

## TEN QUESTIONS FOR ALLISON BRENNAN by Lynne Marshall

I recently had the opportunity and pleasure to meet NY Times Best Selling Romantic Suspense author, Allison Brennan, at the November 2010 Orange County RWA meeting. She is an easy-going and approachable woman with a winning smile and positive attitude, both of which were contagious. From her speech, I realized what a proud mother she is, and how much she enjoys her "other" full time job, as well as her demanding writing career. When I asked if she would answer ten questions, she was more than happy to oblige.

1. How long were you writing before you got published and how many manuscripts had you completed?

I've been writing most of my life (since childhood!) and I always wanted to be a writer, but life interfered. Marriage, family, career. I didn't get serious about writing—and finishing a book—until March of 2002, when I told myself if I wanted to be a published author, I needed to do it. I wrote five manuscripts, found an agent with my fifth, and she sold the book quickly, in March of 2004 (THE PREY was released in January 2006.) It might seem like it happened fast, but I made a lot of sacrifices—I didn't watch tv for three years, I wrote every night after the kids went to bed, and I stopped taking work from my day job home, putting my career at risk. But in the end, it was worth it.

2. Where do you get your ideas?

Everywhere and nowhere!

Everywhere, because I'm pulling in information all around me, from who I meet to what I see to what I read in the news. I don't consciously think when I see a news story that I want to write about it the topic, but I absorb it and when a variety of different snippets of information merge together in my head, a story idea pops out—often without me consciously thinking about it. So while I get my ideas from the world around me, they seem to come out of my imagination spontaneously, as if triggered by some unseen force.

Ideas are like grains of sand caught in an oyster. The layers that build the pearl are placed over time, until that small, common irritant is formed into a natural pearl. One idea needs time to grow and develop, adding layers into the initial spark. It's why you can give a hundred authors the exact same premise and have a hundred completely different and unique stories.

3. Do you plot and make character studies before you start, or do you fly by the seat of your pants?

I'm an organic writer. I don't plot. (And I don't like the word "pantser." Doesn't "organic writer" sound so much better?)

4. What about writing makes you anxious?

I constantly worry that what I'm writing is crap, that I'll never write another book as good as the last, and I wonder how on earth I even managed to finish that last book, and have it turn out not crappy. And of course the business end stresses me out—I want to be a writer, period. But in this day and age, you can't write in your den and pop out every five years, unless you're very special (like Thomas Harris and a few others who write one mega-successful novel every 3-5 years.)

5. How long does it take you to complete a manuscript and how many books do you write in a year?

My first draft takes 6-10 weeks, but it's in no way done. And, I'm often thinking about the book long before I write it, playing the "what if" game and researching potential plot points, even while writing another book. I write and rewrite and rewrite. A book, from start to sending off to production after revisions, will take me anywhere from 3 months to 6 months to write. I, personally, like to have 5 months before the book goes into production. Too short, and I know it could be better; too long, and I tend to procrastinate and edit the life out of the book. But since I write 3 books a year, I realistically only have 4 months per book, and sometimes less.

6. Of all the books you've written, which is your favorite, and are there any you wish you'd never written?

That's like asking me which is my favorite child! How can I choose? I like them all for different reasons. If I had to pick a favorite . . . ORIGINAL SIN. It's the book of my heart. I love that series. And LOVE ME TO DEATH, my recent release, because it was really hard to write at the beginning, but once I got into the story, it took over. I was very happy with the final result. There's nothing I wish I hadn't written. Even the books I never published I don't regret writing, because each was a learning experience. I think I've gotten better since I was first published—stronger writing, better stories, more complex plots—but I don't regret my early work. I always strive to write a better book than the last.

7. Are you involved a critique group, plotting group, any kind of writer's group?

Not anymore. Before I was published, I had a fantastic crit group. None of us were published at the time, but we were all serious. Now? All eight of us are published. When I need advice or need to vent, I talk to the gals at Murder She Writes, my group blog.

8. How do you see the romance genre evolving in the next ten years?

I can't predict. The romance genre has been a successful and stable genre. Like every genre, there are ups and downs and shifts. The business of publishing is changing, but the genre itself? I see it now focusing on home, hearth and family—even the romantic suspense themes are about coming home. My Kincaid family is my most popular, and I think that's in part because readers like the family connection of love and mutual respect, as well as the unbreakable bond of blood. Everything is cyclical, so what's popular today won't be popular in five years, but might again be popular in ten years. I do see more blending of the genres as writers try new and different mixes of the familiar.

9. Which writers do you admire?

Many. I've been a fan of Stephen King since I was 13. He is a master of character and one of the greatest storytellers to ever live, and I don't say that lightly. I admire James Rollins because he has always been willing to help new writers and has a wry sense of humor. I've greatly admired Debbie Macomber since I heard her speak in 2005 at RWA in Reno. It was one of the most sincere and motivational speeches I've heard. I admire Nora Roberts for her discipline and consistently good storytelling, and I admire Lee Child because he is kind, selfless, and truly a friend of writers. There are many, many more—all the authors who have served as mentors to new writers, all the classic writers who forged new ground or reclaimed a genre or resurrected a genre.

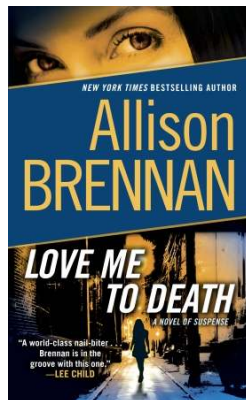
10. Any advice to aspiring authors?

Write. Revise. Learn to self-edit. Learn to discern good advice out of all the crappy advice you get. Learn to be self-critical without destroying your confidence. No one is a master out of the gate; even the masters practiced for years. Be smart about the business, because publishing *is* a business first. Write because you love to write, not because you want to be published. Write

because you can't imagine *not* writing. Writing is a business, but it's also creative, and thus unique. You have to love what you write because if you sell, you'll be writing that type of story potentially for years. Don't write to trends, because trends change, but write what you love—then position it to fit the market. And while some rules are important—such as punctuation—don't get hung up on arbitrary rules. Write boldly and with passion, because that's what it takes to stand out in this tight market. But mostly, write with the love of writing, because even when you curse the computer and your lack of imagination and your fear of failure and your fear of success, even when you think you're writing total garbage, deep down you love it because it's you.

Thank you, Allison, for giving us a peek at your process, for your great advice, and for taking time out from your ultra busy schedule to answer these questions. Oh, and by the way, I agree, "organic writer" sounds much better than "pantser"!

New York Times bestselling author **Allison Brennan** has published fifteen romantic thrillers with Ballantine, the most recent LOVE ME TO DEATH. Called "a master of suspense" by RT Book Reviews, Lee Child said that her latest is "A world-class nail-biter" and Lisa Gardner said, "Brennan knows how to deliver." Allison lives in Northern California with her husband and their five children, and for fun plays video games, watches old movies, and goes to her kids sporting events. You can visit her at her website, [allisonbrennan.com](http://allisonbrennan.com).



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