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# THE PRICE

by New York Times *Bestselling Author*

**JOAN JOHNSTON**

*to be published by Atria Books on March 25, 2003*

With over 10 million copies of her novels in print and five *New York Times* bestsellers – including *SISTERS FOUND* (#9) and *THE LONER* (#5) in 2002 – Joan Johnston has become one of the most popular romance novelists in the world today.

Johnston has captivated legions of readers with her sprawling, sensuous novels set in Texas, particularly her bestselling series featuring the two opposing dynasties of Bitter Creek, Texas – the powerful Blackthornes and the struggling Creeds.

Now in her highly-anticipated hardcover debut, with *THE PRICE* (an Atria Books Hardcover; publication Date: March 25, 2003; ISBN: 0-7434-5432-4; Price: \$23.00), Johnston tells a timely, impassioned story that explores the trade-offs people make between work and family as they pursue professional success, and poses the question of what is truly important in life.

*THE PRICE* features Luke Creed, who appeared in Johnston's earlier *New York Times* bestseller, *THE LONER*. He is a young man who has turned his back on his family's ranch to pursue his fortune as an attorney at Houston's leading high-powered law firm, DeWitt & Blackthorne. Relentless in his quest to make partner – which would give him the financial security that has eluded the Creeds for generations – Luke has put his personal life on hold while working nights, weekends and holidays.

As a result, he's earned a reputation as one of the best litigators in the state, although it has cost him his marriage and left little time to spend with his two daughters who now live with his ex-wife and her husband in Houston.

In the last lap before the management committee decides which of its many associates will gain a coveted spot in its partnership ranks, Luke is handed what seems like a routine assignment: to negotiate a quick settlement to a wrongful death suit against a pharmaceutical client's miracle drug. Luke is surprised, however, to find himself squared off against Amy Hazeltine Nash, the high school sweetheart he has not seen in more than ten years.

Now a single mother, Amy works for a small Houston law firm and has become a passionate advocate for her bereaved client. She's shocked that the once-rebellious Luke is now a member of the Establishment, representing corporate interests.

After discovering that his own daughter is using the drug that may have killed at least five others, Luke risks both his career and his life by mounting a probing

investigation into the firm's largest client. With the help of Amy and two of his colleagues at the firm, he uncovers a web of corruption that leaves him with no choice but to question the price of his own ambitions.

From the towering skyscrapers of Houston to the majestic plains of south Texas ranch country, *THE PRICE* sweeps readers into a powerfully engrossing, passionate novel that will keep them on the edge of their seats, as its charismatic protagonist discovers how high a price he is willing to pay to achieve his ambitions. *THE PRICE* showcases Johnston's uncanny ability to tap into the concerns and the conflicts, the dreams and the desires of ordinary people, while delivering fast-paced, dramatic storytelling that always entertains.

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A former attorney, author Joan Johnston knows well the world of *THE PRICE*. After graduating with honors from the University of Texas at Austin School of Law, she spent five years on the partner track at two major law firms, working 60- to 80-hour weeks and holidays while raising two young children.

"I was trying to be Superwoman. I was trying to be the best lawyer, and if I was home with my babies, I was never going to make partner. But when I was at the office, I missed my kids. There really was no happy medium," she says.

To relieve the stress, she began reading romance novels late at night, after putting her kids to bed and tidying up the house. Her habit quickly grew to "one a day, like a vitamin" – adding up to over 1200 books in three years.

Johnston never dreamed, however, that her passion for reading romance novels would lead to a career writing them. During a business trip to New York to close a \$65 million bond deal, she attended a *Romantic Times* conference, then began writing her first novel a few months later while driving south to take a new position at a Miami law firm. That summer, she passed the Florida State Bar and sold her first book.

Johnston knew her days as an attorney were numbered when she found herself sitting in the law library writing on her book while the other lawyers were doing interrogatories. "I just thought – *This isn't going to work*. So I quit being a lawyer, took a 60 percent cut in income, and got a job teaching college again."

Six novels later, she was fired by the University of Miami in 1991, for publishing romance novels instead of the required academic articles during her first year on the tenure track. "I had exactly two months of income in the bank. I was getting a total of \$350 a month for child support. My ex-husband was nowhere to be found, so I had the kids 24/7. And I thought, *You know what, I'm going to write full-time*," she says.

