

Lori L Lake Interview by DK Ward



"There is a concept in American literature that talking about your life is confessional and therefore for women. But all fiction writers use everything. We steal people and stories. And if life has messed with you repeatedly, then you ought to write it down. Everyone in the world has a story, a secret, a sneaky desire for vengeance."
-Dorothy Allison -

Lori L. Lake is the author of **Snow Moon Rising**, a novel of survival set during World War 2. She is the creator of the "Gun" series, which is a trilogy consisting of romance/police procedurals **Gun Shy** and **Under The Gun** and the adventure/thriller **Have Gun We'll Travel**, which was a 2006 Golden Crown Literary Award Finalist. Her first novel, **Ricochet In Time**, was about a hate crime. She edited **The Milk of Human Kindness: Lesbian Authors Write About Mothers and Daughters**, which was a Lambda Literary Award Finalist anthology. She's published a standalone romance, **Different Dress**, a book of short stories, **Stepping Out**, and co-edited **Romance For Life**, an anthology of romantic stories which benefits the fight against breast cancer. A second collection of short pieces, **Shimmer & Other Stories**, will be published in November, 2007.

Lori teaches fiction writing at The Loft Literary Center, the largest independent writing community in the nation. She was recently named a 2007 recipient of the Alice B Readers Award, and **Snow Moon Rising** was a 2007 Golden Crown Literary Award Winner as well as the 2007 Ann Bannon Popular Choice Winner. Lori lives south of St. Paul, Minnesota, with her partner of 26 years. She is currently at work on her next novel.

Who is Lori L. Lake?

Lori L. Lake: Lori L. Lake is the pen name I chose about seven years ago. When I first posted femme/slash fanfic to [MaryD's XWP site](#), I went by "Lorelei, Bard of the Lakes." In mythology, Lorelei was one of the Rhine Maidens who were river nymphs known for supposedly luring navigators and fishermen to their dooms with their alluring

songs, much like the ancient Greek Sirens did. I wasn't singing, per se, but I hoped I'd manage to somehow lure people into my fictional tales. I can't imagine being called by another first name too much different than Lori, though, so I stuck with it. My real-life Scottish/Irish surname means "People of the Lake." So Lorelei, Bard of the Lakes, worked nicely online, and I chose to be Lori L. Lake when it came time to pick a pseudonym for my published works.

What are the five most important words to you and why?

LL: As I write, the word I find myself needing and using most is some form of the word LOOK - looked, looking, looks... I'm constantly trying to find alternatives for that word, both as a noun and verb. In combination, I find myself asking these five words all the time: "What the hell happened here?" Often it's just in my mind and not necessarily spoken out loud, but it applies to life, writing, making mistakes, world events, etc. In a women's studies class once in my grad program, a very astute professor once said to me, "Don't ask why - ask: 'Where have I seen this before?' " That's sort of a version of "What the hell happened here?" which examines the puzzle of human activities, emotions, crimes, and misdemeanors as we try to understand the quirky things that occur in our lives.

If God does exist, what are the three questions you would ask him?

LL: I only get three questions? <g> And why would God necessarily be a him? I've never understood why people are so intent on casting God as male. (Or the devil as male, for that matter.) I think of God as a Force - a spiritual Force, that is - not as a gender. I suppose if God is all-powerful, then an appearance before a person could be manifested as either male or female (or both!), but in my estimation, God simply has to have ALL the gender-assigned qualities: strength *and* vulnerability; power *and* gentleness; logic *and* feeling; fatherliness *and* motherliness; etc.

Anyway, I'm not sure I can think of three questions out of the blue. I'd probably ask about Free Will vs. Destiny and go from there.

Would you tell us how you became Associate Editor and Manager of Lesbian Fiction Herstory at JAW?

