

## Interview for “The Unlikely Duke” by Debra Killeen

*Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Debra Killeen, who is here to discuss her new young adult novel “An Unlikely Duke.”*

*Debra Killeen graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1985 and spent 15 years working as a pharmacist in numerous settings—hospital, retail, and home infusion. She never found the right fit. Then, having reached her limit with managed “care,” she transitioned careers into clinical research and writing novels. “An Unlikely Duke” is her first novel, but she has plans for many more. Debra lives in Chapel Hill, NC, with her sister Diane and five exceptional cats—Mandy, Scott, Finn, Isis and Osiris.*

Tyler: Thank you, Debra, for joining me today. To begin, will you tell us what “An Unlikely Duke” is about?

Debra: Thank you, Tyler. It’s my pleasure to speak with you.

“An Unlikely Duke” is about several things—it has a few themes, including loyalty and friendship, with the latter being found in some unexpected places, and the importance of not judging a person by his/her appearance. The basic premise is this—I take two characters from our world, aka “the real world” and place them into a world that resembles our European Middle Ages, where Magic works, and is under strict control of the Church. This Church control will play a role in future novels in this series, and another series in this same world that I plan to write.

Tyler: Why did you decide to have the story take place in another world?

Debra: While I loved reading some historical fiction when I was in my teens and 20’s, I’d gotten away from it. However, I have yet to lose my love of history itself. I almost studied history in college—my two favorite subjects in high school were history and chemistry. (I’m not sure what that says about me!)

Anyway, developing another world, kind of an alternate reality to our own, is a challenge, but it also gives me the freedom to change things. Think of it from a “Well, what if the Norman Conquest hadn’t happened?” or “What if the result had been different?” While I need to be relatively faithful to a general time period—for example, I wouldn’t put cars or telephones into a medieval society—I can allow my imagination to roam. Especially in regard to Magic—although my Magical system does have rules.

I loved fantasy during childhood, adolescence, and college – I started with fairy tales and mythology, then moved on to Lloyd Alexander, Anne McCaffrey, Andre Norton, Ursula LeGuin, Tolkien, and Katherine Kurtz, to name a few writers. I still have a copy of “The Phantom Tollbooth” on my shelf, so when Elijah takes his to Myrridia, that’s me. So inventing a new world opens up a lot of possibilities for the stories.

Tyler: That’s fascinating, Debra. I’m intrigued both by having to create an entire different world and having to create rules for it. Will you tell us a little bit about the difficulties of such a creation? For example, I loved L. Frank Baum’s Oz novels when I was a child, but every once in a while, I would find places where he contradicted himself regarding whether people could die in Oz or whether they used money in Oz. How do you keep everything in your magical world straight—did you have to create a timeline or an entire history for events prior to the start of the novel as a reference for yourself?

Debra: Creating a new world definitely has its challenges. You have to have an idea of the place’s geography, climate, level of technology, political systems, social systems, level of health care, and many other things. I do have a partial timeline for this world, both in the form of notes, as well as a piece of poster board with a timeline showing major events. I am always adding to this timeline. Inevitably, inconsistencies will turn up, though, because we’re all human. So far, I think I’ve managed not to have someone’s eyes or hair change color, but it’s early yet!

Plus, I make every effort to give major characters different names, except in cases when giving them the same names works, such as kings naming their firstborn sons after themselves, or in the case of Christian, who named his son Reginald for his king. That often happened, at least if the monarch or lord were popular. Not so much if he weren’t! Or taking different forms of the same names—Helen’s daughter is named Eleanor, for example. Robert’s middle name is the same as his grandfather’s.

In all, I find world creation challenging and fun at the same time. Another thing about names—I try to keep most of the medieval names close to accurate. I’m not going to name a child Tyler or Britney, unless I find a historical source with it. However, Biblical names are definitely fair game, as well as the saints. I will write down interesting names if I run across them doing research, and some characters have personal importance, and may be a clue for my closest friends—ah, this character will be evil, or that one will be good, just from the name.

Now, having said all that, by having two modern-day characters in the mix, I do get to throw in things that would be considered anachronistic. Their speech patterns are different from those of the other characters—speaking in contractions, for instance. Plus modern phrasing. Often in my early drafts, the Myrridian characters may slip out with a modern word, but my early readers often catch them. I try to put in some old-fashioned words as well, but not overdo it. I don’t go so far as to have the characters speak in “thee” and “thou”—I think it would be very annoying for the reader. But the occasional “mayhap” or “methinks” helps add to the setting.

