

# A BSB Interview With Susan Smith

by Connie Ward, Bold Strokes Books Publicist/Author Liaison

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## What made you decide to become a fiction writer?

I don't remember a time when I wasn't making up stories. I think I wrote down my first story in kindergarten. By third grade, I was binding them and handing them around. Third grade I started reading Robert E. Howard's Conan novels, Burroughs's Tarzan, and Anne McCaffery's Pern series. I also read a few biographies of the Lakota chief Crazy Horse, and he fascinated me to no end. I loved the idea of crying for a vision and then following that divine answer, so I tried it. Mostly it kept pushing me back to books.

## What type of stories do you write? And why?

I write all sorts, but many times I'll try a genre just to see if I can. Last decade or so, I've written a lot of drag numbers and scenes for the theatre. My published books, all two of them, are related, so I write stories with a queer cast, pagan influences, and an assumption of magic of some nature. But they are very basic human stories—who am I, why am I here, Good Lord what do I do now that I'm in love, and how does anybody ever survive this?

Why is harder to answer. I think that's what I'm here for, this time around. I can do other things, but if I don't go back to the writing, things will get stuck and not function until I do.

## What do your family/friends think about your writing?

My father has been telling me that I should publish since I was seven. I went to college to become an illustrator, and he told me that was fine, but I'd go back to writing. He was right. I have what feels to me like Universal support from my family and friends for it. My mom volunteered in a library for a few years, and I know she liked to tell everyone she worked with that I was both a librarian and a writer, so I think she's pleased. I just tell her not to read the books, because there is sex in them. My sister, who is quite different than me on most observable measures, read the first book and said it was one of the best books she's ever read. My brother has been supportive of my storytelling since we were kids, and I would make up absurd adventures and send us out into the woods on them. I met my partner, the drag king Johnny Class, when she picked up a copy of *Drag King* in the Toronto Women's Bookstore and wrote an online review. I emailed thanks for the review, and the rest is history, so Johnny's always loved that I'm a writer. I've never before had a partner who was an artist and who supported me wholeheartedly. It makes everything fuller, richer, easier.

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## Where do you get your ideas?

A mall in Trenton, New Jersey.

I wish I knew, I'd make it happen more. I can describe it—I first prepare for inspiration by laying the groundwork. I read everything, constantly. I research anything that sparks my interest, and see where it goes. I dream, then listen. I love language and pay attention to it at all times, like a literary vampire.

Then I sit down, unscrew the top of my skull, place it on the desk next to me, and wait. When something wants to get born, it comes through me. I've written things I don't feel that I can take credit for; I was an instrument. Crafting, sure, I do that—I can make it pretty, or sequential, or understandable. But the first spark comes from the gods.

## How do you write; do you plan everything out or just write?

It's a mix. I keep various notebooks with me all the time and make notes on genealogies, background characters, architecture, logical story structure, scene and dialog fragments. I just write till I slow down, then I do more skeletal structuring, so I can hang meat on it. Sometimes I do that till I get surprised again, and go with it.

## What makes *Of Drag Kings and the Wheel of Fate* and *Burning Dreams* special to you?

*Drag Kings* is my first published novel, and I will always love it for that. It got me my partner, and it was a hymn and a love song to a city and a community that had raised me. It surprised me. I started writing it as a joke, in grad school. But people identified with it. I will always treasure the emails I got during the writing process, from people all over the spectrum, who said it moved them, that it opened their eyes to a world they never imagined, or it spoke directly to the unexpressed longing in their chest. It was all a rush and a gallop.

*Burning Dreams* was the opposite. I was already acknowledged as a writer. It was written at a much more difficult time in my life, and that somberness is all over the book. It was far harder to write, and to finish. I took three years away from it and was convinced I never would. It hurt too much. But Cindy Cressap, my editor at Bold Strokes, made it possible. Without her, it would lie at the bottom of a well.

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## How much of yourself and the people you know are in your characters?

So much, and far from all. People are maddeningly rich and complex. I might absorb bits of habit, style, speech, philosophy, and split it between several characters. Buffalo is a small town. I knew that a lot of people would find the books familiar, and my goal was to make them so without being directly from life. So it evokes a specific time period and mood in the community, without being a portrait. Though if anyone in Buffalo asks me if they were the influence for a character, I always say yes.

## Which lesbian authors inspired you the most? Do you have a favorite of this author(s)?

I have a number of answers to this. Historically, Mary Renault changed my life. I loved her from the moment I first met a book of hers, and only found out years later that she was a lesbian.

More modern—Radclyffe's body of work as a whole, and her incredible work making Bold Strokes such a publishing success. J.D. Glass, of *Punk Like Me* fame, has a voice I admire and enjoy greatly. Justine Saracen for her intelligent research-driven historical work, *The 100<sup>th</sup> Generation*.

## Do you have any suggestions for new writers?

Nobody ever has the same road, so get advice from all over. Just write. Doesn't matter what it is, just write; the finesse comes later. If you pray, pray before you sit down to work. Follow your instinct into new paths, and research everything that bites you.

## When you're not writing what do you do for fun?

Spend time with Johnny Class, hang out at drag shows, produce drag shows, work ( I love being a librarian), read, walk any dogs I can borrow, spend time in Toronto. Haunt Greek diners. I started to teach myself to read ancient Greek because I thought it would be good for how I think.



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