



## Patricia Wood

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### A Conversation with Patricia

Q: What inspired you to write LOTTERY?

A: An interconnected and multitudinous array of elements. It was as if my life were shaped and molded to create this novel. Stellar moments include:

- Interacting with my former brother in law, Jeri, who was born profoundly mentally challenged.
- Working as a teacher in the public school system, I saw so many students whose needs were not met and wondered what would become of them after they graduated.
- My experience when people found out my father won the lottery gave me specificities many other writers would not have. For instance, how differently people look at you after they find out your father won. People who wouldn't give you the time of day pay attention to you. Besides the unsolicited requests for financial assistance, there is a subtle edge to many of your personal relationships. It becomes the fact that defines you as a person, i.e. "the woman whose father won the lottery."
- As a doctoral student at the University of Hawaii, I was enrolled in the certificate program in disability and diversity and my eyes were opened to disability culture.



Aside from personal experience, my characters Perry and Keith emerged from my subconscious and spoke to me. They made it very clear to me they wanted their story told.

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**Q: You've said in previous interviews that we tend to lump together all cognitive disorders and consider all people with mental challenges to be essentially the same. How does Perry's character challenge this?**

A: It has always been disconcerting to me how people with cognitive challenges are usually portrayed in film and literature not as complete well-rendered individuals, but more stereotypically – either fearsome and evil (whether intentional or not), or purely inspirational and entirely good.

They are also, for the most part, desexualized. I wanted Perry to be a complete human being with all the accompanying angst, desires, and foibles that we all share. This is what makes one character different from another. To have Perry articulate his love for Cherry and have it evolve into desire, jealousy, and pain is one way of showing us his humanity. To have Perry react to these feelings, have him rationalize his slowness and make excuses for his friends, demonstrates how like us he is. "Oh," the reader says. "Perry is just like me. I've loved someone who has loved another. I know just how he feels." And we start to see a piece of ourselves in Perry.

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**Q: How did you use your experience studying disability and diversity for your PhD to make LOTTERY accurate?**

**A:** Well, this is fiction after all. I did not want to create a dissertation on how society demeans and diminishes people who are termed different, but I did want to be mindful of those issues. There is a fine line between preaching and suggesting. This question is still a reminder that we have a tendency to view those with cognitive challenges as all the same. It also indicates that we feel there is only one genuine portrayal. The key is to remember that the person comes first. Disability is only one facet of what makes us who we are and is not the primary factor that defines us. For example, having Perry listen to customers made him a better salesman than say Keith or Gary, who often did not hear what customers were saying. This shows Perry is capable of excelling in certain areas, even though he was considered slow.

Along the same line, my brother-in-law Jeri was unable to fix himself a sandwich or participate actively in a conversation, yet he was able to assemble a ball point pen from scratch. How could he do this? We still do not fully understand the potential of people who have cognitive challenges and, in the past, society has resorted to IQ tests as indicators. It then dismisses people who do not appear to meet certain parameters of ability. Understanding the fallacy of this position is the most important aspect of my studies. There is much we do not know about how to measure any person's true potential.

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**Q: You lend an air of authenticity to Perry's narration—what helped you internalize his voice? How were you able to find a balance between Perry's voice and your own?**

**A:** I am so glad that I have given Perry life. This, I think, was the most difficult thing to do. As a writer, I wanted to wow the reader with my prose, amaze them by the choice of my words, create a brilliantly shining phrase, but at every turn, I found myself stymied. *Would Perry say that? Would he really think that? What would he do?* There is much of Perry that is me – just as commonalities exist between us all. As I have said before, finding these commonalities brings a character to life. It is comical to me, having finished the final edits of LOTTERY, that Perry's voice is still here with me. I hear it when I look at the list of foreign rights sales and when I read about the readers who are enthused about my book. He whispers in my ear, "This is so totally cool!"

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**Q: Let's talk about a few of the other characters. Keith is a complex character, at once tortured and tender. Is he modeled after someone you've known? And what about Cherry—she's so young yet falls in love with a man much older than she. Why choose this experience for her?**

**A:** Keith is a composite of the many veterans I have known throughout my life. In the Women's Army Corps, during the early seventies, I was stationed at Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, and worked at DeWitt Army Hospital. I experienced first-hand how the Vietnam War devastated so many lives. My ex-husband was an emotional casualty of this war, although the actual date of his death was over thirty years later.