LL: I've been friends with Nann Dunne since the late 1990s, and when she decided to create an online magazine, it didn't take much for her to talk me into joining the party. Nann is very organized, and she's always put the entire JustAboutWrite.com online herself. My role has been to track people down, get materials, encourage people to submit, and write a few articles here and there. I can't even remember how come my Herstory pieces ended up featured at JAW. I only know that when Radclyffe, Jean Stewart, Jane Fletcher, and I were prepping to present the "The Lesbian Romantic Hero and The Plot She Thrives In" back in 2004 in Washington, D.C., I got very interested in

re-acquainting myself with lesbian literary history - or the lack thereof. I'd studied some women's history in college, but I was keen to revisit it, specifically from a lesbian viewpoint. So I've written five parts so far which stretch from Sappho through the 1940s. I keep meaning to get back to that and do the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Other than never having *enough* time to do it, what is the most difficult thing you find about writing?

LL: I hate to bring up the dreaded word, money, but truly, that is the most difficult thing to deal with - much more aggravating than trying to find time to write. Unfortunately, writing doesn't really pay a decent living, particularly not in smaller niches such as the field of lesbian writing. I give thanks every day for my partner, the financial wizard. She teaches school, so it's not like she earns zillions of dollars either, but somehow she's kept us on track, on budget, so that I've been able to write full-time since December, 2002. Still, I've picked up a lot of side jobs -- teaching, editing, making presentations -- to make ends meet. I wish I didn't have to do any of that.

Naming inanimate objects is one of your quirks, would you tell us a few more?

LL: Of my quirks? Or the inanimate objects? <snicker>

Let's see, what are my quirks? I suppose it's odd that I'd rather eat Cheezits than a fine meal at a restaurant. I get razzed all the time because I drive a Toyota mini-van instead of a racy sports car or a butchy SUV. Those don't seem too interesting, though. I just asked my partner what my quirks are and she mentions two. First, she says I'm always pointing out spelling errors and bad grammar, particularly on signs and in the newspaper (apparently that's irritating to her - go figure! <g>); and then she claims that I'm not just quirky but downright weird because I don't like fresh air. Now she's exaggerating about the latter item. I do like the outdoors - but there are times during the year when the allergens are so heavy that I prefer they get filtered through the AC or heating system so they don't affect me so terribly. It's not a quirk to have allergies, but wow, do I ever have them bad: animals, trees, grass, cigarette smoke, dust, mold, you name it - I'm probably allergic to it. Diane claims I'm just saying all that to avoid dusting and mowing the lawn.

Otherwise, I have no quirks!

In your article "A Thirst To Be Quenched", you talk about the lack of role models in GLBT history. Who do you consider, today, to be of that standard? And would you deem yourself a role model?

LL: Throughout history, I am positive there have been many, many amazing lesbian role models, but the vast majority of them are lost to history because their stories and exploits were not written down or were instead attributed to others. In addition, the lesbians who made notable accomplishments - the ones that couldn't be ignored - were cloaked in secrecy or false cover stories.

Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909), for instance, was a celebrated late 19th/early 20th century writer. One of her novels, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, is often read in both high school and college English classes and is considered a masterpiece of "local color," community, family, and friendship. What I was never told when I read it, however, is that Jewett was a lesbian, in a "Boston marriage" with Annie Fields, which lasted from the death of Fields' husband in 1881 until Jewett died in 1909. After her death, Annie Fields attempted to get their letters published only to be told that they must be edited to take out the passion and love that Sarah and Annie professed for one another.

It's nearly 100 years later, and Jewett's novels are still in print (an amazing feat), but not many people know about her relationship with Fields. This is the sort of obfuscation that has hidden or obliterated lesbians throughout history.

Today, there are so many more role models. Obviously, the ones who get a lot of media attention are the most visible: Ellen DeGeneres, Melissa Etheridge, and Rosie O'Donnell. I can't imagine how much pressure there must be for them. Mainstream literary and pop fiction writers tend to keep a low profile, but there are others who have carved out niches for themselves without having to minimize the existence of their sexual orientations: Sarah Waters, Ellen Hart, Ann Bannon, Katherine V. Forrest, and many others.

It's tempting to say that I'm not a role model because being a role model nowadays seems to imply a fair amount of notoriety and fame. Outside a very small circle of writers and readers, I'm not well known --- call me a very tiny guppy in an overwhelmingly large ocean --- but there is a small cadre of readers and writers to whom I am a role model. It's important to me that we affirm and share lesbian writing. I figure if we don't do it, our contributions and the facts of our lives will eventually be lost from history as well.

That's truly fascinating. How do you find this information on these women of our history such as Fields and Jewett?

