

# Sample Interview with Jean Burgess:

## **As an introduction, give us a little information about yourself.**

I am a writer of both fiction and nonfiction, a playwright, and a former actor, director, and theater educator. While I love all things theater-related and literary, I'm also a birdwatching nerd and a lover of the Chesapeake Bay and Maryland's Eastern Shore! I hold an MA in Theatre from Northwestern University and PhD from New York University.

## **Tell us about your writing/published book(s).**

I write both fiction and nonfiction. My nonfiction, *Collaborative Stage Directing: A Guide to Creating and Managing a Positive Theatre Environment*, was published by Routledge/ Taylor & Francis in 2019. My debut fiction, *That Summer She Found Her Voice: A Retro Novel*, was published by Apprentice House Press in April 2024. The sequel, *Navigating Her Next Chapter: A Retro Novel*, will also be published by Apprentice House and will be released Spring 2026.

## **Where's your favorite place to write?**

My office/library. I like to be surrounded by vision boards, character descriptions, and word lists I've created to assist and prompt me in my writing. However, when I'm stuck on a plot point, I take a pad of paper and pen outside on my lovely deck. Often the sunshine and fresh air is exactly what I need to find a new perspective.

## **How do you approach starting a new book?**

For historical (or what I'm calling "retro") fiction, I begin by diving into research and creating a vision board. Pictures of the dress, hairstyles, furnishings, brands, and automobiles of the era work wonders as far as stimulating ideas and the all-important "what if" questions for me. Also, I do a lot of backstory work with character development and relationship building before I begin plotting out my story. And yes, I depend on an outline. I'm not a "pantser" although I allow my outline to breathe and deviate, if you will.

## **What's your favorite genre to read?**

I love historical fiction but also dabble in mystery and suspense. For nonfiction, I enjoy biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs as well as historical books. And let's not forget my background. I read plays including Shakespeare and books about theater craft.

## **Have you always wanted to write?**

Not really. During the late 1980s and through the 2000s, I did write and publish academic articles, as part of my teaching career, but never considered writing a book. I didn't have much faith in my writing. It wasn't until I wrote my dissertation, "A History of the Young People's Theater at Center Stage, Baltimore, Maryland: 1963-1984" in 1999-2002 that I began to have confidence in my researching abilities and the skills involved in a larger project.

## **What do you do when you have writer's block?**

On the rare occasion that I get writer's block (a term I really dislike), I step away from the computer. A short walk will often provide the "reset" I need to start fresh. What happens more often than writer's block to me is that I'll get stuck on how I want to express an idea/a moment/a plot point. In that case, I use a short meditation, setting the intention for clarity before I begin.

This may sound strange but I can't tell you how often this has worked for me. I also use my vision boards to stimulate my thought process.

**Tell us about a scene that you loved but had to edit out of your book.**

My current fiction, *That Summer She Found Her Voice*, takes place in 1978. Early drafts included an epilogue that jumped ahead 15 years with the intention of showing the reader how the protagonist had progressed. After continuing to revise and strengthen the entire book, a beta reader recommended cutting the epilogue. At first I was shocked! But after reviewing from a fresh perspective and an open mind, I realized that the epilogue was no longer needed.

**Do you write under a pen name? If so, tell us about how you chose it.**

No pen name for me.

**How do you choose your book's title(s)?**

Book titles are tough. They have to hook potential readers enough to at least get them to read the back cover blurb. I choose my titles by being thoughtful about every single word.

**What advice would you give to someone wanting to write their first book?**

Get it down into a first draft. Expect to write more drafts. Find honest Beta readers who are not your best friends or family members. Revise. Revise again. Understand that this is a process that is not to be rushed.

**Do you do research for your books? If so, what kind of research?**

Yes because my novels are historically based fiction so research is required. That research may take the form of online searches, library archives, historical society visits, site visits, and/or interviews. My nonfiction, *Collaborative Stage Directing*, is a text that required a survey questionnaire sent to experts in the field to gather data as well as secondary source research on communication and leadership skills that I then applied to the craft of directing.

**How do you fit writing into your everyday life?**

I'm in the delightful life position where my time is my own. Still, for the sake of self-discipline, I need to schedule blocks of time specially devoted to writing. Do Not Disturb, Please!

