

E.J. Russell Interview Audio

Tue, 9/6 4:42PM 1:17:54

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

books, romance, people, writing, narrator, series, characters, romance writers, theater, themes, male, high school, drama club, hear, genre, write, mystery, actors, gay, cozy mystery

SPEAKERS

Maggie Lynch, E. J. Russell



Maggie Lynch 00:00

Hello and welcome to Dust Jackets: Conversations with Authors. My special guests today is E. J. Russell. She's an author of at least 37 published books, including five series that I've found to date. She writes across several genres: romantic; comedy; historical; paranormal; mystery; and supernatural romantic suspense. At least that's for now. EJ describes herself as a mother of three and a recovering actor who writes romance in a rainbow of flavors. You can count on high snark, low angst and happy endings. Terms of reality, not so much. She lives in rural Oregon, enjoys visits from her wonderful adult children, and indulges in good books, red wine and the occasional hyperbole. Welcome EJ.



E. J. Russell 01:07

Hi, Maggie, it's great to be here with you.



Maggie Lynch 01:09

Thank you so much for making time for us. I'd like to share with our listeners just a fun tidbit about you? Because it turns out that we went to high school together in Southern California 50 plus years ago. And we were in drama club together. So you know, we participated in plays as actors, and did some behind the scenes stuff like stage managers. Anyone who's ever been in drama club in high school knows that you tend to do everything. You know, it's very few people that are only actors or only stage managers. And then after graduation, we lost track of each other. And, you know, I think we went to college in different parts of the country. We chose different careers. We both moved around quite a bit. 40 years later, we meet at the Romance Writers chapter in Portland, Oregon. What are the odds? It's just boggles my mind. And I have to give credit to you. Because you were the one who figured out who I was, I didn't recognize you, or, or remember really that much about my time.



E. J. Russell 02:00



E. J. Russell 02:28

And I didn't notice right away, I think I probably had been a member of the chapter for at least two or three years, because you were going by at least two different last names and not the one that I knew you by back in high school. And then I remember sitting in the meeting one time. It was when you were the treasurer. I think. I was looking at you and all of a sudden it went ping. Maggie McVay.



Maggie Lynch 02:54

Well, that's, that's just amazing. I am not very good visually in general. You know, I can remember people and lots of stuff about them, but like, I can't remember their names. But it was just really a fun coincidence. And I don't know about you, but I don't know anyone from high school, outside of you, who became a romance writer, do you?



E. J. Russell 03:21

Not that I know of, but I'm very bad at keeping in touch with people, as you probably know, given the fact it took us 40 years to reconnect. Right? I wouldn't be surprised simply because I think there are more romance writers out there in the world than people realize just because it's such a broad genre, and so many opportunities for people to tell wonderful stories.



Maggie Lynch 03:47

Exactly. Yes. So well, let's just kind of get into some questions about your writing. So, because we met in drama club, and I believe you continued to study theater, and maybe did some acting after high school. Can you just tell us a little bit about that and how that has affected your writing, you know, has it given you a process or a way that you approach your books that maybe people who don't have that experience might not have?



E. J. Russell 04:21

Well, after high school, I went, I did study theater. I got a B.A. in Drama, with an emphasis in acting from UC Irvine. I first spent at least a year and a half in Wyoming before I finished up there. I worked a bit at South Coast Rep as an acting apprentice and appeared on stage there. In fact, because of some of the actors I appeared with there--if you count stage work, as well as screen work--I'm like two steps away from Jack Nicholson.



Maggie Lynch 04:54

Oh my goodness.



E. J. Russell 04:56

Because one of the people who was there at the time with me and in the same sort of boat was

Arye Gross, who appeared in a wonderful movie called Big Eden with Louise Fletcher. Fletcher, of course was in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest with Jack Nicholson. So, you know, there's, sometimes it's fun to play that game. But after I graduated from there, I moved to the East Coast, worked as a secretary in the theater arts department at Emerson College, before going to graduate school at Yale for Theater Administration. So I have an MFA in Theater Admin. After I graduated from there, I went back to California, and was the business manager at Berkeley Rep. for several years before I started working for the company that provided our software. And I sort of did a hard left turn into computer work, and ended up being a computer consultant for years. But to answer your question, going back to what it was, if I can get off my little train of thought caboose, one of the things that I discovered when I was first starting out as a writer is-- and I don't know if this was true for you, when you were starting out--but because you don't know what you don't know, you try and learn as much as you can from other people. And every time you hear advice, you think that must be the way to do it. I have to be able to do that, you know, if I want to be a success. I have to, you know, have a playlist for every book. Or I have to go do all my writing in a coffee shop. Or I have to do any number of other things. But now, I'm, what, 11 years on in this career and I've learned a lot about myself. One of which is that I'm an auditory learner, which I think is why I recognized you. I recognized your voice.



