

Trading Secrets with Nicole Murphy

Interviewed by Astrid Cooper.

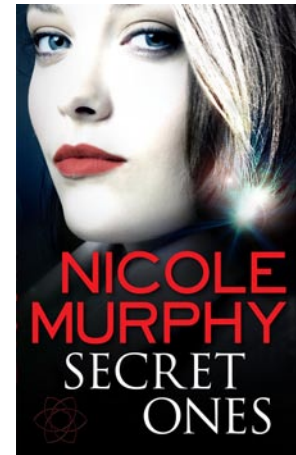
Nicole Murphy is probably well known to many Specusphere readers through her fan activities, but with the recent sale of her romantic urban fantasy trilogy to *HarperVoyager*, she joins the growing list of talented Australian authors taking the speculative world by storm.

Secret Ones (The Dream of Asarlai: Book One) ISBN 978-07322-9161-7
PB: \$22.99. Release date: July, 2010.

The gadda look human, act human, interact with humans, but come from a different ancestor and so have access to the energy of the world around them. With this energy, they can perform what we would consider magic. For centuries, the gadda have worked to maintain balance in using the power and to keep their identity secret from the rapidly expanding human race. All this is now at risk — the more terrible of gadda teachings, The Forbidden Texts, have been stolen and the race is on to find them. Maggie Shaunessy has a well-deserved reputation as a troublemaker within the gadda, but she has to learn to curb those antics when she falls in love. Love is difficult enough at the best of times; now it's deadly...

AC: Welcome to the Specusphere, Nicole. Your bio states that you have been writing stories for as long as you can remember. You've been actively involved in sf/f/ fandom — did you write fan fiction?

NM: Not really. I did win the Thylacon short story competition with a piece on GoH Marianne de Pierre's Parrish Pleisis (I believe the contention of the competition was to show Parrish in a real-world situation that would test her in some way — I gave poor Parrish a mammogram, cause NOTHING tests a woman like that!). My fiction has pretty much always been original. There's always been things I've been a fan of that I based things on — I was big on space opera in the 80s, for example, cause of Star Wars and Star Trek — but I wrote my own space opera (and I'm still trying to devise the perfect vehicle for that character — Cassandra will have her day in the sun!). I also did my obligatory elves/dwarves story from my love of LOTR, but that's morphed into a world that again I haven't found the right vehicle for, but when I do ...



AC: You have been a teacher and journalist, so you have always been writing. When did you decide to make the break from paid employment and concentrate on writing as a career? Many authors advise not to do this until one has a string of publications (and royalties), so when you decided to take the risk, was this a moment that was scary, a release, or perhaps a combination of these? What was the impetus to take the plunge?

NM: I haven't totally taken the plunge — I still work. What I did, though, was make the decision to move from jobs such as the above which, as you said, involve writing and go into easier jobs, part time. I've found that I only have so many words or so much creativity within me, and when the job is taking them up then my writing suffers.

The impetus really began with a blog post Cat Sparks did a few years ago about regret. That started a series of blogs I did called Operation No Regrets, where I made a promise to myself to do all those things that you always want to do but never get around to doing. That triggered something in my brain, and I realised that if I got to the end of my life and was never published at novel length, I didn't want to have to say to myself "Maybe if I'd tried harder, maybe if I'd done this or

done that..." There are lots of reasons why someone doesn't get published, but I didn't want lack of effort or ambition to be the one for me. So when I left journalism I took a job in a supermarket and gave myself two years. If I felt that I was on the right track, I'd keep going. If, after two years of consistent and applied effort it was clear I didn't have what it took to be a published novelist, then I'd give it up as an ambition in my life and find something else to focus on.

I worked professionally — I didn't have a lot of time off, sat down and wrote at least three hours every day I had off work and sometimes on the days I did (depending on shifts). Less than 18 months later, I sold the trilogy to HarperVoyager, so I guess I did the right thing.

AC: In your book, *Secret Ones*, you have combined numerous elements of the real world and of your own creation. How did the story evolve? Was it from a character demanding his, or her story be told, or a 'what if...?' moment?