Johnston literally survived by writing five books a year for the next five years. *THE PRICE* is her 44<sup>th</sup> novel and first hardcover original. Her body of work includes three major series (over 20 books) set in Texas, where Johnston lived during the 1970s,

while working as a newspaper editor and community college drama professor, as well as obtaining her law degree.

As well as **THE PRICE**, her acclaimed Bitter Creek series includes the New York Times bestsellers **THE COWBOY**, **THE TEXAN**, and **THE LONER**.

Johnston's Sisters of the Lone Star series covers the early history of the Republic of Texas in **FRONTIER WOMAN** (reissued August 2001), **COMANCHE WOMAN** (reissued December 2002) and **TEXAS WOMAN** (to be re-issued later this year).

And her Hawk's Way series, which includes her latest New York Times bestseller, **SISTERS FOUND**, features the lives and loves of three generations of a northwest Texas ranching family, the Whitelaws.

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An Atria Books Hardcover Original  
Publication Date: March 25, 2003  
ISBN: 0-7434-5432-4  
Price: \$23.00

New York Times' Bestselling Author  
**JOAN JOHNSTON**

Biography

One of the most popular writers in America today, former attorney and college professor Joan Johnston has over 10 million books in print world-wide – including the *New York Times* bestsellers *Sisters Found*, *The Cowboy*, *The Texan*, *The Loner*, and the re-issue of *Frontier Woman*.

*The Price* is her 44<sup>th</sup> novel and represents a milestone in Johnston's career as her first hardcover original.

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Johnston spent her childhood living in such far-flung places as North Africa (where she learned to ride an Arabian stallion), the Philippines, North Dakota, Texas, Washington, Wyoming, and Florida, as the daughter of a career Air Force sergeant.

Tensile-strength family relationships and spunky women are at the core of Johnston's stories, and it's not surprising why. She is the third of seven children, of which six were girls. It has given her plenty of fodder to work with over the years, including her current *New York Times* bestseller, *Frontier Woman*, in which the three female leads are patterned after the author and two of her sisters. "Cricket is based on me, Bailey is my sister Jeanne, and Sloan is my sister Joyce," she notes.

Johnston obtained a bachelor's degree in theatre arts from Jacksonville University in Florida, and a masters in theatre from the University of Illinois in Urbana. "I never aspired to be a writer. I always wanted to be an actress and later a director," she says.

In 1970, she married her college sweetheart – also a drama major – on Valentine's Day. He was drafted soon after, and following basic training, stationed at Randolph Air Force Base outside San Antonio.

When Johnston couldn't find a teaching position in her field ("They were actually firing in the Fine Arts area at the time"), she took an entry-level job at the local newspaper in nearby Universal City, Texas. Her duties included typing 14,000 newspaper lines every week, writing the headlines, and laying out the paper for the printer. (It wasn't long before her typing speed was up to 120 words per minute, which would pay off later as an author hammering out 400-page-plus novels.) Within the year, Johnston was named the paper's drama critic, responsible for covering San Antonio's thriving theater scene, then promoted to the position of news editor.

While still at the paper, she received a call from Southwest Texas Junior College in Uvalde, about 70 miles southwest of San Antonio, inviting her to interview for an

opening on their theatre teaching staff. Afraid she would lose out on the job, she deliberately waited until the last interview to tell them she was five months pregnant.

“The job started in September. My baby was due in December. I assured the department director it would not be a problem for me to teach the fall semester, have the baby over the break, and come back to work for the spring semester. And he said, “No problem, out here in Texas we just drop those calves and go back to work all the time,”” Johnston says with a laugh. “So sure enough, I went to work five months pregnant. The end of the semester was December 22. My daughter was born December 25, and I went back to school to teaching on January 8.”

After four years in the position, Johnston took a hard look at her future, since the department director, who had already been there twenty years, was making only \$6000 more a year than she was.

She decided to become a lawyer, even though it meant three more years of college. “I initially thought I would be Perry Mason – because I had all this great speech and theater background, which is good for a litigator,” she says.

Johnston took the LSAT exam and scored high enough to get admitted to the University of Texas at Austin, one of the top ten law schools in the country.

The first two years, she took the bus home to Uvalde every weekend. Her senior year, Johnston’s husband – who was now teaching high school drama – and daughter joined her in Austin.