Maggie Lynch 06:59

Oh, my.



E. J. Russell 06:59

And so I have to write in silence. But as a result of that, I hear the characters talking in my head as if they were doing an improv, similar to the kinds of theater exercises we used to do back in the day. So that probably may be one of the the differences in my process than other people's might be who don't have a theatre background is because all my first drafts are very dialogue heavy, lots of talking heads. And I have to go back and fill in, you know, where are they? Are they wearing any clothes? What's the weather like?



Maggie Lynch 07:40

I am so glad to hear that from you. Actually. I'm very much the same. I'm an auditory learner. But I think the difference is that mine are not dialogue heavy, because I'm a very internal processor. And so when I start writing, my characters are doing too much thinking and not much talking. They also do all of this in a white room in the middle of nowhere. So I have to go back and add all those visual things. So I'm so glad because now I don't feel alone.



E. J. Russell 08:18

No, no, I tend to be very reactive. So that's why I like brainstorming with other writers because someone will say, well, we'll kick off something similar to an improv again. In fact, I remember going all the way back to our high school days, I think, when I was a sophomore, it was the year that we were in the wonderful adventures of Don Quixote together.



Maggie Lynch 08:42

Oh, yeah.



E. J. Russell 08:43

At the end of the year, one of the other students, Gary muse, and I wrote a little, you know, interviews skit. And that was probably the first thing I remember realizing that I was a reactive writer, because we would bounce ideas off of one another, and end up getting, you know, getting the scripts down that way.



Maggie Lynch 09:04

Wow. Oh, cool. So do you ever...One of the things I do, as a reformed actor, is that I have learned to act out my scenes in order for me to get some of those descriptive pieces, you know, like body language and emotion, and things like that. Do you do any of that while you're writing?



E. J. Russell 09:31

Well, if anyone were to watch me while I'm writing, because I fast draft, I just sort of blurt it out and then go back later and revise. But if anyone were to watch me, they would probably remark that I made a lot of very peculiar faces. Because as I'm writing in one particular character or another, I'm going, this is what he is. How is he looking when he's saying this kind of thing. So I do that, you know, to a certain extent, even though I don't get up and run around the room.



Maggie Lynch 10:07

Well, I do get up and run around the room. But that's usually in the editing phase, not in the drafting phase. But I realize again that I'm in a white room. So so let me kind of follow that up. So when we first reconnected as I said, it was through romance writing. But the different was that I was writing male-female romances, and you were writing male-male romances. So did you enter publishing with the purpose of writing male-male romances? Or how did that come about, exactly? And did you have a plan for that being your primary niche? Because it certainly seems that you're really well known in that arena?



E. J. Russell 10:54

Well, it's one of those things that my general obliviousness maybe had a lot to do with that. When I first joined Rose City Romance Writers, where we met, the book that I was working on was, in fact, a male-female romance. And when I was planning that series, which was set in a summer theater, I expected that some of the books would be male-female, and some would be

male-male. Now, just because that's what my experience has been working in theater. My best friend, the last two years in high school, was gay. He came out to me in 1975, because of David Bowie.



Maggie Lynch 11:33

Oh, my gosh.



E. J. Russell 11:35

And my sons, I have two sons, they're both gay. So it's just like that's my world. And I've thought that, you know, any romance I write would be a mix of those things. So I expected it to be pretty much a 50-50 split. And then, so the first book that I had accepted for publication happened to be a male-male book. The second book, with the same publisher was male-female. That one remains my sole male-female book that's published because after that one I was contracted by a publisher, Riptide Publishing, that specializes in queer books. And so, because that's what they were interested in, that's what I started to write. And I found that I really enjoyed it. Because as you probably have the same similar experience, to some extent, because we came of age at the same time, right? At the sort of dawning of the modern women's movement. I just, I get so irritated by sexual politics and gender dynamics. And if you're writing about two men that at least levels the playing field.



