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WD INTERVIEW

Lisa Scottoline

THE BESTSELLING SUSPENSE
AUTHOR ON GIVING YOURSELF
PERMISSION TO DREAM BIG



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The WD Interview



Lisa Scottoline

AN ORIGINAL VOICE

An award-winning suspense series set in an all-female law firm. A library of bestselling book club picks. A humor column in the tradition of Erma Bombeck. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, Lisa Scottoline is not your average lawyer-turned-author.

BY JESSICA STRAWSER

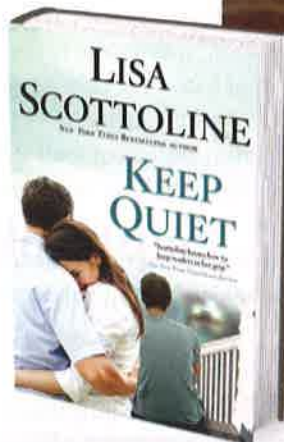


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Lisa Scottoline doesn't like labels. But she does classify herself as a People Person—and about 30 seconds into any conversation with her, it's easy to see why. Just as the bestseller's 22 novels are cross-shelved as Crime Fiction, Legal Thrillers and Women's Fiction, she herself could be cross-categorized as both a Readers Person and a Writers Person. She opens her home to hundreds of book club members every year; she has served as president of the Mystery Writers of America; she exudes gratitude for her success, having begun her keynote at this year's 2014 Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop by calling *thank you* “the two most important words in the English language.” All of which is to say that if she isn't already one of your favorite authors, she probably will be if you ever meet her.

It didn't take long after her 1993 debut, *Everywhere That Mary Went*, for Scottoline to be dubbed “the female John Grisham,” as the lawyer-turned-author made her own name writing a series of legal thrillers centered on an all-female law firm, Rosato & Associates. (The 13th installment, *Betrayed*, is due out this November.) Yet as she has expanded her body of work to include stand-alone bestsellers—most recently, her April release *Keep Quiet*, about a suburban father who makes a split-second decision to leave the scene of a fatal hit-and-run after letting his teenage son take the wheel—her books have become known above all for their emotionality and real, down-to-earth characters (yes, even the lawyers!) facing moral and ethical questions.

The quick-witted author also pens a *Philadelphia Inquirer* humor column with her daughter, Francesca Serritella. Their essays have been collected in several books, the latest of which, *Have a Nice Guilt Trip*, hit shelves in July.

If you're keeping track, that's three new books out this year alone—a pace she has no intention of slowing. Her work ethic is a product of a writing career that began when she was an in-debt, newly divorced mom struggling to provide for the infant Francesca. Scottoline has won awards ranging from the Edgar for excellence in crime fiction to the Fun Fearless Female title from *Cosmopolitan*. She studied under Philip Roth at the University of Pennsylvania, where she graduated magna cum laude in three years with a concentration in Contemporary

American Fiction before going on to law school at her alma mater, where in recent years she developed and taught a course called “Justice and Fiction.” She has 25 million books in print, in more than 30 countries.

I first met Scottoline at ThrillerFest several years ago, where she told a riveted audience that with her writing, she still follows a rule she learned in law school: “Milk the facts.” The *facts* of your story, she says, will yield incredible possibilities if you let them. Here are the facts of hers.

Your books make people ask themselves hard questions about what they'd do in impossibly tough situations. Is that something you set out to do—is that part of what compels you to write a particular story?

You look at your work from the inside out. So to a certain extent you're not even sure why you're doing something, or *that* you are doing it. For 16 to 17 years, I was writing a certain kind of story: Rosato. And what I started to really like was the dilemma it always posed—the disconnect between law and justice. I always thought that drama arose out of a *choice*. That's the thing about law: There's always a choice.

And I'll be straight with you: I started to find that I didn't like being categorized as a legal thriller writer. They [called me] “the female John Grisham,” and I was like, *I'm cross-dressing, it's strange*. As flattered as I was by the comparison, it didn't feel like what I was doing from the inside out.