Johnston got pregnant with her second child at the beginning of her third year of law school. “I kept thinking, if I’m going to be a lawyer, it would be easier to have a baby before I go to work somewhere. *Big mistake*. But anyway, I got pregnant with Blake and had him about three weeks before the end of my last semester. The baby was born on a Monday. I came home from the hospital on Tuesday, and went back to school on Thursday. I would have come back on Wednesday, but I was *really* tired,” she laughs.

During the last three weeks of school, Johnston arranged for a friend to watch her baby in the women’s bathroom, and she returned between classes to nurse him. Despite the demands of motherhood, she still graduated with honors at the top of her class, and was admitted to the exclusive Order of Barristers, to which only five students were selected that year.

After completing a summer internship between her junior and senior year at Hunton & Williams, the largest law firm in Virginia, Johnston was offered a full-time job following graduation, and moved to Richmond with her family. Instead of becoming the next Perry Mason, however, she spent the next two years working in municipal bonds for water, sewer, capital construction and other public projects.

What Johnston hadn't counted on in a large firm was the required 60- to 80-hour work weeks, including at least one day each weekend and holidays, that it would take to make partner. At the same time, she found herself reading single-spaced, 80-page water and sewer indentures and arbitrage statements, plus interfacing with public agencies. "It was boring and repetitive," she says.

With a six-month-old baby and a six-year-old at home, she quickly found herself overwhelmed. "I was trying to be Superwoman. I was trying to be the best lawyer, and if I was home with my babies, I was never going to make partner. But when I was at the law office, I missed my kids," she says.

Johnston finally approached her husband about quitting the firm for a job in the commonwealth attorney's office, where she could work normal hours. But he objected, saying they couldn't afford it. "Unfortunately, I was the one making all the money – and it was really good money – but then I was never home."

To relieve the stress, she began reading romance novels late at night, after putting the kids to bed, cleaning the kitchen, doing the laundry and getting her clothes ready for the next day. Her habit quickly grew to "one a day, like a vitamin" – adding up to over 1200 books in three years.

When a business trip to New York – in which Johnston had to close a \$65 million bond deal – coincided with the second annual *Romantic Times* conference in Manhattan, she arranged to stay over the weekend. However, she didn't tell anyone in her office why.

"In those days, I would hide my romance novels in my briefcase. That was back before the covers changed, and everybody thought they were only about sex, sex, sex," she explains.

She packed all of the books by her favorite authors, to get them autographed at the conference. She was not only impressed by how friendly they were, she made contact with two prospective editors.

Soon after returning home, Johnston got recruited to join a small law firm in Miami, and as she was driving down, "I put my first words to paper in a hotel room. This was on June 1, 1983." She worked on it while studying for the Florida bar exam, and managed to pass the bar and sell her book.

Johnston continued to write romance novels on the side while practicing law for another two and half years. When her firm switched to computers and all of the secretaries were sent off for training, Johnston tagged along. "And that's when I started writing on the computer. I would use my secretary's computer before she got to work in the morning, while she was gone for lunch, and after she left at the end of the day," she says.

Johnston knew her days as an attorney were numbered when she found herself sitting in the law library writing on her book while the other litigators were doing interrogatories.

“I just thought – *this isn’t going to work*. So I quit being a lawyer, took a 60 percent cut in income, and got a job teaching college again.”

Johnston spent the next three years teaching at Barry University in Miami, then four years as an assistant professor for the University of Miami. After only one year on the tenure track, she was fired in 1991 – after publishing two romance novels instead of an academic article.

“I had exactly two months of income in the bank. I was getting a total of \$350 a month for child support, and I had the kids 24/7. And I thought, *you know what* – I’m going to write full-time.”

Johnston survived by writing five books a year for the next five years. “I would get up in the morning and write...and write...and write.”

After her daughter went off to college, Johnston began to spread her wings. She had always wanted to live in the mountains, so she and her son, then in the eighth grade, moved to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, for a year. “I leased a stone and wood cabin at the top of a mountain and wrote five books while I was there. I loved it. I was two miles up a mountain, across from the Grand Tetons. All my mail came to me general delivery, and packages would be left under the counter at this general store. It was just very quaint and really neat,” she says.