My characters determine their own destinies. I originally meant to have Keith facilitate the relationship between Cherry and Perry, but Cherry had

her own ideas. She fell hard for Keith. What is it about women that attracts us to flawed and tortured men? We believe we can save them. To Cherry, Perry doesn't appear to need her, but Keith truly does. It puts Perry in an interesting position – to be considered the one who is less needful.

Cherry is obviously looking for a father figure. This is not uncommon in girls who come from abusive situations. It is implied that her father is an alcoholic. She could not save her father, yet the reader feels sure she will save Keith. There is no accounting for love. It comes at a whim with no recourse. It cannot be contrived nor manufactured. It is what it is, and Cherry knows this.

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**Q: A common thread in this story is the threat of someone taking advantage of Perry. How prevalent is this problem among people with mental challenges?**

**A:** I have made a habit of compiling newspaper clippings that document these occurrences. It happens often enough: the elderly who are affected by dementia and are divested of their life savings by unscrupulous relatives or “guardians,” and those who have cognitive challenges and are living in group homes that provide substandard care.

Just recently, I saw an article about a situation that took place in Washington State. An individual with mental illness was robbed of thousands of dollars by employees of a local business. It happens. We only hear about those cases in which the perpetrators are caught. We hear nothing about people who are successful at stealing the assets of those most vulnerable. We feel we know what is best for those with cognitive challenges, that they need our watchfulness, yet many times this allows unscrupulous individuals to take advantage.

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**Q: In LOTTERY you use a seemingly simplistic voice to convey sophisticated ideas—what do you think this says about the capabilities of individuals with mental challenges?**

**A:** Simple is good. Many times thoughts are couched in such complexity they are indecipherable. I am often disappointed in works I have to struggle through making sense of each paragraph. Five-dollar words (as Keith and Gram said) are not the thing. They can be merely a razzle-dazzle sleight of hand to obfuscate meaning. I am an academic, and I have often used this tool myself to give the illusion of competence. The thing is, there are many times when plain speaking and single-syllable words can beautifully portray a feeling, a story, a concept. This is demonstrated in the writings of Paul Coelho in *The Alchemist* and Voltaire in *Candide*. Both are simple stories, their complexity found intertwined within, creating magic in our minds.

**Q: What's next for Patricia Wood?**

**A:** I have several other characters in my head that are vying to have their stories told in my next novel. I may have them flip a coin to see who comes next.

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## About This Book

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With an IQ of 76, Perry L. Crandall is often mistaken for retarded. But he knows the truth: "You have to have an IQ number less than 75 to be retarded. I read that in Reader's Digest." Abandoned by his mother at a young age, Perry lives with his cantankerous but good-hearted Gram, who tells him that there's nothing wrong with being a little slow. She teaches him how to get along in the world: always write things down, study the dictionary to learn new words, know whom to trust and who's trying to take advantage. Most of all, she reminds Perry that for all his disadvantages, he's a lucky boy --- that's what the L stands for.

Shortly after her death, Gram's belief in Perry's luck is borne out in spectacular fashion. Cheated out of his inheritance by his conniving family, he moves into an apartment above his employer's shop and is watched after by his best friend, Keith, a troubled Vietnam vet who lives on a boat in the harbor below. Money is tight, but Perry does his best to maintain his routine: daily vocabulary words, Sunday crossword puzzles, and weekly lottery tickets. When one of those tickets turns out to hold a \$12 million jackpot, Perry's world is transformed overnight.

After a lifetime of being teased, ignored, and shunned, Perry is suddenly everybody's best friend. His newfound fame makes him a star attraction at work, and he is inundated by letters, phone calls, and visitors, all looking for the same thing: a piece of the winnings. His friend Keith and his employer, Gary, help him fend off the day-to-day petitioners, but Perry's family has a more elaborate scheme in mind. Playing on his trusting nature and his innate goodwill, they maneuver to swindle him out of every last dime.

Patricia Wood's **Lottery** offers a glimpse of the world as seen through the eyes of a man with limited cognitive abilities but boundless generosity of spirit.

