that puts us in that. And when I did tea, I spent most of my time--

I didn't do tea in the bunkhouse out with my boards all the time; I went out and sat in tea shops and sat in coffee houses, and listened to the way people talk. And the tea was mainly the bond between the women, the physical bond between the women. It wasn't really about a tea shop, you know? And so, I did that, and it worked.

GP: You know, it's interesting as I was reading, I sort of felt a connection to *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Like there was sort of a similar vibe of like... except instead of pants, it was tea.

And obviously, they're more together than they are apart. But there's the element of, kind of, having that physical thing that anchors the relationship... and that connects the three women, which I think is really, kind of works well to bring them all together and hold them together with that thing.

So, what does your process or your ritual look like? Like, does it-- Is it the same for every book? Do you have a different ritual when you start a different book or a different series?

Like you mentioned going to the ranch, obviously you're not going to a ranch when you're doing a tea shop book. So, like, how does it change-- How does the ritual change from book-to-book, and what things stay the same from book-to-book?

JT: Someone asked me to describe my offices, and I actually have three offices. And when I'm doing edits or copyedits or anything that is not the specific writing of a book, I am upstairs in a room where three sides are windows so that I feel like I'm in the trees... and I'm always, I always do, that's where I do that kind of thinking.

And it's where you step more into the editor mode and less into the Creative Writing, and I do that. And then a few years ago, a friend of-- I live in a little town and a friend of mine called, that's a real estate agent. And she said, "I've got your hideout," and we went over and I bought it that day.

And it's a little tiny condo that is sliced in between the corner of a bunch of condos. And I go in through the back, and it's silent as it can be. And it's like, it's small; it has a living room, and a kitchen downstairs, and a bedroom upstairs.

And there is where I think; I go and I spend most of my time writing, and not using my computer. And I'll write the names. Sometimes it takes me an hour to figure out a name. Do you have that problem? That's my biggest problem.

GP: You know, I often use baby name websites because when I name a character, I like the name to have a significance to something about that character. So often, I have the meaning before I have the name... and then I'll try to find names that either contradict the meaning that I want or align with the meaning that I want. That's probably a way too complicated way to get a name.

JT: [laughs] Oh, sometimes I go to-- I decide what, like, are they Irish or are they German? And then I go to the German baby-name sites, and they're all-- That's the hardest part of my work, is the picking out the location exactly.

And sometimes that takes a couple of months; and I'll start a book and two months later, I'll still be on the first chapter because I'm messing with that. But once I get the characters, once my people sit down with me and they begin to grow, then I will write... Very often, I'll write half a book in a month.



GP: Wow.

JT: After spending six months playing around with it.

GP: And so, you mentioned, it takes a while to figure out where the story is set, but once you have a-- I mean, you have several series also, so I would imagine that they're tied, the books in those series are tied.

Are they tied by location or do the characters move around? Like once you know that this series is-- Do you have series that are set in a certain place and then you just go back to that place whenever you write the next book? Or is it like all over the place?

JT: My series are always based on a place. For example, when I wrote Harmony, I was speaking in Tyler, Texas to a ladies' group; and they put me up in a 1850 plantation house. And I thought, I was the only one-- I was the only one that was a Bed & Breakfast... and was the only one there.

And I thought, 'I am going to write... this is going to be the best Historical and, you know, start because I'm right here in this house, I'm going to spend the night wandering all over it.'

And then before they left, they told me all the terrible sad things that had happened, murders--

GP: Oh geez.

JT: -and suicides and everything. The minute they left... I ran to my room, locked the door, and started-- And I went to Harmony, I went to a place where people took care of each other, and I wrote almost all night that night.

And in fact, they were making breakfast when I went to bed. But I think that that's the place, and sometimes I see that place with this new series, Ransom Canyon. When I went to college at Texas Tech... about 15 miles from Texas Tech, is a canyon called Ransom Canyon.

And it actually was used, when the Reeves turned, the groups that were roaming around Texas in the early days would meet there and they would ransom off people that they'd captured.