Tyler: Debra, what about having Christopher, from our world, switch places with Christian, the Duke of Myrridia, intrigue you?

Debra: My original idea for the book began with this scene: an important political figure is under threat of assassination. This death would have serious ramifications and would need to be prevented. However, it would take someone from a different world to stop the death. As the story

later developed, it turned out that this figure, Christian, would actually be killed, and rather than having to face the immediate consequences, his “replacement” would take over, and try to find the murderer. Of course, part of the fun for me, as the writer, was that Christopher is nothing like Christian, and he’s not exactly prepared to take on all of the responsibilities of a duke, at least not at first. And as things develop in the story, the people Chris befriends are not exactly the bosom buddies Christian had.

Tyler: There have been many classic stories of confused identity or people who resemble one another trading places such as “The Prince and the Pauper.” Did you have any of these stories in mind when you wrote “The Unlikely Duke”?

Debra: Yes, I’ve always been a sucker for these kinds of stories, actually. I love “The Prince and the Pauper” (Twain is one of the greatest American authors, in my opinion), as well as several other stories using that same theme. There was a novel written by Mary Stewart some time back, called “The Ivy Tree” and Shakespeare’s “A Comedy of Errors” utilizes twins to hilarious effect. In “Duke” I especially enjoyed taking the approach of having two people with an identical appearance, but they’re completely different under the skin. Plus there’s the fun of having other characters deal with unexpected behavior.

Tyler: Debra, what were your favorite children or young adult novels when you were a child, and do you think they influenced you in your writing career, or specifically in writing “The Unlikely Duke”?

Debra: I’ll have to give you a very short list—I’ve been an avid reader since I first learned how. Dr. Seuss was a very early favorite—“The Cat in the Hat” and “Green Eggs and Ham.” The Prydain novels by Lloyd Alexander, “The Phantom Tollbooth,” anything by Ray Bradbury, Asimov’s Foundation Trilogy, “The Lord of the Rings,” the Earthsea Trilogy, Agatha Christie’s Poirot mysteries, Nancy Drew and Encyclopedia Brown, to name a few. Let me stress, this is far from a complete list!

Of course these books influenced me. While I didn’t expect to be a writer back in my college days or early pharmacy career, I did maintain my love of reading. My dream would be to write like Ray Bradbury—the man is a poet. When I had the original story idea, a few years before I began to write, I didn’t realize it would turn into five books, nor did I plan to publish. The latter came about thanks to the feedback of my early readers. And now, I can’t stop writing—I may take time away from it now and then, but I keep coming back. The characters haven’t completed their stories yet. Plus, it continues to be a thrill for me when people buy the book, read it, and then tell me how much they enjoyed it.

Tyler: Thanks, Debra. That’s a great list, including many of my own childhood favorites. I understand at the end of “The Unlikely Duke,” Christopher has completed his mission. Does he decide to return to his own world or remain in Myrridia at that point?

Debra: I’d prefer to leave the question open for potential readers to discover on their own. I’ll only agree that Christopher has completed his mission.

Tyler: Can you tell us a little bit about the love story aspect of the book?

Debra: Wow, how to sort that one out! Love is a strong force in most people's lives. The love story aspect is not exactly part of the main plot, but it certainly helps to drive it at times. It also helps explain the actions of the two characters involved. Plus it helps to drive home the idea of not judging a person by his/her appearance. And it opens up the question of whether these characters were destined to meet?

Tyler: Debra, our reviewer, Tabytha Joy, was very glowing in her review of your book, saying it should be a must read in schools and was as enjoyable as the "Harry Potter" series. What other responses have you received from readers?

Debra: I was overwhelmed by Tabytha's review—I was hoping for a positive review, but that went beyond.

One of my coworkers said that the story felt original to him, not like a lot of the fantasy out in the stores right now, and he's read quite a bit over the years. One reader said that he enjoyed it "better than Harry Potter." A couple of readers have said that fantasy is not their thing, but they felt the writing was good. Many readers have said that they feel the pacing is right, and that they really enjoy the story. Most readers have said that they want to read the next book in the series, which is extremely gratifying.