Like most Americans, Johnston found herself reassessing her life directly after 9/11. At the time, she was in the process of purchasing a country club home in Boca Raton, Florida. “I know 9/11 was life-altering for a lot of people. It especially was for me. I was just beginning work on my 43<sup>rd</sup> novel, and I really did not have a personal life. I had wanted to live in the mountains again. So I said, *Why am I putting this off?*”

That September 28, she was one of only 22 people on a plane equipped for 200 bound for Denver. She spent the weekend looking for homes. “The only instruction I gave the realtor was that I wanted a log home.” She found one on top of a mountain, yet only thirty minutes from the nearest mall.

Immediately after returning to Miami, Johnston forfeited her deposit on the Boca Raton house and bought a beachfront condo instead.

Now she is able to enjoy the best of both seasons, including early morning hikes in the mountains or along the ocean, before settling down to write for the day.

Johnston recently became a grandmother for the first time. Her daughter, a teacher, lives in the Miami area. Her son, a budding novelist, lives in Orlando.

**For more information or photos, please contact:**

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New York Times' Bestselling Author  
**JOAN JOHNSTON**

Fact Sheet
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- Books published to date:** 44
- First Hardcover Original:** *The Price* (March 2003)
- Books in print:** Over 10 million worldwide
- New York Times Bestsellers:** *Sisters Found* (2002), *The Loner* (2002), *The Texan* (2001), *Frontier Woman* (2001), *The Cowboy* (2000)
- First Novel Published:** *A Loving Defiance* (1985)
- Awards and Honors:** Romance Writers of America's "Honor Roll" of authors who have ranked in the top 15 *New York Times*, top 50 *USA Today*, or top 15 *Publishers Weekly* bestseller lists. (Johnston has appeared on all three.)
- Paperback Book Club of America's Book Rak Award (twice); Romantic Times' Best Western Historical Series Award (twice); Romantic Times' Best New Western Writer; Romantic Times' Best Historical Series Award; The Maggie (twice); Finalist: RITA Award for *The Disobedient Bride*.
- Former Career:** **Attorney – five years**
- Hunton & Williams in Richmond, Virginia (1980-83)  
Squire, Sanders & Dempsey in Miami (1983-85)
- College professor – nine years**
- Southwest Texas Junior College (1973-77)  
Barry University (Miami – 1985-1987)  
University of Miami (1988-1991)
- Degrees:** University of Texas at Austin School of Law, J.D. with honors (1980)  
University of Illinois in Urbana, M.A. in Theatre (1971)  
Jacksonville University, B.A. in Theatre Arts cum laude (1970)
- Born:** Little Rock, Arkansas
- Family:** Father was a career Air Force sergeant, mother taught music. Johnston was the third of seven children (six girls; one boy). She has two grown children and one grandchild.

## ***What the Critics Are Saying About...***

New York Times' Bestselling Author

**JOAN JOHNSTON**

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**"Joan Johnston does short contemporary Westerns to perfection."**

*Publishers Weekly*

**"Like LaVyrle Spencer, Ms. Johnston writes of intense emotions and tender passions that seem so real that the readers will feel each one of them."**

*Rave Reviews*

**"Johnston warms your heart and tickles your fancy."**

*New York Daily News*

**"Joan Johnston continually gives us everything we want...fabulous details and atmosphere, memorable characters, a story that you wish would never end, and lots of tension and sensuality."**

*Romantic Times*

**"Joan Johnston [creates] unforgettable subplots and characters who make every fine thread weave into a touching tapestry."**

*Affaire de Coeur*

### **Comanche Woman**

**"A brisk romance chock full of compelling conflicts and strong local color."**

*Publishers Weekly*

### **The Loner**

**"Johnston employs more plot twists than a soap opera, but she carefully controls each entanglement to craft a warm and charming homespun tale."**

*Publishers Weekly*

**"Skillful storyteller Johnston makes what in lesser hands would be melodrama compellingly realistic in this page-turner."**

*Booklist*

### **The Texan**

**"This sprawling, sensuous romance will keep readers avidly reading as Johnston's characters struggle against seriously deranged foes and face seemingly insurmountable obstacles to true love."**

*Booklist*

**“A riveting blend of adventure, intrigue and romance.”**

*Romance Reviews Today*

**“Awesome romance and mystery with a touch of thriller thrown in.  
Lots of twists and turns that will keep the reader hooked to the very end.”**