And so, that's why it was called Ransom Canyon; and it was kind of a trade days in the 1830s. And so, I wanted to ride about Ransom Canyon because I went there so many times just driving around. But I didn't really know what I'd write.

So, I'd go out one day with a friend that's just, she's writing an article about horses that have been abused and left and starving and everything. And I go out to this ranch, and it really wasn't a ranch; it was kind of a, like the earth dipped down and made a big bowl kind of - and the horses could run free down there.

And they didn't have fences; they just had walls, the canyon walls. These are horses that don't even relate to humans because they've been so mistreated. And the lady told me all about it. And I just was walking along with the other writer.

And then she stopped and she said, "One of the most interesting things in my life was when my husband died, and I was so alone that at night I would get out and walk with the horses." And it's a feeling you never expect because these are wild horses, you don't just walk up and pet them.

And she said, "Would any of you want to walk with the horses?" And I mean, I was out the gate, I was on my way. And she was running in the kitchen up with me and she said, "Okay, let me give you some rules... it was a religious experience to walk with these animals and let them slowly accept you with them."



And I knew right then that I was going to do Ransom Canyon series, and I was going to, it was going to be horse ranch.

GP: That's awesome. I love it. For these ones you had the specific place that kind of anchored the series, is it easier when you go back into that place to kind of lock back into that mindset? Or does it feel like you're rebuilding the story from scratch again?

JT: No, it's much easier to walk back in. And usually in a series, there'll be people in the first book that I know are going to go to the second and the third, and then they're going to... somewhere I'm going to tell their story – once they tell it to me, I'm going to tell their story.

So, it's kind of like, when I started out, I thought I'd write trilogy; and my first trilogy was six books, my second trilogy was like five. And finally, my editor said, "Stop calling them trilogies because you're writing series."

[laughter]

GP: Wise editor, that's a wise editor.

[laughter]

GP: When you have these characters that you're kind of waiting to have them tell you their story and you know that they're going to come in, has the opposite ever happened where you kind of told a character story – and then in a later book, something else happened to them... they surprise you in some way? Has that ever happened?

JT: Yes.

GP: What do you do? Like, what happens when a character does something and you're like, 'Whoa, where did that come from?'

[laughter]

GP: Not speaking from experience at all. I've never been thrown for a loop by any of my characters, as you can probably tell from the sarcasm in my voice.

JT: I used to say when I wrote Historicals that whatever they did, I would just go with it. But if it got boring, bullets were going to fly... because it's Historical, you can do that.

GP: Yeah.

JT: You just kill them off if they'd go crazy, that was what I would do. But I usually-- I don't really have that problem too much. But a lot of times-- I'll tell a story of a person and a talent that they have, maybe not necessarily a talent anyone would particularly want to have, can really help them later in the story.

GP: So, you kind of discover something that then comes back and sort of helps the story along down the road?

JT: Right. It's almost like my brother who writes plays, he said, it's kind of like you walk in in Chapter Two and open a drawer... and there's a gun in there and you thought, 'Why'd I put that there?' And then Chapter 17, you need the gun. You know, he writes mysteries.



GP: Yeah, I was thinking it was, it's kind of like the checkoffs gun idea. You know, like that there's that whole checkoff quote... that if there's a gun on the mantelpiece, it has to go off by Act Three. And it's sort of-- It's sort of like that. Like sometimes our subconscious plants a gun or something else in the story; and then down the road we're like, 'Oh, that's why that was there.'

JT: Right.

GP: I love it. So, you obviously have a lot of different books and you're moving between different series. So, what's next after Little Tea Shop? What else can readers look forward to?

JT: Well, Christmas, I'm going to have Christmas in Winter Valley; and it's going to be another Ransom Canyon book. It'll be my eighth Ransom Canyon book. And for the first time, all of the story is going to actually take place on this big ranch.

There's three brothers, and it's got a cast of characters that walk through; and I had a lot of fun with it. I think the first character that came to me was an old rodeo guy that had been a big-time star; and then he's now an alcoholic, and he comes to the ranch, and I start with his viewpoint of what he's seen.