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## Discussion Questions

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1. Discuss the author's use of language. What techniques does she employ to take the reader inside a mentally challenged mind?
2. At several points in the novel, various characters use the word "retarded." How do you feel about this word and other words we use to describe the mentally and physically challenged?
3. Gram tells Perry that his brother David is weak, and that "the weak are more dangerous in the end." Discuss the character of David and his interactions with Perry. Is Gram's warning justified?
4. Perry calls Gram "a good teacher. She didn't mind that I was slow, but lots of people do." How do Gram's lessons prepare him for the challenges he faces throughout the novel?
5. Keith and Cherry, Perry's closest friends, have both lived traumatic lives—Keith served in Vietnam, Cherry has been abused by her father. Why do these characters form such a close bond with Perry? In what ways do their life experiences inform their relationships with him?
6. Which character are you most drawn to? Why?
7. Perry views things in highly literal terms, as illustrated when he refuses to spread part of Gram's ashes in Hawaii because "she needs to be kept together." In what ways does this literalism prove to be an asset? In what ways is it a deficit?

8. Perry says that Gary "was always nice to me before, but now he listens... Money has made the slow part of me not so important." Discuss the relationship between Gary and Perry. In what ways does it change after Perry wins the lottery?
9. Perry's vocabulary words are a motif throughout the novel. Discuss these words in terms of the chapters in which they appear and the story as a whole. What symbolic or metaphoric insights do they offer?
10. What do you think of Perry's decision at the end of the novel? What would you have advised him to do?
11. Does money buy happiness? Does it buy love? What do you think Perry's life would have been like without it?

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### Critical Praise

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"A wonderful first novel...vivid and funny and poignant and joyful. Perry L. Crandall is the thinking man's guide to a happy life."

—*The Washington Post*

"What I love about **Lottery** is that it is much more than a novel about a windfall affecting a simple soul—it's a book about a stupendous event affecting a great number of people, especially the reader."

—*Paul Theroux*

"Patricia Wood's debut novel tickles your funny bone, tugs your heartstrings, and redefines the word 'fortunate' all at once."

—*Redbook*

"[An] irresistible debut novel about what makes people good or bad, smart or stupid."

—*Good Housekeeping*

"**Lottery** is a compelling and beautifully written story that will show you how it's possible to have a low score on an intelligence test and still be a genius at understanding other people's feelings and motivations. And you'll learn that having above-average intelligence may mean less than finding happiness with yourself, and the people around you. **Lottery** is a novel, but it reads like it really happened, right next door to you."

—*John Elder Robison, author of Look Me in the Eye: A memoir of my life with Asperger's*

"Wood's debut is a poignant page-turner...a sweet read about money, relationships, and life."

—*OK!*

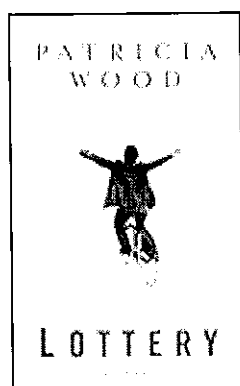
"In **Lottery**, Patricia Wood has created an altogether endearing character swept up in the most extreme of situations. A testament to the transcendence of friendship and the redemptive power of love, this startling novel is at once funny and poignant. Fans of Mark Haddon's **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time** and Daniel Keyes' **Flowers for Algernon** would do well to pick up this

captivating debut. I loved it!"

— *Martha O'Connor*

"Fear not: This novel about a mildly retarded man who wins the Washington State Lottery is no Forrest Gump retread --- we much prefer this (admittedly folksy) narrator to Tom Hanks as a mentally challenged Zelig. Patricia Wood's mentor, Paul Theroux, lent his literary wisdom to a book that manages to be heartfelt and totally not corny."

—*New York magazine*



## Lottery

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audio



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## Money changes everything

### A first-time author and her character hit the lottery jackpot

INTERVIEW BY JAY MACDONALD

Luck, chance, serendipity and coincidence: Patricia Wood knows well these four spices of life. It was through extraordinary good luck that her father, Ray "R.J." Dahl, a Boeing retiree, won \$6 million in the Washington State Lottery in 1993. It was chance that her late ex-husband, an alcoholic Vietnam vet, had a brother with Down syndrome who remains a functional two-year-old at the age of 54. It was serendipitous that Wood met a valuable mentor in novelist and travel writer Paul Theroux (*The Mosquito Coast*, *The Great Railway Bazaar*) who encouraged her to drop everything and pursue the novel she was uniquely qualified to write. And it was purely coincidental that BookPage assigned this reporter to interview Wood, who happens to be a former high school journalism classmate.

