

An Interview with Zara West

You have a long history of writing award-winning nonfiction, what made you decide to write a romantic suspense novel?

Romantic suspense is my favorite sub-genre of romance. I like how the mystery and suspense elements add conflict to and deepen the love story. At the same time, I wanted to do something a little different. Most romantic suspense features heroes and heroines in the military or in law enforcement or in special ops. I choose to look at the seamier side of life and explore what happens when ordinary people come within the cross-hairs of underworld criminals who don't care who they hurt to get what they want.

What was the greatest challenge in writing a novel?

I discovered that fiction writing is very different from non-fiction. You need a whole other toolbox. Non-fiction writing is about sharing information. Fiction is about stirring the reader's emotions. I had to learn how to change the informative writing style I used successfully in my non-fictional work to an intensely intimate approach that puts you right inside the character's head so you hear, see, smell, taste, touch, and feel what the character is experiencing.

What is your writing process?

One legacy of my non-fiction background is that I am a very organized writer. I begin by free writing a brief summary of the story as I imagine it. From that I create a fairly-detailed outline. That outline is pasted into my blank draft, and I start writing. Each line of the outline becomes a chapter or scene. I write as fast as I can, as many words as I can a day without worrying about correctness or details. That way I can write the first draft in a month. I then go back and revise, revise some more, and then edit.

How much do you use the Internet for research?

I think today all writers rely heavily on the Internet. Even if you have visited a place or even actually live there, being able to find a map, a photo or a video of a setting location at the moment you are writing the description of that scene or being able to find a medical detail at exactly the point your character is injured, really speeds up the writing process.

You said you read romantic suspense. What are some of your favorite authors?

I have very eclectic taste in my reading and enjoy all the sub-genres of romantic suspense. My most recent reads are: Sandra Brown's *Low Pressure*, Misty Evan's *Blood Code*, and Lena Diaz *No Exit*. You can find my reviews of these book and others on my blogs and on Goodreads.

Can you give us a sneak peek of the plot of your first romantic suspense, Beneath the Skin.

The catalyst for this story was imagining a romance between an artist who paints incredible landscapes featuring nude women and his model. But to increase conflict I added in a kidnapped tattoo artist, made the model an anthropologist researching tattooing for her dissertation, and cast the painter as an ex-Olympic Greco-Roman wrestler with a twisted past and scarred face. It's a recipe for disaster and—for love.

The story begins when the heroine, anthropology student, Melissa Dermott, discovers her friend and key informant Bella Bell, a well-known Williamsburg tattoo artist has disappeared. Unable to complete her dissertation without Bella's help, Melissa sets out to find her.

Unbeknownst to her, the hero, the tattoo artist's brother, Aristides Stavros, is also looking for Bella. When Melissa and Ari accidentally meet in Bella's apartment, both suspect the other of being involved in the kidnapping. But there is no denying they are fiercely attracted to each other.

In his search for his sister, Aristides befriends a group of graffiti artists and takes them under his wing. Melissa, through the machinations of her

manipulating girlfriend Jana Firth, meets a handsome Prince Charming. But what Ari and Melissa don't know is that they are merely pawns in a much bigger game of revenge between two powerful men. Can they learn to trust each other before it is too late?

Your novel Beneath the Skin is set in Williamsburg Brooklyn. What made you choose that setting?

Beside the fact that I am a native New Yorker, Williamsburg, Brooklyn is home to a thriving art culture. Street art can be found around every corner. Artist studios and galleries abound. But with spectacular views of Manhattan, it also has all the ambiance of life in an urban center. Sparkling new condos rise along the East River alongside abandoned rusting factories. Quiet residential streets lead to thriving commercial areas when the food from all nations can be found. And there are at least ten tattoo studios in the neighborhood. It seemed just the place that fine artists, street artists, and tattoo artists would congregate.

Art plays a major role in the story. What inspired you to mix graffiti artists, tattoo artists and fine art?

As a professional artist in a craft field—weaving, I have always been annoyed at the distinction made between various art forms. All art is creative. What makes an image on a piece of canvas worth more than one on the side of a building or one tattooed on to someone's skin?

In *Beneath the Skin*, I introduce some of this dichotomy. In the next books in the series I dig deeper into each of the art forms. The heroine in *Close to the Skin*, second in the series, is a tattoo artist who aspires for the recognition and fame her brother has earned as a fine artist. She hopes to achieve this by designing the tattoos for a new TV series.

Where did you get the idea for the paintings, the hero Aristides Stavros, creates?

I had a very close friend, Reiner Strub of Freiburg, Germany, who passed away last year. We met in Greece where he had a summer art studio with a

view of the sea. He painted the most magnificent landscapes of the rolling hills and inlets of the Argolis coast. But they were not just simple landscapes. If you looked carefully, the hills were actually nudes.

Will there be a sequel to Beneath the Skin?

Beneath the Skin is one in a series of four romantic suspense novels in *The Skin Quartet*. The second book, *Close to the Skin*, which is Bella and Vernon's story comes next. Within the Skin, Toro and Tejada's story is the about a female graffiti artist who pretends to be a man in the pursuit of fame and fortune. And the last book, Jana and Paulo's story, is about the theft of a fine art collection.

The hero of your novel is a battered Olympic wrestler from Greece. Why did you choose to have him be Greek?

I wanted my hero in *Beneath the Skin* to be strong and successful. At the start of the story Aristides Stavros is a multimillionaire who owns his own island and is a world renowned artist whose paintings sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. He has also wrestled in the Olympics representing Greece. At the same time, I wanted him to be a little lost and to experience the wonder and incongruities of the Big Apple as a newcomer. Hopefully, readers who do not live in New York will get a better understanding of life in the city by seeing it through his curious eyes. I chose Greece as his homeland since that is the place I have spent many years living and working as an ethnographer. It is place dear to my heart.

The heroine is an anthropology doctoral student. Do anthropologists actually study tattooing?

They most certainly do. In preparation for writing this book, I read five dissertations on tattooing, in addition to several scholarly works on the history and psychological and cultural elements of tattoos. Melissa Dermott, the anthropology doctoral student, is specifically studying why women get the tattoos they do, and on the side, she is trying to help women who have disfiguring tattoos. A percentage of the proceeds from

The Skin Quartet series will be donated to [Sanctuary for Families](#), a New York City organization that addresses domestic abuse and gender violence.

Do you have a tattoo?

Although I write a lot about tattooing in novels, I have to admit that I do not have a tattoo—yet. For now I am exploring the world of temporary tattoos which seems the perfect way to find out if you really want a piece of art permanently on your skin. I have teamed up with Tattly Temporary Tattoos of Brooklyn to produce custom *Beneath the Skin* designs. Check out my giveaways for opportunities to win one.

How hot are your books?

My books are romances, and they're definitely sexy! I'd say they're like an R-rated movie, and a few times during the story, things will get steamy between the hero and heroine as their relationship deepens. If that's not your thing, DON'T read these books!

Who should pick up your book?

If you love complex, suspense novels with twists and turns and smart villains, but want a happily ever after? If you love richly crafted, sexy romance but enjoy mysteries? If you like spine-tingling suspense but also want a little "wow" in your heart? If you like to see unconventional heroines standing up against convention to follow their own path, or heroes who are both smart and tough, but also kind and loving, Then *Beneath the Skin* is just for you.