I said to myself, *Look at what you're doing that is making that happen*. You can't keep secretly complaining about writing legal thrillers when every main character is a lawyer. And then it occurred to me that issues of right and wrong and justice happen all the time, and not just to lawyers—in fact, probably rarest to lawyers! [Laughs.] So that's when I said, “If you love writing about these issues, you're really writing about an *emotional justice*. Do it, try it. . . .”

It was a huge gamble. I was writing this successful series, it had gotten me very far. To sort of just ditch it—I mean, I did. The first [stand-alone novel] was *Look Again*, and that [protagonist] was a journalist. This woman gets this card in the mail, and it says “Missing/Abducted Child,” and the kid is her kid, who's adopted. And the readers know right away, something's wrong with her adoption, she didn't know.

"You have to believe [your writing dream] actually can happen, and nobody tells you that. It can happen!"

What is she going to do? Is she going to tell the truth and lose her child, or is she going to keep the truth to herself?

So that was a very happy thing, when the book did so well—and all the following stand-alones. They come out [every] April, and that's where I get to kind of run around—write about justice but not in a legal context. And it got me out of a corner I'd painted myself into.

[But eventually] I actually missed those Rosato characters. And those readers, they didn't desert, but they still said, "When are you going to write about Rosato?" When I figured out how to get better control ... I [decided to continue the Rosato series] and the other stories, and [the nonfiction humor] books with Francesca, about family life.

People say, "Where do you find the time for that?" Well, you get really ruthless. You really cut back socially. And who needs to wash your hair—who needs contacts? [Laughs.]

I think it was Stephen King who said you can choose to be an author or a writer, and that's a paraphrase, but the idea makes sense to me. It's really cool to be an author and swan around, and, you know, people clap, but if you do too much of that, you can't write. At least, I can't. And so that's how you can do three books a year, and not go crazy—in fact, feel the happiest and the luckiest you've ever, ever felt.

Some writers don't like to talk about branding, but your early books looked like what you'd expect a thriller to look like. Now, they even look more character driven. You're right, and you're right to notice it, and I think it's important to talk about. Everybody has to think about it, whether you're self-published or published by legacy publishers. That stuff really matters.

It was a change when I changed publishers. And we still work on the covers. I have a wonderful editor, and she said, you know what, these distinctions we're making [between the stand-alones and the Rosato books] are not really meaningful ones. People are coming to you for a family story and a crime story. Whether one is the plot or the subplot—lawyers say it's a "distinction without a difference." So Rosato is going to start to look more like the stand-alones, because to me, I'm writing stories about people. I think character and voice and plot are all the same thing.

It is about branding, and it helps the book find its audience—conversely, it also makes sure you put a book

in somebody's hands and it's what they expect. ... I've been very lucky to be very involved [with the publisher's marketing decisions]. And it seems like it's really working.

It seems you've really been embraced by book clubs.

Right! It always bothered me with Rosato—why don't book clubs read these? So I started to ask them, and they go, "Well, we don't read 'books like that.' They're crime fiction." So eight years ago, I [started my own] book club on Facebook. All you have to do is show me a picture of your book club, everybody holding a book, and you will be invited to a big party at my house. At my actual house where I actually live. People couldn't believe it. They were like, "Isn't that kind of personal?" And I said, "Wait a minute. If you read a novel of mine, you know my soul. Do you really think it matters if you see my couch?"

We put a tent up, I buy all the food, I do a little talk, they ask questions, and it ends up being an amazing personal experience just to meet these people.

Now, other authors have faster trajectories. But in my career, it's built on good books, delivered at regular intervals. And at the book club, you meet people who've read you for 10 or 15 years, and you get to say to them, "You know how much you matter to me?" ... It's all mixed up in what's great about books. You can't even match that experience.

You mentioned you've come to feel character and plot are the same thing. Could you talk more about that?

The example I always think of is if everybody is in a room, and all of a sudden a bad guy comes in and starts shooting. Everybody is going to react, and by definition they're going to react in character. Some people are going to jump in front of the children. Some people are going to call 911. Some people are going to try to attack him. And some people are going to run and hide. *Action reveals character.* I've learned, really just from my life: *We are what we do.*

Now, if your characters are what they do, it also drives the plot. As soon as you make that decision—actions are choices, they're just quick choices—that tells you what happens next. So the guy in *Keep Quiet*, he makes the choice [to leave] the scene. You know why he makes the choice: He wants to protect his son. He's completely off balance, blind-sided, a time when the best choices don't get made.

