

Spotlight Interview: Lisa Gardner with Jerri Williams

How to Create an Iconic Character

Presenters: Lisa Gardner and Jerri Williams

From Lisa Gardner's Website:

Lisa Gardner, a #1 New York Times bestselling thriller novelist, began her career in food service, but after catching her hair on fire numerous times, she took the hint and focused on writing instead. A self-described research junkie, she has transformed her interest in police procedure and criminal minds into a streak of internationally acclaimed novels, published across 30 countries. She's also had four books become TV movies (*At the Midnight Hour*; *The Perfect Husband*; *The Survivors Club*; *Hide*) and has made personal appearances on TruTV and CNN.

Lisa's books have received awards from across the globe. Her novel, *The Neighbor*, won Best Hardcover Novel from the International Thriller Writers, while also receiving the Grand Prix des Lectrices de Elle in France. She was also recognized with the Daphne du Maurier Award in 2000 for *The Other Daughter*. Finally, Lisa received the Silver Bullet Award from the International Thriller Writers in 2017 for her work on behalf of at-risk children and the Humane Society.

For a bit of fun, Lisa invites her readers to enter the annual "Kill a Friend, Maim a Buddy" Sweepstakes at LisaGardner.com. Every year, one Lucky Stiff is selected to meet a grand end in Lisa's latest novel. Past winners have nominated spouses, best friends and even themselves.

Lisa lives in New Hampshire where she spends her time with an assortment of canine companions. When not writing, she loves to hike, garden, snowshoe and play cribbage.

From Jerri Williams's Website:

Jerri Williams has always been a storyteller and, after serving 26 years as a special agent in the FBI, she has plenty of stories to tell. During most of her Bureau career, she worked major economic fraud investigations and is amazed at the schemes and deceptions con-artists and corrupt corporate and public officials devise to steal other people's money. She notes that with a gun, they can steal hundreds. But with a lie, they can steal millions.

She is using her prior professional experiences with scams and schemers to write crime fiction about greed and often jokes that she is reliving her glory days by producing and hosting FBI Retired Case File Review, a true crime podcast with 10 million downloads and over 300 episodes where she interviews retired FBI agents about their high-profile cases and careers. Based on her experience as an FBI spokesperson, she also debunks misconceptions about the FBI and is under contract as a technical consultant for major TV networks and production companies wanting to create authentic FBI dramas and characters.

In *FBI Myths and Misconceptions: A Manual for Armchair Detectives*, she presents the top 20 clichés about the FBI in books, TV, and movies. Each cliché has its own chapter, where she provides a reality check while breaking down the facts. The entertaining companion book with advanced FBI themes, *FBI Word Search Puzzles: Fun for Armchair Detectives* is also available. Her crime novels—*Pay to Play* and *Greedy Givers*—feature flawed female FBI agent Kari Wheeler, a married mother of three investigating fraud and corruption in Philadelphia while struggling to balance her family responsibilities. The books are available wherever books are sold, as ebooks, print books, and audiobooks.

On November 18, 2021, in Washington, DC, the FBI Agents Association (FBIAA) recognized Jerri as their G-Man Honors – Distinguished Service Honoree for her continued support of the FBI Family through her podcast and books.

JW: What's your definition of an iconic character?

LG: I never intended to write any series at all, so it's surprising that I have four series. There are characters that stick with you, and you want to see more. The truly iconic characters supersede even authors. I love it when the character is even bigger than the author.

JW: Who are some unforgettable characters you think of as iconic?

LG: Agatha Christie wins this with Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot, etc. An iconic character is one that teaches us something or shows us a world we want to enter again and again. Hannibal Lecter is another one.

JW: One of my favorites is Lisbeth Salander from The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. You remember her not just for her appearance but from her backstory and sadness and who she is.

JW: You describe yourself as a character driven author. What does that mean?

A book for me always starts with a voice talking to me in my head (the voice of the hero). I just completed the fourth in a novel series and it started with a voice in my head that says, "When I was a girl, I dreamed." So, it was a process of discovery to think about who this character is and what this all means.

JW: How do you make the character unique?