Tyler: I understand "The Unlikely Duke" has become part of the recommended reading list in at least one school district. Can you tell us how that evolved? What about the novel do you think makes it belong on a recommended reading list for teenage readers?

Debra: That came about thanks to my amazing aunt! The school district is in Florida, where she lives. She has done a tremendous job of promoting the book in her community, and she volunteers for the local school system. She provided a copy of the book to the Assistant Superintendent of the schools, who read it and was highly impressed with the writing. She was the person who determined the reading level, for grades 8 through 12. I have had a few readers around the ages of 10-11 who have also enjoyed the book, but these are kids who love reading.

The young adult label came about in a convoluted way. I was originally going for an adult audience, but a few of my early readers asked if I had considered young adult. I hadn't until I started hearing this from a number of people. As a writer, you pay attention when more than one or two people start making the same suggestion! Anyway, I gave it some thought—I already had two teenaged characters, Robert and Allyson, but how could I get them more involved in the story? Then I had an idea...and after a major revision of the book and a slight change to the ending, voila.

I think there are a number of things that makes "An Unlikely Duke" a good read for teenagers. One is the teenaged characters are part of the core team. I tend to write an ensemble cast, at least in this series. Another is the level of detail. I often hear that fantasy readers want more details, and I've read some cases where the stories can get bogged down in the details. Now again, early readers were telling me that I needed more details, so I paid attention and the book was vastly improved by it. But there aren't so many that it distracts the reader from the story. There is plenty of action, too.

I tend to use swear words judiciously in my writing—I find they have more impact the less often they're used. Plus, while there may be violence, I don't dwell on all of the gory details. Yes, characters have a tendency to die in my books, and often violently, but I see no need to describe a violent scene in intimate detail. Leave something to the reader's imagination—mine can do a pretty good job of filling in details. Sometimes too good of a job! But, for teens, you can put in almost any kind of situation, and it's still appropriate. For instance, one character is nearly assaulted, but I wouldn't provide a blow-by-blow description if a full assault had occurred. Enough to make the point of what's taking place.

There is also the book's length. It runs about 105,000 words, which is possibly a little bit long for what used to be called YA, but thanks to Harry Potter, that's no longer the case. ♪ Typically, publishers look for 85,000 to probably 110,000 or 125,000 words.

Tyler: Tell us what readers can expect in terms of more tales of Myrridia? And are you working on anything else besides?

Debra: Readers can expect several more tales of Myrridia. This series will run for five books (I think it goes back to being a pharmacist for so many years, and counting by fives). I've finished the manuscripts for the next three installments, and I'm in the middle of a revision of the final novel in this series. After that I have several books planned.

One series, a trilogy, will also take place in the same world as Myrridia, and involve many of the same characters, although it will take place 10-15 years later. A crusade will be called, and I plan to explore, among other things, the idea of religious tolerance, something that the world today still sadly lacks.

I also plan to do a spin-off mystery series—without giving away too much, I take two characters from the second book in this original series (“A Prince in Need”) and put them into the modern world, where they will join a team of people who investigate mysteries with an element of the paranormal. Some of these will be hoaxes, but others will be true. This has partly been influenced by a couple of short-lived TV series—“Miracles” and “American Gothic.”

Then I have a series planned for middle grade readers, where the main character is a young witch-in-training, with her best friend & neighbor, a Jewish boy who is also studying the Kabbalah. The first book opens (as of now, anyway) with a fairy suddenly appearing in front of this girl and falling into her history book.

After that, I have a few other ideas—a post global warming apocalyptic novel and a modern-day witch novel. My psychic last told me that I would write 25 books. When I saw her earlier this year, I asked if the number had gone up. She said, “Don't ask.”

Tyler: Wow, Debra! I don't blame your psychic for saying that. That's a lot of books! But tell me a little bit more about the five books set in Myrridia. Will you tell me a little bit about your process—do you write one and when it's done, move onto the next, or do you work on them simultaneously, or do you just plot them all out—knowing what the end result will be ultimately?

Debra: Well, I don't want to give too much away, but here goes. The second book is titled “A Prince in Need,” and it opens with the King of Myrridia being murdered. It explores the idea of past sins coming back to haunt the sinners, and in this case, also the children of one of the sinners.