NM: People will groan, but it started as a dream. I saw a woman, working in a university, in a relationship with a dreamy hunk of a man but she was keeping a secret from him — she could do magic. However, I couldn't just keep it at that. I myself have issues with suspension of disbelief when I'm asked to just imagine that this is the real world, but now it has vampires or wizards or whatever (not that I hate those sorts of book — Harry Potter is fabbo, as is Anita Blake and I loooooove Keri Arthur). However, for me to be able to write, I had to believe what I was writing. So I came up with the concept of the gadda being from a different set of ancestors to us humans, and as a result they have access to the energy of the world and can do things with it that we poor powerless humans can't. I also decided that the gadda were keeping themselves secret — just imagine how this world would react if we suddenly found there were people here who could do magic? — and so they live amongst us, as us, but there's also this whole culture of their own that they are dealing with.

I've always had this thing about having to know why something is so, and have an explanation for it. At uni, I was known as Ms Relevance — I was constantly questioning why we were doing something, what it meant for teachers and students in the classroom. That's where this has all come from.

AC: I don't think anyone should groan about inspiration coming from dreams. Just about every author I know (myself included) has dreams that lead to stories... Can you describe how the sale for your trilogy came about and the moment you received "the call"?

NM: It was actually "the email". For some reason that even now escapes me, I decided to go about submitting myself rather than getting an agent (I can hear people yelling control freak at me and I'll just tell those people to go away...) So I started to query publishers — here in Oz, in US and electronic.

I was getting fabulous rejections (really, they were great) and so I kept going. I queried Stephanie Smith at HarperVoyager (I know, they don't receive unagented submissions but I was feeling arsey and hoped that knowing Stephanie from the convention circuit would mean she wouldn't immediately boil me in a burst of flame) and she said she was interested in reading the manuscript. I sent it, and waited. That was May.

It was July 4 2009 when I opened my email and saw the header on Gmail from Stephanie — Dear Nicole, I loved your manuscript... I think I might have cried. From that point, it was a very short eleven days until the trilogy passed acquisitions at HarperCollins and I had made the step from wannabe to professional. Very short, and yet the eleven most nerve-wracking and insane and longest days of my life. I could go on for hours, but I won't. Just feel sorry for my friends and family, who had to deal with a raving lunatic for most of that time.

AC: I think you told me some time ago that you had been writing this story for a long time? If so, were there moments when you thought it would never be published, and what kept you going before you received the Call?

NM: I first wrote this trilogy as a romance series with fantasy elements in 2003. Back then, I was still very much learning to write and in fact that year and this trilogy was when I taught myself to revise (note that I'm still learning — the past twelve months have been the most amazing learning curve for me).

The fact is that there were times I did almost give up. I stopped writing for a while and went into editing, cause I thought that maybe I wouldn't make it as a writer — I thought I didn't have good enough ideas, mostly — but I had the skills and maybe that was where my talents lay. I loved editing, and I certainly want to do it again.

I went into journalism, and found that such an easy fit for my writing style that I wondered if maybe that was the answer. But there are elements of journalism that don't work for me — the in-your-facedness, the inability-to-avoid-confrontations.

Throughout all this period (late 2003 to early 2009), always there niggling at me was the need to write fiction. I tried, but as I said earlier, the journalism started to suck all the stuff I needed to write fiction from me.

When I made the decision to re-dedicate myself to my fiction, I chose this trilogy to work on because I not only enjoyed it, but I felt it was the most commercially viable thing I had going. Paranormal romance and urban fantasy was growing at a rate of knots, so why not work on my version of that? Especially since I'd come to realise that romance is my most comfortable genre to write it.

AC: You have written an unusual story, a blend of romantic urban fantasy with settings in Ireland and Australia, drawing on the familiar and twisting it to make it unfamiliar: for example -- the gadda and their society that secretly exists alongside the world of humans. But the gadda aren't omnipotent — they are beholden to the council of the gadda, the bardria, and the rules of the gadda which are policed by the six guardians: - Sabhamir, Heasimir, Garramir, Firimir, Coiremir and Ceamir. The gadda are based in the Irish town of Sclossin, in the county of Leitrim. You have rivalry between the gadda families — the Purists and the Humanists whose ideologies make them opponents, if not fierce rivals for political power among the ruling gadda council. Readers may not be familiar with Irish traditions, can you explain how much of this world is invention and how much you drew on existing myth, legend or fairy tale to colour your creation. As a reader, I felt that the Irish connection was well done, seamlessly woven into the narrative, and I wasn't sure what was invented and what might be 'real'. Or perhaps it is all invention, but because it is so real to you that this has carried on to me, as reader?