LG: To make this character unique, I start with basic building blocks. I had the opportunity to work with Sandra Bullock on a project. Sandra Bullock starts with what the character owns. How do they dress? What does their home look like? What furniture. You're establishing how the person presents themselves to the world, which may not be who that person is at all. And those disconnects and internal conflicts are what makes a compelling character we can relate to.

JW: Is this something you always use now?

LG: If you're struggling, it's a good starting point. You want to think about what their internal struggle is, though they have an external goal. An internal goal asks "Why?" (i.e., Why would the character want to do the external thing?) Of course, Hannibal Lector doesn't even need a why. He exists and accepts himself so perfectly. This confidence makes him uniquely interesting.

JW: So, does the character come first and then you think about what you want the character to do?

LG: I had crimes and aspects of criminal psychology I wanted to explore, and the character, an amateur sleuth, wanted to investigate those cases. So, the two aspects often work together.

JW: Are you going to continue in the FBI profiler series?

LG: It was a popular topic on my book tour. The character grew on me, and I'd say that any one story isn't necessarily done yet. I like when you can bring characters

from different stories together. Could you imagine if Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple were in a room together? And Sherlock Holmes? Jack Reacher?

JW: One of my pet peeves about FBI stories is the insistence to make like we don't play well with others. But your books have more realistic relationships, so thank you for not relying on that clutch of making the FBI come in and treat everyone like crap.

LG: Part of developing a character is to talk to people in that occupation who do that work. And you realize many things you see on TV are wrong.

JW: Does a character have to be likeable?

LG: No, but they have to be relatable or identifiable. If you can see part of yourself in them, it helps with the journey. There needs to be some kind of character arc, where at the end you can understand why they are the way they are so you can at least tolerate them. For characters you don't like from beginning to end, it's less compelling.

JW: I'm into redemption stories. How do you do a character arc in a longer series?

LG: Our characters should be flawed and human. And any of us who are human have flaws, and lessons we're trying to learn. I introduced Frankie Elkin, a brash, Boston cop with no personal life nor does she want one. She leads with aggression and says all the things we'd be afraid to say. Once it became clear she resonated with readers, I realized she was incomplete as a human being and needed to learn some things. So I thought to challenge the workaholic in her. She fell in love, ended up married and pregnant, so she was given opportunities to grow.

JW: So you're trying to create a relatable human character, but you need them to be larger than life since it's a series. Is that something you consciously work on?

LG: A lot of iconic characters, like Jack Reacher or Sherlock Holmes, have a certain bravado we couldn't have and go places we can't or won't go. We all get to take a journey with them and experience things we wouldn't do. There's a superhero edge to it.

JW: When talking about characters, there are two other types of characters I'd like to talk about: Crabby and Coconut Crab, two strong "characters" in your book, *I Still See You*. I thought the villain would meet their demise by being killed by Coconut Crab, but I was wrong. What importance do you place on those nonhuman characters?

LG: The book takes place on the Palmyra Atoll, near Hawaii. Coconut Crabs rule the night there. They're huge and aggressive, so they became villains in my story. They attack smaller crabs (like Crabby, the cute ghost crab. who Frankie cares for).

Keep in mind there's who we are as individuals and who we are with others around us. When you're trying to develop a character, creating a robust social circle for them matters because that's how you can flesh out the character. For Frankie, I had a book with a burnt out ex-marine and a young lady wants to learn self-defense because her husband was about to get out of prison. My publisher said I have to give him a reason to live because it's dark. So I gave him a pet iguana. Frankie is not good with other people, but she felt close to Crabby, the little crab and cared about him.

JW: In your book, the island is a character, too. You did a lot of research.

LG: Yes, and it was really fun for me. When we were at ThrillerFest, one question that came up to S.A. Cosby was whether place can be a character. And he said, "Yes, Shudder Island." I had the opportunity two years ago to go to a remote atoll for an environmental trip, unrelated to any book. We needed doctor's notes to go. They preferred it if you didn't have an appendix because if you got appendicitis, it's a three-day rescue. Humidity is relentless. Halfway through the trip, I realized it was a thriller novel. The place became the major character. It was an experience most readers won't have.