When Wood and I talk to one another three decades after graduation, it isn't to gossip about our former classmates, but to discuss her debut novel, **Lottery**, which opens with this line: "My name is Perry L. Crandall and I am not retarded." Wood has shaped her life-affirming book around a most intriguing premise: What if a mentally challenged shop clerk hit the big one?



We meet 31-year-old Perry, IQ 76, shortly before the death of Gram, the cantankerous, caring grandmother who instilled in him ironclad values after his self-absorbed mother left him in her care. When Gram dies, Perry's money-grubbing brothers sell her house from under him and kick him to the curb. He moves into a small apartment above Holsted's Marine Supply on the working docks of Everett, Washington, where he has worked his entire adult life. There, kindly shop owner Gary, his second mate Keith, a hard-drinking Vietnam vet, and the pudgy, pierced cashier Cherry help Perry navigate the swift currents of sudden independence.

Then the unimaginable happens: Perry hits the lottery for \$12 million. Before the vulture brothers can descend, Keith helps Perry wisely choose annuity payments over the cash-out. As the family maneuvers to pounce on his millions, Perry revels in his new role as a

businessman savant whose simple, successful marketing ideas spring from years spent listening to—while being ignored by—customers.

Owing to its cognitively impaired narrator, **Lottery** will inevitably bring to mind *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *Forrest Gump*, though a more apt comparison in tone and emotional impact might be Ron McLarty's touching 2005 debut, *The Memory of Running*.

Wood, who lives with her architect husband Gordon aboard Orion, a 48-foot sailboat moored in Ko'Olina, Hawaii, was just a thesis away from completing her education doctorate on disability and diversity at the University of Hawaii when **Lottery** sold at auction for a handsome sum. With healthy advance orders and Hollywood sizing it up as the next *Rain Man*, that thesis may have to wait; she has three more manuscripts waiting to see daylight.

"I've had this kind of windfall now twice in my life," she admits. "I was under the mistaken impression that I would be able to write my thesis and promote **Lottery** at the same time. Ha! All of a sudden, my Ph.D. has served its purpose; I have the learning. I wanted the degree because then I could get a job. But that doesn't seem to be an issue right now."

Wood has led a varied life: She served in the U.S. Army, worked as a medical technologist, and taught marine science and horseback riding. But it was her encounter at 19 with her then-husband's brother Jeri that sparked her interest in cognitive impairments and society's often-insensitive reaction to them.

"I was uncomfortable at first; I really struggled with my feelings," she recalls. "You could tell that there were periods of time when he knew he was different." Years later, the author herself had that same feeling of otherness when her father won the lottery.

"You would think it's a life-changing moment, but it is more a change in your own cognition," she says. "The perception is that money solves all your problems. The life-altering events of the lottery are more in what you choose to do after that point. Is it going to define you?"

Her father, who was comfortably retired from the Boeing test flight program, had been playing the lottery for less than a year when a machine issued him the winning ticket. His only celebration was to upgrade from coach to first class on the European vacation he and his wife had already booked.

But an equally harsh blow accompanied his good fortune.

"Very shortly after they won, it became readily apparent that



something was dramatically wrong with my mother," Wood says. "Her down-spiraling into dementia made me think, is this a pact with the devil? I started thinking, what would you want, win the lottery but know that you would be affected by dementia? I visualized one of those linear graphs—at what point as the wealth increases and the IQ decreases do you become acceptable socially? That was my premise."

Wood's mother passed away last year. This spring, Wood used part of her advance for **Lottery** to take her 87-year-old father on a trip to Norway to boost his spirits.

Wood received help and encouragement from Theroux, her horseback riding student, and novelist Jacquelyn Mitchard (*Deep End of the Ocean*), whom she met at the Maui Writers Conference and Retreat. She modeled Perry's supporting cast after people in her own life; there is much of her father in Gram, and her late ex-husband in Keith. Unfortunately, the less savory characters also resided close to home.

"The inspiration for the brothers, in part, comes from my own family," she says. "It caused hard feelings. It causes relatives to stop speaking."