NM: I'm so glad you found it real. The large majority of all this is my own invention, but once I made the decision to make the gadda of Irish ancestry, it gave me a rich pool to dip my toe in from time to time.

I'd come up with the idea of the gadda being from different ancestors, and I tried to make them be Australian but couldn't get my head around that and our indigenous peoples and their mythology. So, I then thought if humans come from Africa, what's the opposite of that and immediately had a vision of rolling green hills and mist.

Choosing Ireland then made a lot of sense when you considered the rich culture of magic and mythology from there and I thought: what better place for a secret race able to do magic to be from? Looking at it from that perspective — that the

gadda were there first, and therefore probably the inspiration for most Celtic mythology — meant that borrowing from Irish tradition and mythology became quite organic. I could take what I wanted and present it as the truth of the gadda, knowing it didn't have to match what is now known because that's the human version of these ideas.

I often find that when you have a problem you have to solve, the solution lies within what you've already created and you just have to delve deeper to find it. The whole process of creating a world, characters and the storyline to depict them is interlinked and quite organic.



Nicole Murphy

Photo by Cat Sparks

AC: You have a long history with speculative fiction, both as a fan and professionally, as your bio attests, (see details at the end of this interview), how did you get into fandom and have you any highlights in your fannish activities that you'd like to share with readers of the *Specusphere*?

NM: Discovering fandom, the rich talent of people within the science fiction industry here in Australia and making the wonderful friends I have has been the undoubted highlight of my life. These are my people — my kin, the ones who think like me, who see the world like me. I have a freedom to be myself here that I've never found anywhere else, and it's empowered me to be more myself elsewhere in my life. I hate to think where I'd be if I hadn't stumbled on the call for stories for *Machinations*, the second CSFG anthology, in 2002.

For my entrée into fandom proper, I point the blame squarely at Donna Hanson. I was kinda new of conventions, but it hadn't clicked that there would be any in Australia or that I could attend (I tend to be quite slow at that sort of thing).

Donna and I had become friends through the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild (CSFG) — which is more a writing, editing, artistic group than fandom. We'd helped each other polish stories for *Machinations*. When Donna took over as the chair of the first Conflux convention (2004 Natcon), she asked me to run the short story competition, so there it began.

I fell in love with conventions that year, and so became a bit of a fixture on the Conflux committee (so much so that last year I was still honoured as a committee member, even though I really wasn't and just acted more as a sounding board for the chair, Karen Herkes, than anything else).

My highlight? Undoubtedly it was chairing Conflux 4 in 2007. Boy, that was a hard, hard gig — I estimated once that I worked more than a thousand hours on that convention, including two weeks full time in the lead-up. Was it a perfect convention? No. Would I ever do it again? No. Do I regret doing it? Absolutely not. I did the very best I could, and at the end of the day people left the convention with a smile on their face and they rushed to sign up for the next con and really, as a con organiser, that's all you can ask for.

AC: Each of the characters in *The Secret Ones* has weaknesses and strengths. They make mistakes; they resist their destiny. Lucas, the hero, is one such character who has overcome a violent and delinquent past to achieve international success through his scientific work. You're not afraid to allow your characters to have "human" failings. How important is it as a writer to have characters that are shades of grey rather than the traditional hero/heroine who is almost too good to be true? Did you enjoy writing your villains as much (or more) than your heroes?

NM: Excuse me while I squeal with delight that you see the characters this way. It's really important to me that they have failings, cause otherwise I as a writer have nothing to work with. Where's the conflict? Where's the place I'm going to test that person? Where's the interest for anyone?

You mentioned Lucas. I know that for myself, I've had a default programming that I fall back on in times of stress or trouble (I'm trying to change it cause it's not a very helpful default). Once I had Lucas come from the background he has (every good romantic hero has some sort of darkness in his background), it made sense he would have a default way of dealing with the world that he would fall back on and his past is so different to everyone else that it would cause conflict. That's the type of thing that helps a writer make the most normal scene interesting. In Lucas' case, it helped make the scene where Maggie reveals the truth of his ancestry much more dramatic than if he didn't automatically react like that and just went 'OK, what now?' Boy, it's hard to answer some questions without spoilers.