LL: I can't remember how I happened onto Jewett's circumstances. Maybe via a news story or while surfing the Net. I'm always running into little clues, and often I check further to find out what the real story is. In August I saw that Madeleine B. Stern died. She wrote a number of books, but the ones I know her for include a biography of Alcott and at least one book of essays about Alcott's writing and life called *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home*. Turns out that Ol' Louisa was NOT just a writer of sentimental, G-Rated children's books, but also wrote lurid "blood and thunder tales" under various pen names. Truth be told, until she hit it big with *Little Women*, the stories she sold under pseudonyms are what gave her an income. Stern, a talented scholar and critic, managed to unearth much of Alcott's anonymous writings and those Alcott had published under pen names.

Stern died recently at age 95 after living for approximately 70 years with Leona Rostenberg, whom she first met in 1929, then became reacquainted with in grad school at Columbia. They moved in together in the early 1930s and were partners in *Rostenberg &*

Stern Rare Books for over fifty years. Both were legendary in the world of antiquarian book-dealing. Books were their life. They claimed at one point not to be lesbians, but practically everyone who's ever been asked says that the two women had a deep and abiding love for one another. Neither married. They never parted until Rostenberg died in 2005. I don't know what went on behind closed doors, but whether the two of them had a "Boston Marriage" or not, I claim them as part of the lesbian literary heritage.

It seems to me that if a woman was smart and talented and literary, she often had to hide her sexual orientation and relationships. Even if a woman DID want to let the world know she loved a woman, the historians cut that right out of the story as in the case of Fields/Jewett. Who knows how many great writers have been lesbian, but were forced to hide it or had their real lives, their real loves suppressed.

That is truly saddening to think about, and I'm glad we live in a day and age where we can be more open and accepted. Which leads me to wonder why some of us feel we must acquire this acceptance from a society that would rather not know about us or change our history to suit *them*. Have you ever felt you had to conform to society?

LL: Oh, yeah! Practically every day.

You've recently won three awards at the Golden Crown Literary Society Conference in Atlanta, what was that like?

LL: It was rather like a dream come true, actually. The whole awards ceremony sort of blew by, and I was rather in shock. I think the best moment was when *Snow Moon Rising* won the Ann Bannon Popular Choice Award, and I got to go up on stage and receive the award from Ann herself. She gave me a big hug, and I was just gob-smacked. It was an amazing night.

There has been numerous praise for *Gun Shy*, and countless questions asked answered. I'm not sure I have anything new to add, but I was wondering where you think you'd be now if not for the publication of that book. Would you have tried on another? Or worked harder to see that particular book published?

LL: I originally posted *Gun Shy* online and never expected it to be published at all. I'd already written *Ricochet In Time*, and that book had been rejected by all the lesbian presses that were open back then. I was pretty well demoralized by that, so with *Gun Shy*, I was writing for myself - and my partner - with no expectations. MaryD was good enough to post the parts of the story for the online Xenaverse readership, and everything took off from there. I didn't work at all to get *Gun Shy* published. The offer came to me without me soliciting it. Maybe the Universe decided I'd been through enough after the *Ricochet In Time* debacle.

On the Golden Crown Literary Society (GCLS) message board, you recently commented on Fan Fiction, and its impact in the publishing world. Would you talk about it here for our readers?

LL: A lot of lesbian writers were inspired by various fandoms (*Xena: Warrior Prince*, *X-Files*, *Buffy*, *Babylon Five*, *Highlander*, the various *Star Treks*, etc.). Many writers learned the tricks of the trade writing fan fiction, posting it online, getting feedback about the work, and making connections that eventually led to print publication. Other writers merely read the online work, enjoyed it, and were inspired in that way. There are scads of readers all over the world, some of whom can't afford to buy books, but who are hooked up to the Internet so that they're able to access the fan fiction. It's a fertile and vital community of readers and writers, and I've met a multitude of wonderful people through it. The impact on the lesbian publishing world was and is pretty amazing. Up until the late 1990s, there was Naiad for pop fiction, and there were a few other presses (Firebrand, Rising Tide, and New Victoria come to mind). It was fairly tough to get published. Then along came half a dozen small lesbian presses willing to take a chance on new writers. Some of the early books lacked production quality and editing, but the speed of improvement was quite notable. Writers who might not have ever been published - in fact, some who had never even *thought* of being published - were getting their work out there. It opened up a lot of possibilities for a lot of people.