In the third book, “The Legacy of the Archbishop,” the current Archbishop of Myrridia is slain. (I did say that characters do die!) In this novel I explore Dark Magic, and one of its more powerful practitioners, and also the would-be nemesis of the archbishop’s successor. I had a lot of fun with this, and went back to reread “Paradise Lost” for inspiration. For about two months, this book was going to be the last of the series, but then I realized the characters’ stories weren’t complete, and it would take two more to finish out the series.

The fourth book involves the resurrection of an evil spirit (from “Prince”), who then possesses the body of an innocent—the spirit is female and the body is male, which opens up some other fun possibilities. Plus there is a character who is a woman, but she’s disguised herself as a monk. In this book I add Pagan Magic into the mix.

The final book starts with the deaths of two kings—Myrridia’s immediate neighbors. One from old age, the other an infant suffocated. The twelve-year-old heir to the former is kidnapped, and his friends set off to rescue him. It’s a bit of a departure, but it also continues to explore some of the alternative Magical threads brought into the mix in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> volumes, and it ties up most of the loose ends.

As far as my writing process—first, I now have to literally schedule my time away from my day job, almost down to the hour. I try to work on writing or research at least 1-2 evenings a week, and at least 3-4 hours on the weekend. For this series, when I’m working on the first draft, I tend to work on it exclusively, although I may be outlining the next one. Then, when I’m working on revisions, I’ll be doing research for future books, or making slight modifications to older manuscripts based on reader feedback. For this series, I didn’t have the end of it fully plotted out until I realized there would be five books. Then I knew exactly how it would end.

I often work with a rough outline of the major scenes. Then I get to fill in the other scenes around the big plot points. Oh, and then on occasion, one or another character will surprise me, by saying or doing something unexpected. Originally, Robert wasn’t going to accompany Christian when the latter was returning to Saelym. But then when Christian suggested the idea to the king, I knew it was right. And it had great effect on the plot points downstream in the story. I typically know the beginning and ending of each novel before I sit down to write it. But then, getting there is part of the fun for me.

Tyler: How does real history influence your books? For example, you mentioned a crusade in your other series set in Myrridia. Will you build off of actual events or situations from the medieval crusades to the Holy Land? What period of the Middle Ages is closest to that you’ve created for Myrridia?

Debra: Well, I’ve chosen the early 11<sup>th</sup> century as the time for Myrridia for these books, and it’s relatively close to the European 11<sup>th</sup> century. I wanted to work in a period without plate armor, for instance, but still recognizably medieval. Now since I’m writing fantasy, I can work a little bit outside our historical timeline, if needed. Although I was surprised that spinning wheels, as we know them, were more of a 13<sup>th</sup> century invention. There went one idea. But I would’ve felt silly having it pointed out to me after the fact by a sharp-eyed reader.

The crusades began in our timeline in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, so I’m in the ballpark. I’m starting off with a similar premise—Muslims have taken over the Holy Lands and have to be rescued in the

name of Christianity. However, part of what put me onto this story is, sadly, current events (i.e., real history), so I will be working out some issues in the course of these books. One is the idea of religious tolerance, which has been important to me since I was a teen. I was raised a Baptist, but I left that church many years ago. I will have good and evil characters of all religious persuasions, because let's face it, they'll be based on more or less actual people.

I have had to do a lot of research in regard to Islam and the Middle Eastern part of our world, so that I can write these characters believably, and give this religion a fair showing. Then there are the Arab and Turk naming conventions! And there may be a little bit of "Arabian Nights" thrown in. I'm still working out the details of a Muslim Magical tradition, without putting it straight into Sufism, although I may end up going that way anyway. It's too soon to say.

Tyler: Debra, I also understand you self-published both "The Unlikely Duke" and its sequel, but just earlier this year, it was re-published by Helm Publishing. How did Helm come to be interested in your book?

Debra: I first met Dianne Helm, the owner of Helm Publishing, at DragonCon 2005, where she and a couple of her authors had a table in the dealers room. I asked whether she were accepting book submissions, and she said she was and gave me her card. I went on the Internet and found the submission guidelines and sent in "Duke." I stated in my query letter that the book had already been self-published and had been put on the Recommended Reading list for grades 8-12 in the Indian River County Florida school system. Dianne then accepted "Duke" for publication in 2007. "A Prince in Need" is currently at Helm for consideration.

Tyler: That's interesting, Debra. Do you go to many conventions? How important are organizations and conferences for getting a book published or noticed? Do you think how you transitioned from self-published to traditionally published is common?