Maggie Lynch 12:47

How interesting.



E. J. Russell 12:49

There's that part and also, because of Gordon, because of my sons, I wanted, I want gay romances to be mainstream. I want everyone to have a chance to have funny, happy, snarky experiences without having to worry too much about judgment, I guess.



Maggie Lynch 13:12

Oh, that's great. You know, I've heard of so many people that have gone into writing male-male romances for very similar reasons. You know, their children, relatives, their best friend, things like that. And I, it's funny, you were probably a lot more aware than I was in high school. Because I really didn't know, to my knowledge, I didn't know any gay people. And I didn't really know much about the movement until well into the 80sm when HIV AIDS became such a big deal and, and I was living in Utah. So that's kind of was when my awareness became blown out. But since then, interestingly enough, you know, I have several cousins who are gender fluid. I have one who has transitioned from male to female. I have two gay cousins. And so it's probably always been like that. And I just was totally oblivious.

E

E. J. Russell 14:28

Well, I was pretty oblivious back then, too. Like I said, Gordon didn't come out to me until 1975, two years after I graduated, but also it wasn't. It wasn't that long after Stonewall. I mean, it was still not very safe for people to be open. I had conversations with Gordon at one point I said, you know, aren't you afraid of approaching people? I mean, how do you know? He said, I always know. So apparently gaydar was a thing, which I did not have any clue about. But, but my friend did. Then of course, once I got further into college and into working in theater professionally I knew. Theatre was one of the safest places for people to be open about their gender identities and their sexuality. Though, oh man, so many friends lost to HIV AIDS, including Gordon.



Maggie Lynch 15:33

Oh, really? Oh, I'm so sorry. Yeah, yeah. Okay, well, let's go on. So one of the things I'm really horrible about is keeping in touch with even my friends writers careers, because I can hardly keep track of my own. But I was really surprised to see your whole Quest Investigation series, which is not romance, I think.

E

E. J. Russell 15:59

It really has a romantic subplot. But not a romance. No.



Maggie Lynch 16:05

So it seems to be mostly kind of paranormal mystery. Would that be fair?

E

E. J. Russell 16:10

So paranormal cozy-ish mystery is what I call it.



Maggie Lynch 16:14

So what kind of drew you to that, you know, away from what you had been writing? You know, several series of male-male romances?

E

E. J. Russell 16:24

Well, I'm a sucker for interconnected worlds interconnected stories. And maybe it's also part of my theater background and cameos from other shows. So I've really enjoyed writing series that are interconnected with characters that sort of branch out. And at the end of my first series that I wrote with Riptide--well, no, not the first one, but one of the early ones--at the end of the series, I had planned for two of the characters to go into business together as private investigators. And so I had always kind of planned that any books I wrote would be about those

two guys. And one of them would have to be the narrator. But then I started thinking about it well, that their stories were really pretty much over, they found their guys, they, you know, they're happy together. But there was one character in a subsequent book that some of my readers said really deserved his own story. And so as I look back on that, you know, the P.I. organization and this character, they seemed to go together really well, because he's the only human in that world. Everybody else is supernatural in some way. And he just has to try and figure it out what the heck is going on. Plus, I was getting really tired of writing sex scenes. So I wanted to break it up. So that's why there are four books in this first one. I call it the first cycle, because now people are saying they want to hear more. So maybe. So I arranged it so that the romance arc between Matt, the narrator, and his love interest would span all four books. So at the end of that last book is when they get there. They finally get together. So anything I do in the future, I don't know whether it's going to be that same Narrator or whether I'm going to shift to somebody else, because there is one character that's a big fan favorite. I know I owe them his book for a long time, but he's still too young in my head. He needs to get a little older before he's ready.



Maggie Lynch 18:51

Well, I think it's really exciting and mystery has really become a big trending genre. And I know a number of Romance Writers that have really kind of switched away from romance into Mystery. For some of them, I mean it's really hard not to have any romantic subplots, if you're started as a romance writer, but I do hear you on the getting tired of writing sex scenes. I was definitely in that camp too. And now I'm writing middle grade, so no. Yes. So the other thing I noticed is that you have audiobooks. And and I, of course, because I have audiobooks, I had to go listen to your narrators. And both of the men that I listened to just were marvelous. I mean, their intonation, their ability to change tone to differentiate their characters. And they just had gorgeous voices that you know, I could fall asleep to if I wanted. And so I just wanted to know, what was your process for finding them and do they work for anyone else? Just in case.