*Huntress Book Reviews*

### **The Cowboy**

**“Johnston has concocted a compelling story of jealousy and greed, passion and hate, combined it with an intriguing look at the world of cutting horse competition, and set the tale against the backdrop of working Texas ranches.”**

*Amazon.com*

### **Captive**

**"DELIGHTFUL!"**

*Atlantic Journal-Constitution*

**“Lively and well-written....perfectly enchanting.”**

*Publishers Weekly*

**“*Captive* is guaranteed to hold you in its thrall...a lovely reminder of what romance is all about. The author’s talent brings everything to vivid life.”**

*The Romance Reader*

### **Outlaw’s Bride**

**“A very amusing and imaginative romp that has the Joan Johnston stamp of excellence all over it!”**

*– Affaire de Coeur*

### **The Bodyguard**

**“Now *this* is a ‘Bodyguard’! Kevin Costner, eat your heart out!”**

*Atlanta Constitution*

### **After the Kiss**

**“A mesmerizing, moving and powerfully emotional love story.”**

Author Mary Balogh

**“A strong and powerful tale....Would recommend this to everyone without a doubt.”**

*Romance Reviews*

# Romance Novels – A Publishing Phenomenon

**“Bodice rippers are more popular than ever.”**

*Time*, February 3, 2002

Never read a romance novel? You’re among the few who haven’t.

Over 50 million Americans read at least one in 2001 – up from 41 million in 1998. And they spent over \$1.5 billion dollars purchasing those mostly paperbacks you see on the racks at grocery stores, airports and local bookstores.

Indeed, the romance genre now represents over half of all popular fiction and almost one-quarter of all books sold today – according to the national organization, Romance Writers of America, based on statistics compiled from Book Industry Study Group, American Bookseller Association reports, and tallies in Ingram’s catalogue of all book releases.

Following is an overview of the study’s conclusions. For more details, please visit [www.rwanational.org](http://www.rwanational.org).

*(All figures are for 2001)*

<b>Total sales generated by romance fiction:</b>	<b>\$1.52 billion</b>
<b>Number of romance titles released:</b>	<b>2,143</b>
<b>Number of Americans who read romance novels:</b>	<b>51.1 million</b>
<b>Romance fiction’s share of all books sold:</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>Romance fiction’s share of all popular fiction in North America:</b>	<b>54.5%</b>

*In contrast...*

General fiction comprised only 17% of popular fiction sales

Science fiction/fantasy comprised 6.6%

Mystery/detective/suspense was 26.6%

Religious, occult, westerns, male adventure, general history, adult and movie tie-ins were 14%

## **Where romance readers live:**

32% in the Midwest

26% in the West

20% in the South

16% in the Northeast

**Percentage of readers who are women:** 93%

**Marital status of readers:**

49.5% married

33.3% single

10.7% divorced

6% widowed

**Education of readers:**

32% High school graduates

22% Have attended vocational school or some college

21% College graduates

10% Have attended post-graduate programs

10% Have Associate degrees

**Race of readers:**

75% White

11% African-American

11% Hispanic

**Where readers buy romance novels:**

33% Mall bookstores

20% Mass merchandisers (such as Target and Wal-Mart)

18% Grocery stores

9% Book clubs

7% Stand-alone bookstores (such as Barnes & Noble)

4% Internet sites

**Quantity of novels read by romance readers yearly:**

57% 1-5 books

17% 6-10 books

12% 21-50 books

8% 11-20 books

4% 51-100 books

2% More than 100

**Top three character traits romance readers like to see in heroines:**

1) Intelligence

2) Strength of character

3) Attractiveness

**Top three character traits romance readers like to see in heroes:**

1) Muscle bound

## Little-known Facts About Romance Novels

- 3 -

- 2) Handsomeness
- 3) Intelligence

# Joan Johnston Talks About Writing...

One of the leading romance novelists in the country, Joan Johnston has written forty-four novels – including her first hardcover original, *The Price*, to be published in March 2003. Indicative of her growing popularity, she has had five *New York Times* bestselling novels in the last three years: *Sisters Found* (2002), *The Loner* (2002), *The Texan* (2001), *Frontier Woman* (2001), *The Cowboy* (2000).

Johnston is a former attorney and college professor who launched her writing career in 1985. She holds a J.D. degree with honors from the University of Texas at Austin Law School, a master's degree in theatre from the University of Illinois in Urbana, and a bachelor's degree in Theatre Arts from Jacksonville University in Florida.

