

Eureka moments

Cindy Gerard, author of romantic suspense novels, says when she starts writing a new novel, it's "like a bright, shiny new toy." But then comes that bleak stretch after the first 100 pages. . . . How does she make it through to the end? With determination, a little panic, and a few "eureka" moments!

A conversation with Cindy Gerard

What is your writing process?

Cindy Gerard: [. . .] when you first start a book it's like a bright, shiny new toy or a new pair of shoes. Oh, they're so exciting, they're so flashy, and it's razzle dazzle, and it's just all brilliance and light, and all the words just start coming, coming, coming. And then all of a sudden you reach a point—or I do at any point—where I think, "Okay, got it. Now what?" And then it becomes work. [*laughs*] So I have a tendency in my writing process to start out gangbusters, and then I'll get mired about page 100, because now I'm starting to worry. Are these people as wonderful as I thought they were? Are their actions plausible? Are these people that somebody is going to want to cheer for, root for, emulate, love? And so then I'll stop, and I'll go back, and I'll start writing and rewriting, and so my 100 pages turns into 150 pages, and then I had to reach a point where, you know, you have to leave this at some point. You are comfortable here. You're making excuses. There's nothing more you can do. You must move on, but it takes me a long time to get to that.

So then I kind of slog through the next few pages because I'm—not few. Couple of hundred pages—because I'm very uncertain yet that oh, do I have enough story to just sustain these characters? Am I going to be able to hold it together? So every process turns out the same. Excited and giddy at the beginning, draggy toward the middle, panicked toward the end, and then somehow it all comes together. But I've talked to so many writers and it seems to be kind of a—we're self-perpetuating our own dilemmas. We do this all the time. You'd think after almost 50 books I'd have it down pat by now. No. Each book is a new experience. Each one's harder.

[. . .] If it weren't for plots, I could write a lot of books. [*laughs*] But editors generally notice if you don't have a plot in your book. [*laughs*] They tend to frown on it. But plotting for me is the most difficult part. Characterization, setting, anything like that is fine, and generally when I sit down to write a book, I have a kernel of an idea. I may have read something in *Newsweek*; I may have read something in *Time*. I may have seen a movie and there was one scene that triggered something that, "Ah, that—I could see developing that, going in a whole direction there."

But then the trick is, you know, it's real easy to sketch it out. Like I always say that my outlines generally when I start are like four pages of backstory and the characters and four pages of BS because I don't know exactly where I'm going. But in order for me to keep my mind level to some degree when I'm working, I have to have a roadmap to follow, so I do try plot point by plot point just to get them where I need them to go. I have a pretty good idea of beginning, I have a pretty good idea of what needs to happen; I'm not sure sequentially how that's going to happen or how it's going to play out, and I have, you know, kind of a fluid idea of what the ending is going to be. But I like it that way. I can't write like a 100-page detailed synopsis because to me that confines me to the size of this room where I could have the whole hotel as my playground. So I call my outlines like roadmaps, and as I'm riding down that road toward my goal, if I see a blue

highway or a gravel road, I'm going to veer off because some of the best things I ever come up with are out there.

[. . .] Every book I count on at least two "Eureka" moments. [*laughs*] If I don't have that "Eureka" moment, I come out two weeks before deadline—I'm pulling my hair out. This last book I had such a hard time. I told my husband, "Okay." This was about six weeks before the book was due. I said, "Here's the deal. For the next six weeks, if you want to eat, you're going to have to take care of it. You might have to make sure I eat, too. And then if you want clean clothes, you're going to have to take care of it. And if I come out of my office and I say to you, 'Chocolate or Cheetos,' you get in the car and you go get them." [*laughs*] And he doesn't ask any questions; he just does it because he knows. And I literally—this last book, I powered through on chocolate and Cheetos. [*laughs*] And somehow as you're sitting there and you're nibbling on food, and thoughts and ideas, what I need comes out. And I wish I could tell you I knew how I did it because if I did, it would be so much easier. [*laughs*] But it's just—every book I turn in, I think, "This is the one. This is the one they're going to figure out she does not know what she's doing." [*laughs*] "And we're not going to ask for any more books from her." [*laughs*] But I guess that's kind of the fun of it, too—the spontaneity of finding out what's going to happen.

And sometimes I start with a brilliant outline. "Oh, I know exactly what I'm going to do!" By the end of the book, it doesn't bear any resemblance at all to what I had started out writing. And that's about the time I always tell my editor, "Surprise. Remember that book you bought? Well, I'm turning in a different one. Hope you like it." [*laughs*] But you know, I think that just goes with the creative process. Some people are very linear thinkers and they can do that, and some of us are scatterbrains.

What pulls you along through a novel, either writing or reading one? What discourages you from continuing? If you're a reader, do you keep going in hopes

the book will improve? If you're a writer, what keeps you going through the discouragement?

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