E. J. Russell 20:09

Well, actually, I've worked with three different narrators. Now, I think all three of them are, you know, are very well known in the genre. One of them, the narrator Joel Leslie, the new narrator for my Fey Out of Water books, recently narrated Winnie the Pooh. And also the Christmas Christmas Carol. So he does other things as well as gay romance. One of the ways I discovered narrators is through one of the conferences I used to go to regularly, before the pandemic kind of shut everything down. Gay Romance Writers literature retreat. And I met Joel there in the fairly early stages of his career. One of the reasons I wanted him for that particular series was because it's based on Celtic mythology, and there were like, crazy different Celtic accents. And Joel does this really well. One of the other character narrators I work with is Greg Boudreau, also known as Greg Tremblay. He actually was contracted to the very first audio book of mine, which was through Riptide. I didn't contact him directly. But he's very well known, very popular, very busy. But one of my author friends mentioned him--we were involved in a multi author series. She mentioned that Greg had room on his calendar. So I contacted him and was very happy that he was able to fit me in. So he's done a lot of that same series of books. And the third one I've worked with his Kirt Graves. He did my Christmas series, a contemporary. he's got this wonderful sort of comforting voice. But he can also deal with characters. And one of the characters in these books is very extra, which is extremely

excitable. Kirt really captured him well. So I've been very, very lucky to work with these three wonderful men. And I would recommend that anybody go out and look for them, because they do fabulous work across any number of genres. You'd never, ever go wrong with any of them.



Maggie Lynch 22:52

That's great. I've only used female narrators so far, but I do have a romantic suspense that really needs a male narrator and I haven't gotten around to contracting it. But when I listened to your guys, I thought, Okay. I think one of these guys would really work well. Because, that's the other part with male narrators. That sometimes they can't do women very well. But I heard a couple of them do female parts. And I thought, yeah, that really works. I was just so impressed. I thought, well, she's an actor. She's been a theater manager. You know, she probably knew these people, like from 20 years ago and could find them easily.



E. J. Russell 23:33

No, no, I met them through other connections in my writing genre. And in those conferences. So very fortunate in that I think I never actually met Kirt face to face. He said he was sitting in back of me at one panel at GRL, one year. I thought, hmm, I really liked the sound of his voice.



Maggie Lynch 23:55

Ah, very good. So let's go on to the next question. I find, for myself and many authors I talk to, that they tend to write some of the same themes in every book. It's kind of like the thing that they're either searching for themselves, or they're trying to solve for the world, or whatever. It really doesn't matter the genre, but the themes keep reappearing. So is that true for you? And if so, what are those themes? And if it's not, what makes you so special?



E. J. Russell 24:35

Are we talking themes or tropes?



Maggie Lynch 24:38

I think of them as themes. For me, it is, you know, like one of the themes that I'm always writing about is coming of age and finding identity. Probably because I've come of age about five times in my life. Because it seems that with each change in your life that you have to kind of rethink all of that again. So that's like one of the things that I write about all the time. But you can talk about either themes or tropes, whichever you would like.



E. J. Russell 25:09

Well, I find that I do lots of fish out of water things, simply because I have always felt like an outsider no matter where I am. So it's like, how do I find a way to fit in? And so that's what a lot

of my characters try and do. It's like, they're, they're put in a situation that's unfamiliar to them. And they have to figure out how to make their way. So there's, you know, acceptance. As well as self identification, I guess, self knowledge. I don't know that I can specify any other particular theme. Other than that, it tends to be fairly broad in terms of the way that it's implemented in any book. There's always some aspect of that, I think. Just I don't fit in here. How do I make that work?



Maggie Lynch 26:10

Yeah, well, I mean, I do think that is a theme. And a lot of people can identify with not feeling like they fit in, you know, even people whose entire life is fitting in. Usually, they're trying so hard, because they have that fear. So I can really understand that. One of the things you do, and I'd like to kind of understand this better, is writing humor. I mean, that seems to be something really important to you, and something that I'm really awful at. So I wonder, is that kind of just the way you think, or do you purposefully, you know, really try to inject humor? Because you seem to write some really good snark without being mean.