Wood dismissed the suggestion of editors that she abandon the first-person narrative, knowing full well how challenging it would be at times to advance the story through Perry's limited understanding.

"The authenticity is very important. I want people who are termed normal to really feel what it's like to be like Perry. I didn't want to have another book where this person is so inspirational, and celibate. A lot of parents of these kids who have read my book say, yes. Yes. I want to believe that my child has a life."

Jay MacDonald and Patricia Wood were classmates at Shoreline High in Seattle. Go Spartans!

**Home Reviews & Interviews**

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## **The View From Here Interview: Patricia Wood**

*Lottery*, Patricia Wood's debut published novel, was released in the US in hardback August 2007 by Putnam and released in trade paperback by Berkley June 2008. In the UK, the hardcover came out Jan 2008 by William Heinemann (Random House) and the paperback was released recently by Windmill books, a new imprint (Random House) in January 2009. *Lottery* was selected as an October 2007 Book Sense Notable and included in the Washington Post Best Fiction 2007. It went on to be short listed for the 2008 Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction.

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*"This wonderful first novel is about a guy who starts off with all the chips stacked against him and still comes out a winner. It's an underdog novel, and the underdog is a most satisfying hero, for more than any other protagonist, the underdog is the one we love to love....Patricia Wood's portrait of Perry is so vivid and funny and poignant and joyful that it avoids the disappointing flatness of the predictable." -- Washington Post*

*"What I love about Lottery is that it is much more than a novel about a windfall affecting a simple soul - it's a book about a stupendous event affecting a great number of people, all the winner's friends, and especially the reader." -- Paul Theroux*

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**Patricia, let's start with *Lottery*. Perry has an IQ of 76 but "is not retarded". Do you or did you work with people who have a disability? You deliberately made Perry non-specifically with special needs. He's not Down Syndrome, or autistic or anything in particular....**

Perry could be everything or nothing. It's so seductive to label. Developmentally delayed? Cognitively challenged? Mentally retarded? Autistic? Learning disabled? Whatever. Any of those immediately puts a person into a little box.

When I was a public high school teacher my students all had different abilities and different special needs. Additionally my brother-in-law had Down syndrome, and my PHD work was in disability and diversity. Because I've had this experience I think I'm able to look at how all of those things interconnect and conflict. Oftentimes academics have "Ivory Tower" ideas of how we should educate those with special needs, and parents have other more practical concerns, and teachers who work with these students every day can get overwhelmed and jaded.

I also wanted to show that if someone with a cognitive challenge has one person who is truly meaningful in their life, whether a grandmother, a sister a friend (a mentor if you will), then that person is likely to achieve far more than otherwise

expected.

**What about the use of the word retarded? You explore it in the book and you ask that of your book club readers, “how does it make you feel?” What is your opinion and how should one use that or other terms?**

There are certain words that diminish a person’s worth and cause society to marginalize them and retarded is one such example. A person is defined by many things and not just by what their IQ is. I object to its popularity both in comedy routines and in trendy speech by teenagers. I think it desensitizes us and makes us less empathetic when we use those words.

**You mentioned ‘labeling’, and you pointed out in the book, this 76, the number, and if you were 76 you were OK and if you were one number lower you were not. That was interesting to think about...**

We give these numbers to everything: IQ, grades on tests, ratings, below average, average, above average- And what’s considered rich? A million dollars, two million? We have these ideas about who and what we are based on numbers. Am I too heavy? Too skinny? Do we all really want to be like everyone else?

I had students in my class, at a variety of IQ levels. Schools don’t test for IQ very much anymore, unless the parents ask for it, but it used to be always tested, and that was it. Everyone was tested, that was where you fit in, and you couldn’t change. While researching my book I was trying to find what constituted, ‘retarded’. You know I couldn’t find a straight answer. One country had 68, and another was 70. Even state to state, here in the United States it varied. In criminal situations there is a self-identification segment, to being excused of the consequences of a crime, you have to be interviewed, tested, but you need to be able to say, ‘yes, I am mentally deficient’, and often times the person will not do it, even if it means being put to death, they will not admit to anything but being slow. I thought all of this was fascinating yet somewhat depressing at the same time. Have we really not progressed any further than this?