JW: You talked about internal conflict. For Frankie, she's a workaholic. For Peirce, his first wife and daughter were killed, so despair was an internal conflict.

LG: I like characters who are self-aware. For Pierce Quincy, he was a workaholic and understood later in life that he had an issue on the home front. He would like to connect with everyday people, but his job takes him out of that world so much.

JW: In my first novel, I was focused on my female FBI character, so I gave her three kids, so I could show how you have to balance work and family. So, talking about conflicts, tell us more about how that's important for an iconic character?

LG: I think again that's what makes them human. If you look at Sherlock Holmes, he was barely human. But Watson was human, and it eased it for the rest of us. It was important to have Watson narrate those stories. In these days of social media, we expect to know everything about everyone. Remembering the Sandra Bullock model, external appearances, like someone who has one nice suit to appear put-together to the world introduces conflict with who they are internally. Sometimes internal growth makes them better in their pursuit of their external goal.

JW: Because you have suspense and police procedurals and you also have all-out thrillers, what do you think about regarding creating characters with an arc in a thriller? Do you have the page count to allow for it?

LG: Suspense is almost like whodunnit (like a police procedural). In a thriller, you know who did it. There are also hybrid models. George RR Martin said he doesn't get the need to label things. He says it's a marketing ploy to know where to place books. But readers just care about the story, so don't get lost in labels. Have a story where people want to get to the next chapter and care about what happens. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is a great example. You care about Lisbeth Salander and she's always growing. It's a good puzzle but what sets it apart is that you want her to succeed.

As a reader, I want to feel good about a character. I want to see a puzzle solved. And I want to see the character grow along the way.

JW: In John Grisham's *The Testament*, an attorney has the job of notifying a missionary who has no access to telephone to let her know she's now a billionaire. It's a redemption story that incorporates all the things we talked about.

LG: When I'm writing, I'm unencumbered by reality. The world of fiction works well because I didn't have real jobs. I started writing at a young age. This leads me to a question for Jerri: You have the FBI background. In what ways does it help and in what ways does it trip you up?

JW: I think it's actually harder when you have the full background. My bestselling book is *FBI Myths and Misperceptions*. I wrote that not to chastise someone but to let them know what the reality is. But what I had to teach myself in my first novel was that the most important thing is the story. I'm a TV consultant for JJ Abrams for his upcoming series *Duster*. I would say to them, "This is how it really works, but I'm not mad if you don't do it that way." It

should provide knowledge but not be a handcuff. You don't want to take readers out of the story.

LG: If I'm going to include a scene in the book, I'll include just enough real world to not suspend disbelief but to make the story compelling and fast moving. If you have detailed knowledge, it may be harder to bypass certain things.

JW: There are so many times you can't reach out to a subject matter expert. But podcasts are a great source of information. Today there's no excuse to not gather real knowledge of the details. But remember, the most important thing is the story.

LG: People have this misperception that because you're a NYT Bestselling author, that everyone will open the doors to you. That's not the case. But if you say things like: "I would like to accurately reflect how you do your job," it helps. It also helps to clarify you're writing fiction. Every law enforcement officer I spoke to can usually solve the crime in two pages. But they often have thoughts on how to get away with things. I also respectfully ask how it affects them personally. For instance, I may learn that cops don't really hang together after work.

JW: The FBI is different, though. They often develop friends in the office, and they hang out together, because you're depending on each other.

LG: That's a perfect example of how things really work vs. the cliches.

Q&A:

I heard it's good to put 5 personal things next to your character's bed.

LG: There are lots of great ideas like that. I once heard that you know a character when you can describe them as a flavor of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Some use zodiac signs. Whatever works, do it.

Do you have a favorite character from your books?

LG: They become like children, and your favorites may change from time to time. My characters represent pieces of my own life. Detective D. D. Warren is like the "motherhood" version of me. She was a nice proxy. Frankie Elkin is interesting because I'm now an empty nester and she has an element of freedom.

JW: If you didn't like a character, it would be hard to make it a series.

LG: I have limited free time, as many of us do, so I don't want to spend it with unlikable characters.

So does write what you know only pertain to a portion of a story? How does research play into your credibility as an author.