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## Did you like to read as a child?

“I was a big reader growing up. I read all the Jim Kjelgaard dog books, all of the Walter Farley horse books. When we lived in North Africa, we had no TV for two years, so I read everything in the library.”

## Have you ever had a writing class?

“I took a creative writing class in the eighth grade and wrote short stories. That was the extent of my writing experience before I wrote my first book.”

## How did you learn how to write romance fiction?

“A lot of what I learned, I learned from going to writing conferences where a lot of my favorite authors – like Sandra Brown, Nora Roberts, LaVyrle Spencer, and Roberta Gellis – would give speeches. I'd go to seminars and learn how to write better conflict...how to write better characters...how to create better settings...how to keep the narrative together with the narrative, and the dialogue with the dialogue...how to speed up the book with dialogue and slow it down with narrative...how to do verisimilitude: don't just say 'the church,' say 'the First Presbyterian Church on the corner.' But I also read over 1500 romance novels before I wrote my first novel.”

## How did you make your first sale?

“I contacted Linda Marrow, who was then an assistant editor at Pocket Books. I had met her at the *Romantic Times* conference I had attended in New York while I

was still a practicing attorney. I told Linda I was going to be in New York for business in six weeks, and asked if it would be all right if I stopped by for a visit. I also mentioned that I had 120 pages and a synopsis, and would she take a look at them? Linda said she'd be happy to meet with me. Meanwhile, I had also met Damaris Rowland, an editor at Berkeley, at the same conference, and asked her the same thing. And she agreed.

“So the Friday before the Tuesday I was supposed to be in New York, I called to find out whether Linda still wanted to see me. The truth was, I had to be in Washington, D.C. on business and would be making a special trip to New York just to see her. If she'd read my proposal and wasn't interested, I didn't want to waste her time or mine. Linda said, 'Sure, come on ahead.' Years later, I discovered she not only hadn't read my proposal, she had to go hunting for it.

“I walked into Linda's cubicle at Simon & Schuster on April 24 about 11 a.m. (It's like the birth of your first child. You never forget.) It was tiny, windowless and stacked with manuscripts. After a little preliminary chit-chat, Linda said, 'I loved your book. I'd like to buy it.'

We talked about whether I wanted to use my own name or a pseudonym (I chose to write under my own name). I mentioned I'd like to have a cover by Harry Bennett. Linda said she couldn't promise anything (but I did end up with Harry doing *A Loving Defiance*, my first novel). Finally, she told me what my advance would be: \$3000. And Linda said, 'So are we all set?'

I told her I'd have to think about it. Because, you see, I had a luncheon engagement with Damaris Rowland from Berkeley, and it was possible she might also want to buy the book. It turned out that Damaris was interested, but Berkeley wanted some revisions first. So I left lunch, called Linda and said, 'What do I have to do to accept your offer.' 'Just say yes,' she said. And I did.”

### **Has it always been so easy to get your books published?**

“I started out writing 'historicals' because it was easier (in my mind) to hide the fact that all the characters were all 'me.' My 'contemporary' writing career didn't run quite as smoothly. I wrote two books for Silhouette that got published without an agent, but didn't sell that well.

“I then submitted nine proposals, one after the other, to Silhouette in a pretty short period of time, all of which were rejected. (I've never written an entire manuscript – or even a proposal with chapters – except for that first book. My proposals are really a 10- to 20-page synopsis.) So I gave up and kept writing 'historicals.'

“Two years later, I was giving a speech on ‘Where do I Get My Ideas.’ A Harlequin editor heard it and asked me to submit a proposal for a book about wolves, which was one of the ideas I had talked about. When the Silhouette editor – to whom I had submitted all those proposals two years before – heard, she said, ‘Send that proposal to me first.’ I did and she bought it (*Never Tease a Wolf*). I’ve been published by Silhouette ever since.”

**How has your writing changed over the years?**

“I’ve learned to let the reader know not just what the character is doing, but how the character feels about what he’s doing. Fortunately, early in my career, a friend who is a sales rep for my first publisher gave me the best ‘how to’ writing advice I’ve ever gotten. One day I was complaining to her that another author at the same house was getting so much more attention and had such better sales than I did. She looked me in the eye and said, ‘I care about her characters. I don’t care about yours.’ So I went to work to find out what that author was doing that I wasn’t. And I learned to write a better book, which meant learning to ‘go for the choke’ – in other words, creating characters who lived and breathed and tore your heart out.”