Debra: I'm working to increase my convention attendance. I did two this year—ConCarolinas, in Charlotte, NC, in June, and DragonCon in Atlanta, over Labor Day weekend. They are tremendous fun, but they're also a fantastic place to meet other writers, artists, actors, readers, fans, etc. Next year I'm already trying to figure out how I can manage at least four of them, but it's early yet. I will also be at a book festival in Vero Beach, FL this coming November. I will also be visiting the local schools there. Attending any of these venues is critical to help writers promote their work. You're with your audience, in my case, fans of fantasy fiction, or in the case of festivals, readers of any genre. Conferences can also be helpful—I attended two of them, in 2004 and 2005. I obtained a lot of excellent advice and information, and conferences are terrific for the serious writer.

The school visits are a definite pleasure for me. I thoroughly enjoy talking to the kids, and some of the questions they ask! One asked if I got to ride in a limo; another asked when the movie would be coming out. Many ask where the ideas come from, or how long does it take to write a book, and things of that nature. But it's so wonderful to see them interested in books, not just mine. (although I won't disparage that!)

I do think a lot of writers transition from self-published to traditional publishing, and others are happy with remaining self-published and retaining full control. There are a lot of Print-On-Demand publishers, which has made producing a good-looking book much more affordable. That's the route I went, and I'm glad I did. It gave me a chance to get the first two books out to a larger reading audience, and the feedback, and especially the recommendation by a school system (not even in the state in which I live!) had to help with the transition.

Tyler: Debra, what have you found to be the difference between being self-published and traditionally published. Do you think self-publishing first helps or hurts a writer wanting to be published traditionally?

Debra: I honestly think that it can go either way, and some of the determining factors may be the quality of the writing, the level of reader interest in the story, and the author's ability to market the book. Some highly successful books have gone from self-published to traditionally published. I think authors should be careful in the self-publishing company they use, (there are many out there!) but for myself, I found that the earlier experience with marketing and promotion has helped me with doing the same now, with a real publisher. Writing is first done in private, and then MUST be shared with readers, if one hopes to publish the material. Feedback is critical, and having a writing critique group is also beneficial, because other writers will tell you what your family and friends won't.

Having said that, I'm fortunate that my "first reader" is my sister, who has a degree in English and also an outstanding grasp of the usage of same. She also doesn't care for much in the way of fantasy. So when she tells me the story is good, I can trust that opinion. She also has turned me into a much more technically proficient writer over the past 7+ years. And on occasion, she provides vital plot input or lets me know if a certain character wouldn't do such-and-such, or wouldn't do it a particular way.

Tyler: Debra, I'm sure you have many young readers out there, not unlike yourself as a child, who love books so much they aspire to being writers. What advice would you give to them?

Debra: I have had the pleasure of meeting a number of them already, and hope to meet many more as I continue on this writing path. First, if a child/teen wants to write, I will tell them to write. Don't worry if the writing is good or bad, write—whether it's a story, or just thoughts or feelings, write, write, write. Write first for yourself, then for others. I wasn't thinking about publication when I started. I wasn't even sure I could finish a whole novel! Many people can't. And definitely, if you think publishing is what you want, keep at it. Work to improve your writing to the best it can be, and keep on looking to improve. I still have a lot to learn. But once you think a piece of writing is as good as you can make it, give it to your friends and family. If they think it's good, find a few people whose feedback you truly trust, or join a writing critique group—either live or on-live. Writer feedback is critical. Persistence and good writing will pay off in the end. Oh, it may take years, and a mountain of rejection slips, but sooner or later, you will find the right publisher. And better to find the right publisher than the biggest. Finally, believe in yourself and your writing! Other people will, too.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Debra. Before we go, would you tell our readers where they can find more information about "The Unlikely Duke" and how they can purchase a copy?

Debra: I appreciate this opportunity, Tyler. More information about "An Unlikely Duke" and myself can be found at [www.myrridia.net](http://www.myrridia.net), including my upcoming appearances. The book is available on-line at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Borders, and Books-A-Million, as well as Helm Publishing—[www.publishersdrive.com](http://www.publishersdrive.com). It may also be ordered at independent bookstores as well as the chains.

Tyler: Thank you, Debra. I hope you and your readers enjoy many more visits to Myrridia.