E. J. Russell 27:03

Well, sort of my tagline is romance and mystery, reality optional. But the subtitle might be if it's not fun, why bother? So even back when we were still actors, I much preferred acting in comedies with other people, than, you know, the angst ridden dramatic monologues or whatever. Because I think it's because I internalize sadness too much. And I don't find crying cathartic. So I don't want to do it. I don't want to experience it. And I don't want to write about it. So I'm looking, I'm always looking for something that will help me, you know, buoy me up, you know, make me lighter. And I'm also married to one of the most dryly witty men probably in the world. So, oh, we have those sort of conversations. But yeah, even when I was doing back, working in accounting, it was always about the jokes. You know, two plus two equals five. Yeah, accountants just know how to have fun. Yeah, it's because humor is important to me, because I like it. That's what I sort of gravitate towards. And hopefully I do well, I don't know.



Maggie Lynch 28:35

Well, I mean, I haven't read a lot of your books, but what I have, I do think you do it very well and I admire that a lot. We are totally opposite in that way. I would rather take the crying, angsty, Oh, my life is the pits part. Because I I don't know if I identify with it; but I think I identify with the underlying emotions a lot. And, all my books tend to reflect that as well. I always do issue books and people having really difficult lives. But they do get justice in the end. That's important to work out. So what are you planning to write moving forward? Are you planning more romance or more mystery, more fantasy? All of the above? Something maybe completely different.



E. J. Russell 29:31

Yes. I just launched a more traditional cozy mystery series with a collaborator. Our penname is C. K. Eastland. Our first traditional cozy mystery came out on Monday. As a matter of fact, it's

the first in the Crafty Sleuth series. It's called Die Cut. And we have seven books planned in the series.



Maggie Lynch 29:59

Wow!,



E. J. Russell 29:59

It's been just a total hoot working with C, because she essentially, well, she writes as C. Morgan Kennedy. And you probably know her from it. So, originally, we were having brunch together multiple times when she was looking for a different job and was working on a series that she wasn't sure whether it was a mystery or a romance. I said, I'll take a look and maybe we can work on it together. And so, I read a book on writing cozy mysteries and I was reading about what the sleuth was like. They are very active in a particular sort of niche community. They have lots of connections. They have all these you know, x x X. And I went basically that's C. So I said, You are the sleuth. She is actually the embodiment of the the main character in these books. I wanted to do it because she's so much fun to work with. I also have another book, in my largest world, coming out next month, which I need to finish. I've got a contemporary male-male romance coming out. Hopefully, once I get that revised and more books in the in the Crafty Sleuth series, then possibly another cycle of Quest Investigations. So I've got a whole list of things on my possible to do list for 2022. And I just have to buckle down and do some of them. Once tax season is over. Yeah.



Maggie Lynch 31:47

Oh, are you doing taxes as as a side busines?



E. J. Russell 31:51

Oh no. Just for myself. Yeah, after being in denial for them for so long. And then you have a week to do them? You know, it's down to the wire. I guess.



Maggie Lynch 32:05

That's, that's usually my approach. Oh, the 15th is coming up! Okay, so what is the best way for people to connect with you if they want to learn more about your books or about you?



E. J. Russell 32:21

Well, my website is ejrussell.com. It has a list of my books, my audiobooks, also links to my social media presence. I'm kind of an introvert on the internet, as well as in real life, so I don't have a really broad footprint on social media. Probably the best place to connect with me is in

my Facebook reader group, which is called Reality Optional. It's pretty lucky because that's the definition of me. Also, Instagram, [ej_russell_author](#). All those links are on the website. The website is probably the best place to start.



Maggie Lynch 33:04

Okay. And do you have a newsletter for people who want to hear from you regularly?



E. J. Russell 33:09

I do and the signup is right there on the on the website, too.



Maggie Lynch 33:13

Perfect. Well, I really appreciate you taking the time to do this interview. And for all my listeners out there, you can learn more about E. J. at her website. And I will put all of that information into the show notes so you can look right there with a link directly to it. And I hope that you do check out her books. So thank you for listening, and I'll see you next time with another episode of Dust Jackets: Conversations with Authors.