I'm only half way through everything you have on the internet and already I'm impressed by your vast knowledge and willingness to share it. Have you considered writing a book on writing?

LL: Thanks for the compliment, Deven. Yes, I do plan to write a How-To book - perhaps even several. I've been collecting my thoughts, ideas, and techniques for some time. Nann Dunne keeps telling me to put a guide together, and I actually have enough material for more than one book. For one thing, I'm tempted to write a book on Point of View. If you try to find writing instruction on that topic, you'll see it's one area sadly lacking. Character building, plot, structure, setting, description, dialogue -- all of those topics have multiple books out there, but not Point of View. I also teach craft and technique workshops, and I teach at The Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. Those experiences have given me many opportunities to observe and talk about how adult learners can improve and strengthen their writing, and I'd love to have a practical guide of my own that I could use when I teach.

Would you tell us about your newest novel, *Shimmer & Other Stories*?

LL: *Shimmer* is actually a collection of five rather long stories. Would they be novellas? Novelettes? The book will be out November 10th. All five stories feature a lesbian main character in some sort of transition place in her life. The title of the collection comes from the story called "Shimmer," which is set at the time of the Stonewall Riots in New York City.

What would your “ideal” day consist of?

LL: I'm not sure I could give you just one ideal day. An ideal work day would include me cranking out about 4,000 words of easy-to-write, smooth, and flowing prose. My record, to date, is one weekend when I wrote 9,000 words in one day. But that's pretty unusual. I sort of had an ideal day last Tuesday. I wrote over 5,000 words, then connected up all the parts to a novel and finished the first draft. That's always exciting. My ideal contemplative day would take place in autumn, and I'd read for hours, perhaps write in my journal, have a good physical workout, and later walk over to the Vermillion River, stand on the bridge, and watch the water to recharge my internal batteries. An ideal day with my partner Diane would be one where we went to a double feature at the cineplex, shopped for her at the Apple store, shopped for me at a bookstore, then went to a restaurant and had great food while being waited upon by someone entertaining. We're pretty easy to please - very low-key.

Gun Shy is packed with action. Do you prefer those types of books to romance, or a little combination of both?

LL: My favorite type of entertainment/escape book is definitely action-oriented. I like mysteries, suspense, sci-fi, and fantasy with a fair amount of conflict, action, and adventure. For every romance I read, I'm likely to devour ten mysteries, some dramatic fiction, a literary classic, a sci-fi series, and a writing book or two. (I'm a voracious reader.) I've got very high expectations for romance novels. That type of book is so much harder to write than anyone realizes. "Girl meets girl, girl loses girl, girl regains love of her life" is not as simple as it would seem. In addition to that basic storyline, a good romance that I enjoy has to have a couple of decent subplots, lots of internal (and possibly external) conflict, and not much dilly-dallying around, whining and sighing. I recently read *Finders Keepers* by Karin Kallmaker and very much enjoyed the conflicts that the two characters faced. She manages to create characters who are individual and unique, but are entirely believable, as though I could meet them on the street or in the grocery store. Her writing style flows, she injects humor at the right times, and the internal and external struggles that her women face are always plausible, always compelling, always ultimately delightful. Kallmaker writes the best romances I've ever read, and I've got every one she's written.

I really like Dez and Jaylynn. They have great chemistry together. Did that come easy or did you have to work at it?

LL: I knew Dez and Jay through and through. Each of them has their own personality . . . but each of them is also half of who I am (if that makes any sense). I wrote them both as strong characters with inner demons, active inner lives, and individual temperaments, and that meant that any time they were in the room together, more often than not sparks would fly. In a sense, they each possess qualities that the other lacks, and by falling in love, they gave themselves via relationship the opportunity to learn new skills and new ways of perceiving the world.

So I didn't feel I had to work at their relationship or at the journey the two of them were on to try to find themselves and each other. In *Gun Shy*, I think I had to work harder at streamlining the events than dealing with their interactions. Their world, in my mind, is so rich and complicated and . . . well, busy!