And I've seen these-- I've seen a-- I grew up in Amarillo, of course, I've seen them; and I've, I've seen these rodeo guys who rodeoed maybe five years too long, and that was their life, they're crippled up.

But if you start talking to them about rodeo, they'll scoot forward in their chair and they'll put their knees apart and they're sitting that horse right then; and it's fun to watch them, and I wanted to start with a guy like that.

GP: That's awesome. So, that's the Christmas in Winter Valley book, which is coming out, I guess, is that right around Christmas?

JT: Yes. It'll be out, I think the end of September. And on my disc right now, are the copyedits of it. So, I'm working on the copyedits now.

GP: That's awesome. So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

JT: Whenever I started writing 30 years, over 30 years ago, I wrote for five years. I studied writing, I did test, did a lot of books, I did-- I went to every conference I could, and then I started putting different kinds of stories and not knowing what kind of book I wanted to write.

After almost five years, I thought, 'I'm about to get this, I'm good.' And so, there was a local contest, and the contest had seven kinds of entries. And I entered all; I wrote a Mystery, I wrote a Romance, I entered all.

This is a contest that most of them had 12 or 15 entries, I guess, in each category. And I went to the luncheon and I didn't know anyone. And I sat with a bus driver and he didn't care that I was a writer, [laughs] but I told him, I said, 'I'm going to win, I have worked so hard... this is my dream, this is what I want-- I'm going to-- I'm going to win so many contests they're going to say, Jodi, just stay up here at the podium, we're not even going to have you walk and sit down.

And I just knew I was going to win. Maybe am, will mention in one and maybe first place with another... and they called everybody's name but mine. And at one point there were seven entries in a category, and they called six names, and mine wasn't called.



It just crushed me that I'd been writing five years, I had a degree, I had everything I needed and I couldn't win in a local contest. The book that would later win a RITA, the National Best Book of the Year, didn't place in this category in rough draft form. And I walked out... and by the time I got to my car, I was crying and I started home and I thought, 'I do not want to my sons to see me crying,' so I turned at a cemetery and I started--

Llano Cemetery is a beautiful cemetery, only place the Amarillo has trees. And I was walking around by the trees and I saw a statue of a bowl of fruit, that's a whole another story why they put that there. But I saw the statue of a bowl of fruit and it had a concrete square at the bottom.

I was sitting there crying, thinking, 'That's it. I made a mistake... I thought this was my career, I thought this is what I wanted to do – and obviously, if I can't win even an honorable mention at a local contest, I don't have a chance.'

And I looked down and I saw the word through on the concrete carved in. And so, I got down and crawled around the bottom of the statue, and there was one word on each side, and it changed my life; it said, "Triumph comes through perseverance".

And I stood up and I said, "That's it, God... I am writing the rest of my life... they're going to have to pull the pin from my hand to get it in the casket, I am never stopping." And I went home, and I went to work trying to sell and trying to get my manuscripts out there.

Three months later, I sold my first book. 15 months, I'd sold five. If I had quit that day, if I hadn't seen that statue – I took a magic marker as big as I could find – and I wrote behind my computer on the wall, Triumph comes through perseverance'... and I misspelled perseverance, but that doesn't really bother me.

[laughter]

JT: But I think you have to have, you have to have that drive. It's probably more important than talent. You have to have that perseverance that you're going to do it no matter what, that's the best advice I can give.

GP: That is just such an amazing story and phenomenal advice. I feel like I should write that on the wall. I face out into a window, like the glass window, Triumph Comes Through Perseverance. My husband's going to love that one too.

That, first the whiteboards, now this, what's going on? Oh, my goodness. It's been so much fun chatting with you today, Jodi. I feel like we could go on talking about books and writing for another five hours and not run out of things to say. Thank you so much for being here today.

JT: Thank you. I enjoyed it. And I'd love to come back and talk about Christmas next time.

GP: Oh, wonderful. All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