**You interact with your readers in a number of ways online, through your blog and through web book club meetings. What feedback do you get?**

Authors would love everybody to enjoy their book, but that’s not the way it happens. My words may provoke one person to think and examine their beliefs or may cause another to roll their eyes. One person will say it’s deep and profound, another will say it’s a cute little beach read. What somebody gets out of your book is what they get out of your book. You have no control over readers. You have to accept that.

It adds to, and makes a really interesting discussion in a book club, when one

reader feels comfortable to say, you know Patricia, I really hated the end, or I just didn't believe Perry, or I didn't like this or that. It makes for a more interesting dialogue. Some people have been put off by some of the language. Keith uses the f-word a lot- it adds to his authenticity as a Vietnam vet. Authors have no control over what their characters do. I did not sit down and plan ahead of time that Keith was going to be a big, farting, rude, Vietnam vet who said the f-word. He spoke in my head and that's what he became. In the same way that Perry became the way he was, and Gram the way she was. It is very interesting to readers in book club discussions to hear about how my characters came to be.

### **How tightly do you plan your plot in advance and how much do you allow your characters to develop and shape it as you go along?**

Everybody who writes novels does it differently. This is what's so wonderful about writing - anybody can do it, and you don't necessarily have to go to school to learn it. You can learn it by doing. I always have the story in my brain. I never start a book where I don't know what the story is about. I know there are authors who do. People start writing and they say, "I love this character, I'll just write and see what he does."

I dream and my dream will be an abbreviated tiny synopsis, and as I write, I get ideas for more and more things happening. Generally I have the first and the last chapter written. I'll create a file, and use my novel template with empty chapters and fill them in.

*Lottery* is the fourth novel I've written even though it was the first I've gotten published. I got a quick idea of what the book was going to be about, I made 40 chapters, I wrote the prologue, and essentially the essence of the story is as I wrote it that first day. That prologue changed very little but the rest of the book morphed a bit. My epilogue was pretty much the same but I didn't know which characters were going to be there or not. I had no idea I was going to kill off any characters until I did...

### **For the ending I believe you had a number of different scenarios thought out?**

I wrote four different endings. You don't sit down, write a book, and that's it. You write drafts, and then you go back and see how can you make this character better. Or you might say, should this character really be two characters? I don't think I need this other character, he started off being important and he's no longer important. Should Perry and Cherry get married? OK, what if they don't? Should I just have them have a needy night of sex, and that's it? There were lots of different ideas I had for the ending. Ultimately, it was important for me to have at least a transient happy resolution.

### **How did you know when *Lottery* was 'finished' and how did you feel on completion?**

and covered his mouth with his hands. My mother carried the worn copy around in her purse for years. I only remember pieces and parts. Daddy roosters "fortifying" eggs, the inconsistency of hens' laying ability, and the trauma our neighbor's cats inflicted on our flock. It was my first foray into the use of clichés. *Don't count your chickens before they hatch.*

Of course, our chicken house was another story. My mother built it out of discarded wood pieces. The neighbors were convinced she was building a bomb shelter. This was the early sixties after all.

*A little bit about myself*

I am currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Hawaii, and focus on education and the study of disability and diversity in addition to writing fiction. I live with my husband, Gordon, aboard *Orion*, a 48-foot sailboat moored in Hawaii. I have one son, Andrew, who lives in Everett, Washington, where **LOTTERY** takes place.

I graduated in 1971 from Shoreline High School and am always interested in reconnecting with former classmates.

*Careers...*

When I am at a party and asked about myself, I sometimes cringe. People are fascinated at first but then they began to look slightly alarmed and begin to move away...

Oh, you've done shark research?

You compete in horse shows?

Your horse was a jumper champion?

You're working on your PhD?

You were in the Army?

You have published underwater photographs?

You sailed across the Pacific Ocean in a 39-ft sailboat?

Gee, you should write a book...

Oh, you have?

I am certain they think they are in the company of a pathological liar.



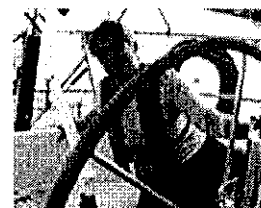
WAC Fashion



Cradling a shark in Belize



Airborne and me in the jumpers



Mid-Pacific on Itasca