LG: You want enough credibility to be dangerous. One thing that helped me is how to do a good interview. When I started, I asked tons of procedure questions, but now I get into things like how you'd get away with the crime, what did I get wrong, what does it mean to be a modern FBI agent, etc. One example was that I was missing extracurriculars, which is big to FBI agents. Things you don't know you don't know are things the reader doesn't know.

JW: Even my FBI director says the FBI is not what we do, but who we are. If you can get the humanity, the part of the character that makes them human and real, that's the ideal you need to aim for. Doing that kind of research is invaluable. That's even more important than whether you're using the right gun or following a specific procedure. It's not the action, but the emotion and the character that makes you fall in love with a story.

LG: I did research in Afghanistan and what you need to research is what it feels like to be that person in that situation. The best books aren't determine by which genre they fall into, it's whether you can walk in someone's shoes and feel what it's like to be them.

Once you create a new main character and figure out their strengths, weaknesses, etc., how do you come up with the perfect name?

LG: I think what it sounds like. So for Frankie, I wanted her to be harder to place, a mix of masculine and feminine, so I chose Frankie. Pierce "Quincy" was easy for a medical examiner. Rainie was inspired by Oregon where rain is a common occurrence. Some characters need a harder sound or softer sound. It's fun to play around with those kinds of things.

It sounds like Crabby and the Coconut Crab characters were based on a real life adventure. Can you name the adventure?

LG: The Palmyra Atoll was a research opportunity. I've done a lot of off the beaten path travel. I like to experience real world things which helps fuel ideas.

Do you do major profiles for your characters?

LG: No. Of course, my series characters weren't meant to be series characters. Now, after the fact, I go back and add traits to them. I don't do it ahead of time. I gather ideas later as I flesh out characters in subsequent stories.

Trixie Belden is an iconic character.

LG: I'm not familiar with her, but I'm going to look it up!

In *Before She Disappeared*, how did you learn about the Haitian community?

LG: I used to live in Boston and was aware of the community. I booked several days there and have friends in the community, and talked to small business owners (Haitian restaurants, etc.). You can learn a lot about a culture by eating their food. You want to be respectful but curious. Ask open-ended questions. Don't have an agenda. In a way, Frankie is a proxy for us as authors, always curious and asking questions.

For some iconic characters, they don't arc (James Bond, Sherlock Holmes), but something about them makes them bigger than life. Would you say a character lacking an arc needs some elements that make them peculiar or larger than life? I wouldn't think we'd actually want Sherlock Holmes or Hannibal Lecter to arc, right?

JW: Still, there's something you're looking to learn about them that makes them interesting. They may not have an arc, but they give you hints about themselves.

LG: With Marvel superheroes, we like them because they're extraordinary, though it's not my style of writing. As I mentioned, Sherlock Holmes works because of

Watson. Even Hannibal Lector we meet through Clarice. It's how they interact with other characters that are unique and makes them human.

When you have multiple characters, how do you distinguish them?

LG: We did an ITW session on audio narrators. They look for speech patterns, intonations, dialect, etc. that make each character unique. People have their own ways of talking. You do want to give some thought to secondary characters as to where they're from, how they would be wired, etc.

Do you have any tricks for figuring out new characters, like a dialog with the character?

LG: One fun question is whether or not they swear. That's just a starting point. How would they voice displeasure. What would they do if a hammer dropped on their foot?

How do you determine whether to write in first person or third person?

LG: First person is more intimate. I started writing third person because I was used to it, and most police procedurals were third person. I did first person due to my desire to have more of an intimate relationship with the victim.

If there was one thing about the FBI you haven't shared, what would it be?

JW: We're really caring people. A lot of authors make them cold, humorless, uncaring people. In real life, agents may be crying when sharing stories about

some of the work they've done. Or their wife left them because of the job. In a lot of shows, they do things way too quickly, without warrants, and seem unfeeling.

One follow-up to what Jerri is saying: Is the FBI / CIA rivalry that gets called out in lots of shows and books grounded in some truth?

Before 9/11 it was, but afterward it is not. There are always individual rivalries, but not agency rivalries. We learned that lesson.