

Interview with Candy Calvert **Author of *Dressed to Keel***

Today Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views is talking with registered nurse and critically-acclaimed author Candy Calvert about her award-winning novel, “Dressed to Keel.”

*“Dressed to Keel” won 1st place in the Reader Views Annual Literary Awards 2006 – Mystery/Thriller Fiction Category, and is the first in her “Darcy Cavanaugh Mystery Series.” Candy’s writing career began with her inspirational true story, “By Accident,” which appears in the New York Times bestseller *Chicken Soup For the Nurse’s Soul*.*

Juanita: Welcome to Reader Views Candy and congratulation on your 1st place win with “*Dressed to Keel*.” How does it feel?

Candy: Thank you Juanita, I’m delighted to be here. And to answer your question: It feels *great* to have my debut mystery win the Reader Views Literary Award. And it’s especially meaningful since a panel of reader reviewers made the choice--pleasing readers is my biggest goal.

Juanita: Would you tell us about the *Darcy Cavanaugh Mystery Series*?

Candy: Absolutely. The Darcy Cavanaugh Series is a funny and romantic cruise mystery series, featuring a young, feisty, redheaded nurse involved in murder and mayhem during madcap adventures at sea. I often joke that the series is something like “I Love Lucy meets ER on the LoveBoat . . . to solve a murder.”

Juanita: One of the enthralling qualities of your series is the high level of quirky humor in your writing. Where does this humor come from?

Candy: I often tell folks that I “blame” my sense of humor on “survival tactics learned in the trenches of ER.” And the truth is, that my 20 plus years as an emergency room nurse, taught me that laughter *is indeed* the best medicine. For medical personnel--and for everyone at some point in their lives--life can get gritty and real. Sometimes a deep belly laugh, a well-timed hug, or just the barest glimmer of a happy ending is all it takes to keep us going.

Juanita: How did your nursing background influence or drive this series?

Candy: Nursing and emergency medicine are what I know and--if TV is an indication--medical drama has always been intriguing to people. I decided to combine this element with my passions for both humor and cruise travel and--voila--the series was born.

Juanita: How did you come up with Darcy Cavanaugh, and would you give us a little insight into who she is?

Candy: Darcy Cavanaugh--though a nurse--is like many 30-something women today. Strong, independent, learning to be realistic about career and life goals, fully capable of standing on her own . . . but still hopeful that “happily ever after” might be in the cards as well. Overly responsible and impulsive, Darcy is a crusader, prone to righting wrongs . . . and to “therapeutic” macaroni and cheese binges when the going gets tough. She has personal, human issues as well, like her worry for grandmother with Alzheimer’s, and self-doubts regarding love relationships.

Juanita: What happens in “*Dressed to Keel*”?

Candy: In this series debut, Darcy Cavanaugh climbs the gangway of a glitzy New England cruise as R&R for job burnout and a failed romance, but instead finds herself involved in jewel theft, murder . . . and unexpected romance.

Juanita: I understand that your research for this series has proved to be an adventure in itself. Would you explain? What specifically did you do to prepare for writing “*Dressed to Keel*”?

Candy: Ah, yes, cruise research--so very grueling, but I *am* dedicated! In all seriousness, the idea for *Dressed to Keel* came to me while aboard a Fall Foliage cruise sailing from Boston to Quebec City and back. Many of the scenes, from the midnight chocolate buffet, to the dangerous cliff at Peggy’s Cove lighthouse, to the Champagne Waterfall in the book’s exciting climax, spring from real experience. Even the killer is based on an intriguing character I “found” aboard ship.

Juanita: Who are some of the other key characters in this novel, and how do they factor into the storyline?

Candy: Darcy’s best friend--warm and wise-cracking, shipboard nurse Marie Whitley--is accused of jewel theft and the murder of a ship steward. Darcy is determined to vindicate her friend. Luke Skyler, the young and handsome “dance host” seen schmoozing the elderly female theft victims, becomes Darcy’s prime suspect--despite the fact that she finds herself not entirely immune to his charms. A gang of quirky elderly passengers, from the Yoga Nazi to the Queen Bee and Phantom Dancer, add to the colorful shipboard cast.

Juanita: Your cast is quite a peculiar gathering of folks. How do you come up with your characters?

Candy: Like most writers, I confess to being a “people watcher.” I compile physical traits, personalities, and odd bits of human quirkiness to create unique characters--almost the way we built “Mr. Potato-Head” as kids.

Juanita: How important do you feel a strong imagination is to a comedic writing style?

Candy: That's a good question--I've never been asked that before! My instinct would be that a "comedic writing style" springs more from a way a person views life, than from pure imagination. I admire the heck out of fantasy and Sci-Fi writers who can build entire alternate *worlds*--that takes imagination! "Comic voices," in my opinion, are likely born that way--they're the folks who have to bite their lips *not* to add the funny quip, the ones always itching to lessen a tense situation with some self-deprecating, "pressure-releasing" comment. My guess is that a "comedic sense" is partly a quirky and amused take on the world, and partly self-defense against life's harsh realities. It's certainly saved my sanity more than once!