**How do you approach writing characters?**

I believe my background as an actor, director, and playwright has helped me immensely with writing characters. When I performed professionally, I was known as a character actor – playing a wide range of roles with different accents and backgrounds. This training has been invaluable in my writing.

**How do you approach "world building?"**

I have a template that I have created by combining elements from several templates found online. I pulled the elements that made the most sense for my genre. Additionally, I utilize vision boards, word lists, character backstory creation, and other tools, depending on my current story. I'm a big believer in putting in what I call "the headwork."

**How do you handle criticism?**

I prefer to think of it as constructive feedback, since the word "criticism" has such a negative vibe. I'm open to hearing constructive feedback from other authors, publishers, and my editor, of course. My method in dealing with feedback is to reflect on it for a few days and then return to the manuscript to decide if a change is needed and what is the best way to implement it.

**Describe your perfect character.**

Whether reading or writing, I love a character who is quirky, slightly flawed, maybe rudderless, but trying to get it together and find a path.

**Tell me about your current work.**

My latest fiction in my Retro series is *Navigating Her Next Chapter: A Retro Novel*. It's the sequel (although it can be read as a standalone) to *That Summer She Found Her Voice*, where readers will continue to follow Margie Stevens' career and personal journey. It takes place a few years later from 1981 through 1983 as she tackles New York City. She befriends a cross-section of interesting characters while exploring career options in the Big Apple and faces some difficult life challenges along the way. It reads as if the TV series "Friends" was set in 1980s NYC. *Navigating Her Next Chapter: A Retro Novel* will be published by Apprentice House Press in the Spring of 2026.

My debut novel was retro themed and very close to my heart. It is filled with music and self-discovery and 1970s topics that resonate even today. *That Summer She Found Her Voice: A Retro Novel* is set against a backdrop of 1970s music and tells the story of 23-year-old Margie Stevens as she pulls herself out of a heartbreak-induced depression and begins a journey of discovery. Clarifying her views on emerging feminism, social injustice, and spirituality - all while touring across the country with King Video's Swing Band – Margie finally finds the courage to face her fears and use her authentic voice.

**Tell me about your main character.**

Margie is in a vulnerable place when readers meet her in book one, *That Summer She Found Her Voice*. She is bright and talented but hasn't developed her inner strength or belief in herself. At 23, she is still influenced by her parents' values, afraid to assert her own opinions or make her own decisions.

In book two, readers see a stronger Margie but she will face extremely challenging situations in an already challenging environment: New York City circa early 1980s. The question will be how a young woman from a small town on Maryland's Eastern Shore will navigate this unfamiliar terrain.

**Would book clubs like your books?**

Absolutely. Themes of voicelessness, racial intolerance, and questions about religion during the late 1970s that continue to be relevant today found in *That Summer She Found Her Voice* have been popular with book clubs. In fact, I've included Topics for Discussion in the back of the book. I've enjoyed visiting book clubs and sitting in on the discussions as well as making myself available for a Q & A. *Navigating Her Next Chapter: A Retro Novel* also offers book clubs great starting points for discussions with its themes of fear of change, stressful family dynamics,

challenges of addiction, overcoming a friend's death, establishing independence. My hope is that both of these novels become a catalyst for conversation.

**Would you want your book made into a film or TV Series?**

Who wouldn't? Similar to Tom Hanks' *That Thing You Do* movie and even the new *Daisy Jones and the Six* television series, a film version of *That Summer She Found Her Voice* would give audiences a retro backstage peek at the touring world but with the addition of the coming-of-age story of a young woman. There are so many great visual elements in this book that would lend themselves to film, such as the way the band travels, the beauty of the U.S., the various band venues as well as Margie's hometown on the Maryland's Eastern Shore and the band's headquarters in Baltimore's Little Italy neighborhood. Plus, the book has an intriguing criminal subplot but...spoilers!

And I could picture *Navigating Her Next Chapter: A Retro Novel* as a limited TV/cable series with its vintage New York City landmarks like the Greenwich Village clubs, neighborhood diners and cafes, Off Off Broadway theaters, and the iconic Radio City Music Hall. All I need is an agent to make me those deals, right?