I am absolutely committed to making sure that every character has light and shade, both heroes and villains. I'm working on book three now, and this is where some of the villains of the trilogy really come to the fore and I'm working hard to make sure that they seem human and real and aren't caricatures. Because it's easy to just have someone be all bad — but having good within them, or getting across the sense that they see their bad as good, that's where you have the potential for conflict and that's what all good stories are — conflict and resolution.

AC: Have you any advice for new writers, or writers who are still chasing that elusive publishing contract? I also noticed that you are a member of a writing group called **Fantasy Writers on Retreat**. How important do you think it is for a writer to have the support of such a group?

NM: New writers and writers still chasing the contract are two different sets, I think, so I'll deal with them both.

New writers — keep writing. Keep learning. Go to courses. Find critique groups and give and receive feedback. Accept that when you start, despite whatever talents you have, you are currently not that good a writer, but you can be. Writing is a craft that, if you have the talent and the perseverance, you can learn to a level high enough to achieve publication. And know that you never stop learning. I'm a better writer now than I was twelve months ago. I'll be a better writer again by the end of the next project.

Writers chasing a contract — Educate yourself about the realities of the publishing industry. Understand that it may not matter how good you are — sometimes you write the right story at the wrong time. Sometimes you're writing the wrong

story. Sometimes the publisher is having a bad day and they just can't grasp your story. If despite all this you still want to keep writing and keep submitting, then do it. And get yourself a group of supportive friends and colleagues. I've got the Fantasy Writers on Retreat group — a mix of up-and-comers and experienced professionals. They have been invaluable to me, if only for patting me on the hand and telling me that no, I'm not mad — I'm just a professional writer now. And if you don't have trusted beta readers, people to read your manuscript and give you honest and thorough feedback, then get some NOW.

AC: Will you be attending Worldcon this year in Melbourne?

NM: Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I'm sick of hearing friends crap on about how fabulous Worldcon is, but attending overseas has been out of my reach. I'm so excited about having so many people in the one place, people from all over the world. I'm very excited about the opportunity to showcase the incredible, amazing talent here in Australia.

There's also an overwhelming sense of terror. When I joined up to go, I was a fan. In fact, I was on the committee. Now, I'm going as a professional writer, with a book out, and it will be my first con in that role. Does that change things? I don't know. Does not knowing terrify me? You betcha!

AC: Is there anything else you would like to mention to readers?

NM: That I will love them forever if they buy the book. Seriously. Your name will be printed on my heart for all eternity. The tattooist probably won't like it, but that's their problem.

To follow the genesis of this trilogy, read the instalments at:

<http://nicolermurphy.com/blog.aspx>

The Secret Ones is due in July, 2010, with the remaining two titles scheduled for release in 2011.

Nicole, we at the Specusphere wish you all the very best with your books and career.

Nicole Murphy Biography

Nicole has been telling stories for as long as she can remember and been writing them down since primary school. Her two main occupations thus far in her life — teaching and journalism — have taught her a great deal about writing. As a teacher, having to explain the nuances of story to young children helped to hone the information in her mind. As a journalist, Nicole has won awards for her writing (in particular a series of articles on mental illness) and has interviewed people such as Gary McDonald, Noeline Brown and Roy Billing. She quit journalism in 2008 to focus on her fiction writing.

Nicole has had more than a dozen short stories published, the most recent in *Scary Kisses*, a paranormal romance anthology from Ticonderoga Publishing. She has worked in the speculative fiction industry as an editor and edited *The Outcast* for CSFG Publishing (including the Aurealis Award nominated horror short "Woman Train") and Issue 25 of *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, both published in 2006.

Nicole is also active in fandom. She has been on the organising committee for the first five Conflux conventions, including chairing Conflux 4 in 2007 and programming Conflux 5 in 2008. She was involved with the organising committee for Aussiecon 4, the 2010 Worldcon in Melbourne (quitting when she got the deal for her urban fantasy trilogy *The Dream of Asarlai*) and is a long-time member of the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild (CSFG).

She is a member of the Fantasy Writers on Retreat writing group, which includes Trudi Canavan, Russell Kirkpatrick, Matthew Farrer, Cat Sparks, Donna Hanson and Kylie Seluka.

Nicole lives in Queanbeyan with her husband Tim, a computer programmer who happens to be one of the top croquet players in Australia and has just captained NSW to victory in the interstate cup.

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