Juanita: Candy, with all of your Darcy Cavanaugh novels taking place onboard cruise ships, would you tell us about your interest in this particular setting?

Candy: (Winking) Want to see my Holland America "Mariner's" pin? Yes, I love cruising! My first sailing (to the Bahamas) was a result of winning a Nurse Excellence Award. Since that time I've cruised both coasts, to the Alaska Inside Passage, other sites in the Caribbean, and to Europe twice. In fact, I'll be climbing aboard another cruise in September, which will travel to the Greek isles and then on to Egypt.

Juanita: For those of us who haven't yet been on a cruise, is it typical to have a certain amount of drama going on onboard?

Candy: Anywhere a large number of people gather, there is drama. Aboard ship, the focus is merriment and escape from the stresses of "real-life," so you feel this great sense of community with passengers from diverse backgrounds and nationalities. Contrary to news stories of rampant illness and "man overboard," situations, I've found the cruise experience to be safe and infinitely enjoyable. Two of my editors have taken first cruises after reading my books!

Juanita: Though "*Dressed to Keel*" is full of humor, we must not forget that it is a murder mystery. Would you elaborate on the pace, as well as the mystery element?

Candy: I was so tickled to have a reviewer for *Reader Views* remark that she neglected her chores and spent an entire day in her pajamas, because she was reading *Dressed to Keel* and "could not put it down." Maybe because I was an ER nurse, I like my pacing fast, my dialogue snappy and the plot chock full of surprises. I add medical drama, cliff-hangers (once, literally) at the end of chapters, and weave enough clues throughout to challenge even the veteran mystery buff. Humor and romance offer "breathers" from the story's tension--and I never kill the good guys.

Juanita: It sounds like the mix of mystery, suspense, humor and romance would all transform this story into a great screenplay, and then the big screen. What are your thoughts?

Candy: It's a great idea. And if Matthew McConaughey stars as Luke Skyler, I promise to be on the set every day. For literary accuracy of course. Seriously, my agent is pursuing these avenues as we speak.

Juanita: Candy, what do you enjoy most about writing about strong and independent women?

Candy: I love writing about women who must summon strength despite self-doubts and vulnerabilities--it allows great opportunity for growth. I can relate to them personally, especially those in the medical professions. They are, in my opinion, true heroes.

Juanita: With three books in this series, what keeps you going?

Candy: Despite the fact that these books are a hoot to write, I'm enjoying watching these characters grow and change. And my readers keep asking for more--always a wonderful incentive.

Juanita: What is the underlying message in "*Dressed to Keel*"?

Candy: The theme of "acceptance," is woven throughout the stories in this series--Darcy struggles with that issue in both her career and in conflicts regarding love and family. Her friend Marie, with her own unique challenges, serves as a sort of "wise Yoda" mentor.

Juanita: How long have you been writing? Who have been your literary influences?

Candy: I've been writing (with a goal of publication) for about 7 years. I was fortunate to find my literary agent, Natasha Kern, in the fall of 2002.

I'm an eclectic reader, but a few of my favorite re-reads are novels by Jennifer Crusie and Anne Rivers Siddons. Anne Lamott inspires me, and I enjoy the romantic comedy of Stephanie Bond and Rachel Gibson. And Janet Evanovich of course--I'm thrilled when readers liken my work to hers.

Juanita: Candy, do you have any other projects in the works? How can readers find out more about you and your books?

Candy: My second Darcy Cavanaugh mystery, AYE DO OR DIE, a wacky wedding cruise, has just been released. MAI TAI to MURDER, set in the Caribbean, will "launch" in September.

I welcome everyone to sail by my website at: www.candycalvert.com.

And to my Blogs, OverBoard (<http://ccalvert.livejournal.com/>) and InkSpot

(<http://midnightwriters.blogspot.com/>) where I muse with 20 other great Midnight Ink mystery authors.

Juanita: What are your plans after you release your Darcy Cavanaugh series? Do you have thoughts for your next books?

Candy: Actually, I'm working on a couple of projects, one of which is a great, new inspirational medical romance series--an uplifting (and at times humorous, of course) take on "Grey's Anatomy," if you will.

Juanita: Candy is has been a pleasure talking with you today. "*Dressed to Keel*" sounds like a fantastic read, as well as your entire *Darcy Cavanaugh Mystery Series*, and we encourage readers to

look for your books at local and online booksellers. Before we depart, do you have any final thoughts?

Candy: I've loved talking with you, Juanita--and you can bet I'm still happy-dancing over being chosen as a winner in the Reader Views Literary Awards! I thank you all, enormously for this honor.

And I invite all readers in need of fictional "R&R"-- and a deep belly laugh-- to climb aboard the Darcy Cavanaugh Mystery Series. You'll find chocolate on your pillow . . . and murder underway.

Happy sailing!