**You’re an extremely prolific writer, always producing at least two new books a year. Do you work on them simultaneously?**

“I only write one at a time. I tried doing two once – a ‘historical’ and a ‘contemporary’ – but the ‘contemporary’ characters started speaking with a western twang.”

**Do you have a writing routine?**

“I try to write in the morning, as that’s when I’m creative and productive. But when I’m on deadline, I can write from early morning until late at night with a break every hour or so. I write while it’s flowing, get to a place where I don’t know what the characters are going to do, then leave the computer to think. I come back when I’ve figured it all out.”

**How many pages per day are you able to turn out?**

“I have no idea how much I write over a day, a week, or a month. Each book takes as long as it takes. For instance, for *The Price*, one chapter took four days; another took six hours.

“The most I’ve written in a single 24-hour period is 90 pages – and that was the end of a 120-page short story, which was due on a Monday and it was already

Saturday afternoon. But, at other times, I can sit at the computer for 24 hours and I don't get anything. I might get a paragraph.

"I once wrote a 400-page book in 72 hours over ten days. I only had one chapter written when I started, and it was a new genre for me. But I'd been thinking about it for a year. That book is one of my favorites and is now in its 10<sup>th</sup> printing. It isn't the process. It's the product."

**Where does your inspiration come from?**

"I once woke up in the morning with a whole story in my head. I had gone to bed worrying about it. I didn't want to lose the thought and go search for paper. The only thing handy to write on was a paper plate, so I had to write in circles to make sure I got it all down before I ran out of space. By the time I was through, about 45 minutes later, I had 15 pages of a chapter – essentially, the way it turned out in the book.

"A lot of the time, I'll be in the car going somewhere and an idea will come to me. I try to always have paper with me, because you've got to write it down when the inspiration strikes. If you wait, it will go away."

**How much research goes into your books?**

"Each book is different. I'm always doing research, even when I'm not. A writer is always a writer, even when she's not writing. Your eyes and ears are always open for new ideas and new experiences. As for 'formal' research, I do as much as the book requires. I cut newspaper and magazine clippings. I read books. I go to movies. I travel. I do interviews. Whatever is necessary until the book feels 'real.' I keep researching until I get a feel for the major plot points and conflict, then I write. I fill in the holes later and check facts to make sure what I've written works."

**When you start a new book, which comes first – the characters or the plot?**

"Sometimes it's the character, sometimes it's the situation. Since I write continuing series where the main character in one book was a minor character in a previous novel, I often know who the character is going to be. The challenge is coming up with some dynamite situation – 'terrible trouble' – for the character, so readers will stay with him or her throughout the story."

**Do you plot everything out in advance, or just let it flow?**

"You must put your characters in terrible trouble and keep them there, so readers won't be able to put the book down. I do start with a synopsis, which is usually

about 20 pages for a 400-page book. But once I start writing, I never look at it again. The characters will take me where they need to go. That said, I don't let them get too far afield from where I want them to end up. If they start off on a tangent, I rein them in – or, as I've learned from experience, I'll end up throwing away a hundred pages that I can't use."

**What do you enjoy reading these days?**

"I'm currently into mysteries – Michael Connelly, Robert Crais, Jeffrey Deaver, David Baldacci, Brad Meltzer, and Jonathan Kellerman. Although I'll always write relationship books, I'm moving into adding mystery elements to my stories. Essentially what authors do is read in the direction they're going. For example, I probably read 600 or 700 'Regency' novels before I ever wrote my first one – because I loved the genre."

**Who is your favorite author?**

"W.E.B. Griffin. Even though he writes military novels, they have strong relationships, and World War II is one of my favorite periods."

**What's the downside of success that is rarely discussed?**

"I need to finish at least one book a year to earn a living. So the challenge for me over the past ten years or so has been how to balance my professional and personal life. A friend chided me for being so focused on my career at the expense of everything else. I wonder if I would be where I am today if I hadn't been so focused on my career. There's a reason why women so seldom create great art, music, or literature. It takes a tremendous commitment of time and emotional energy. We all have to make choices, and I did the best I could to be both a loving, caring mother to my two children and become a *New York Times* bestselling author."

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