

Catch Up With Author Clea Simon

Learn more about the inspiration behind her latest book series, "Shades of Grey."

By Stacy N. Hackett

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1. What inspired you to write "Shades of Grey"?

Have you ever lost a pet? Do you remember how, in the days or weeks afterward, you were sure you saw your beloved kitty? I remember how I felt when we had to put my wonderful Cyrus to sleep. I kept seeing him — everywhere. And it wasn't weird or scary, it was strangely comforting, like he was still around, like he would come to me if I needed him. So that was the core of "Shades of Grey": A young woman is in trouble and out of no where the ghost of her late, great cat, Mr. Grey, shows up to warn her and to try to guide her to safety.

2. What type of feedback have you received about "Shades of Grey" so far?

Readers — particularly readers who have loved and lost a pet — have loved it. Some critics have taken exception to its slower pace. It's a cuddle-up and read book, rather than a thrill-a-minute mystery, but that's OK. I wanted this to be the kind of friendly ghost story you could really savor. (My editor loves the series, by the way, so in a way that's the best feedback!)

3. Does casting Mr. Grey as a ghost give you more freedom with his character? If yes, how so?

Clea Simon and her cat Musettalt does, because I feel free to have Mr. Grey speak and also to have knowledge of events that he did not witness. The trick, for me, is to not have him give away too much. I mean, he's a ghost, he could tell Dulcie what's going on right from the start and there would be no mystery. But I figure I have an out because he's also a cat, and cats are not direct. They like to hint, drop clues and then nap. That gives me more leeway!

4. Will there be more books about Mr. Grey and Dulcie Schwartz?

Yes, there will. This spring, in fact, will see them return in "Grey Matters." It has already been published in the U.K. and will be published in the United States in April.

5. What can we expect next from Dulcie?

As "Grey Matters" opens, Dulcie is on her way to her thesis adviser's house when she literally stumbles over a body. The dead person, a fellow grad student, had secrets. But so does Dulcie's professor, her officemate, her roommate/best friend, and maybe even her boyfriend....

6. Why did you decide to write a new series centering around cats?

All my mysteries have cats in them, but I wanted to stretch a little bit. I love reading book-within-book types of mysteries, and I thought it would be fun to try one. Also, even though so many books were delving into the supernatural or paranormal, nobody else seemed to be writing about ghost cats — and that experience of "seeing" my departed pet was still very strong with me. I knew other people would understand that, and I wanted to see how that could play out in a story.

7. Do your current pets inspire certain characters in your books?

Yes, indeed! I don't want to give anything away, but both my dear, departed Cyrus and my current kitty, a black-and-white named Musetta, play a role in both the Mr. Grey books. And Musetta is pretty much the real heroine of my Theda Krakow books. I'm not Theda, but Musetta is Musetta for sure!

8. Will you continue to write the Theda Krakow series?

I'm not sure. To some extent, it depends on my publisher. I am very fond of those characters, but I needed a break. That said, I may wake up some morning with a Theda story I just have to write, in which case, I'll talk my publisher into it! Never say never.

9. Do you have any other series planned? Can you tell us a little bit about them?

Well, I'm not sure if it is a series — partly because I can only write one book at a time — but I am now working on a sort-of tongue-in-cheek "noir" or "hard-boiled" mystery. I was reading a lot of tough-girl noir mysteries and it all came together in my head with the kind of cozy/cat mysteries that I enjoy writing, and I came up with the idea of a bad-girl animal psychic.

She hates her gift, but she uses it to help animals, and her sidekick is an irascible older tabby named Wallis who gives her a lot of attitude. It's tentatively called "Dogs Don't Lie," and I hope to have more news about it soon!

Stacy N. Hackett shares her Southern California home with two adorable Cornish Rex cats, Carson and Evita, and a playful tabby named Jackson.