How has your writing improved over the years?

LL: I'd like to think that my writing has improved substantially. I know my conceptualization of projects is better. I can see the structure and a lot of the scenework in advance. But I've also done a lot of work to learn to identify my bad habits such as passive language, poor grammar, awkward sentences, and bloated narrative. For years I've called myself "An Apprentice to the Craft." If I were a carpenter, at this point in time I might say I've reached Journeyman status. I'm not a Master. Yet. I'll keep working at technique and craft. I enjoy learning about it and trying to apply what I learn, and I've spent quite a bit of time sharing what I know with others. I think I learn better - cementing the ideas and concepts in my brain - when I have to explain them so someone else will understand.

What do you do different now than you did back then?

LL: From 1992 until 2001, when *Ricochet In Time* (the first novel I ever wrote), was finally published, I did fourteen drafts of that book. Fourteen drafts! Oh, Lord! Nowadays, I've been able to cut that way down. *Snow Moon Rising* was the most difficult book I ever wrote, and I did three drafts before it went to the editor, then revised the heck out of it twice more. Still, if that counts as five drafts, that's quite a bit speedier and more effective than fourteen drafts.

Besides gradually improving in the overall amount of redrafting I've had to do for each book, I think I work differently than I used to. For one thing, I try to discipline myself to write a certain number of words per day, but I also don't shame or blame myself if I can't write - for whatever reason. This week is the one year anniversary of the death of my mom, and I can honestly say that I didn't have any stamina at all for the first six months after her death. I wasn't able to start a new first draft until late March. I just didn't have it in me. So I'm more demanding of my time and focus, but I'm also more forgiving.

What are the most considerable things you noticed that are different from your first published book and the current one (other than the plot, place and characters of course)?

LL: *Gun Shy* was my first published book, followed a few weeks later by *Ricochet In Time*. If I compare those two early novels with *Snow Moon Rising*, I'd have to say that *SMR* is a much more ambitious, complex novel which required a lot more research and patience to write. Both *RIT* and *GS* are focused more intently upon the ordinary lives of two somewhat ordinary women; *SMR* is focused on the lives of extraordinary people living in extraordinary times. It's the difference between a smaller, more intimate watercolor painting and a great big giant mural covering the side of a five-story building.

And yet the books have a great deal in common, too, because at the heart of each is a pair of women trying to find meaning and love in their lives. Even when I write a dramatic novel or a historical novel, there always seems to be that thread of romance, of the search for love or lost love.

I normally go by “all things in moderation”, but in your case, I’d love to spend hours interviewing you. However, that’s not possible. So thank you, Lori for taking time out of your very busy schedule to sit down and answer these questions and I’ll close this interview as I always do: Is there anything you'd like to leave us with? Quotes of inspiration? Things we may not know about Lori L Lake?

LL: I've just spent the last eight hours with my partner and two friends crawling around on the living room rug, then on the wood floor, to rip up the carpet and padding, pull staples and nails, and drag pieces out to the curb. I believe I'm going to be extremely sore tomorrow! We're having our wood floors refinished for the first time since the house was built in 1950. Bye-bye allergy-producing carpet - hello shining red oak! One thing people don't realize about me is that I would NEVER do any kind of home improvement project like this if it weren't for Diane. She's definitely the brain-trust in that department. I can't believe all the stuff she can get done and what she believes we can do. Over the last 16 years here, she's talked me into the inside work of painting or papering every room in the house, finishing the basement into a family room, and re-doing both bathrooms, not to mention outside work like having Leaf-Guard gutters installed, widening the driveway, putting in a huge retaining wall, and getting new windows and siding. Our house is a lot more solid and comfortable. She teases me that if I lived here alone, the whole thing would just fall down around my ears.

Thanks for the entertaining time doing this interview, Deven. You asked interesting and unusual questions that made me think about a lot of things I hadn't considered. Since I've just recently watched *The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe* along with the extras that included a biography of C.S. Lewis, here's the quotation I'll leave you with:

“Whenever you are fed up with life, start writing: ink is the great cure for all human ills.”
~C.S. Lewis

I have to agree - ink has been a wonderful cure for me.

:-) Lori