And the coolest thing is that not only does it reveal character but it *forms* character. There's a lot of slipperiness in the world. So you tell a little lie, and you think that's OK, or you get away with it, and then you start to become a liar. Because as soon as he decides he's not going to tell, he's got to go home, and he's got to keep his secret, and he's got to make his kid keep a secret, which is going to be really hard. So [character and plot] become the same thing. It is a distinction without a difference.

You've said you don't know in advance how your stories "middle," let alone finish. Yet you're known for plot twists. Do you have any strategies for pulling those off? This is going to sound a little bit woo-woo—and I don't want to say the characters write the books, I never think that—but I do think you have to be open to the character behaving the way the character would behave. *Keep Quiet* turned out to be pretty twisty, and it's because of getting out of the character's way, and going, *What would this guy really do?* If you don't have an outline that you need to overlay, you're not going to force anybody into a box. They're going to do something that is going to hand you something really interesting, and you need to let that happen, and be not afraid.

When I wanted to be a writer—and I always did—I always thought, *Wow, the writing is the hard part.* The writing isn't the hard part. The figuring out what comes next is the hard part! And it really matters at the end. I happen to think that a lot of novels fall down at the end, and I try not to make that happen. The main character can't fold up the tent. You've got to go forward. We all have difficulties, we all get plot twists; we just have to win in the end.

Do you ever write yourself into a corner?

No—because if you have a really logical narrative flow, honestly I think it's the best thing you can ever have for a page-turner. The reader is always following the character, they know why the character does things, because I didn't construct it out of the thin air.

So I never get to a point where I lose 200 pages. Sometimes I get to a point where I don't how this book is going to end, and I'm worried that it's going to be unsatisfying. . . . The weird thing—and I hope other authors feel this way—is there's a point, and usually for me it's about midway, where it gets *real*. It's a *real problem*. Everything in *Keep Quiet* can happen. So then you go, well, if this happened to a guy, he's going to *have* to figure a way out of it. And that's what makes him a hero. Not that he's true blue, not that he has superpowers—I don't write that person. I write every man, and every

WD MORE THAN JUST THE FACTS

For lessons from Scottoline's "Justice and Fiction" class, plus other inspiring outtakes, visit writersdigest.com/oct-14.

woman, in trouble, sometimes of their own devising. I think that's my life. [Laughs.] So you've got to figure it out.

Francesca has said that the most valuable thing you taught her was to give herself permission to take her writing seriously. Why do you think that can be so hard? The world is really tough on people who want to be writers, and there's precious little support for it. And if you're a good person, and most people are, you have a lot of responsibilities. We're so good that we put them first, and lose ourselves.

I think it's a bit about [being] an adult who has a dream. Like, little kids, when you go, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" you think that when you're 30, you should have answered that and you should be it already. But that's really not fair. In my case, it didn't work out. I was a lawyer, and when I got divorced and my daughter was born, I wanted to be something else. You have to nurture this dream.

I visualize it as a candle. You're the person in the movie walking around in the dark scary house, and you have the candle in the little dish, and you have to protect it with your hand. It can blow out very easily. And the world is not going to help you hold the candle.

You've got to *protect the candle*. You've got to go, "No, I can't come into work on the weekends—[that's] when I work on my novel." . . . People deserve those dreams, and they have to fight for them. You don't want to be at the end of your life and go, "Oh, I met all the obligations people had for me."

You have to believe that it actually can happen, and nobody tells you that. It can happen! I had five years of rejection. I had the worst rejection letter ever. But it happened to me, it can happen to you. But you have to give yourself permission, say to yourself, "I'm not foolish for wanting this."

All writers have to fight the same fight. I have to write 2,000 words today, no matter what. That's my discipline, and that's me protecting the work.

As the former "female John Grisham," do you imagine the day a writer is dubbed "a male Lisa Scottoline?" [Laughs.] I would not wish that on anyone! You know, you love writing, I love writing. We all want to be known as an original voice. **WD**

Jessica Strawser is the editor of *Writer's Digest*.