

An Interview with John Desjarlais

December 2008 Featured Author

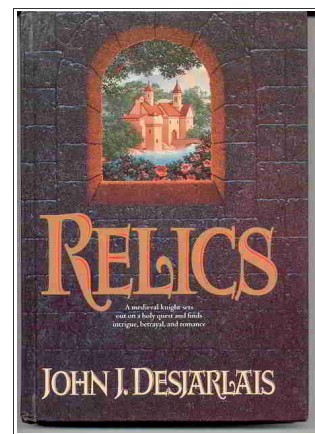
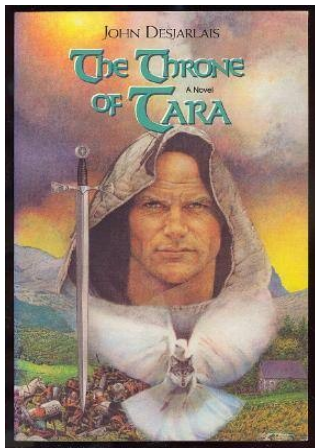
at

Time with Tannia

(<http://timewithtannia.tripod.com>)

By:

Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés



1. Tell us about yourself.

I'm an English/Journalism professor married 30 years to a counselor/therapist. The two of us are recent "reverts" to the Catholic Church; we were raised in the church but in college left, albeit finding Christ anew in evangelical circles. We were faithful Presbyterians for over 30 years and involved in professional lay ministry for about 20 years. When I started to sell fiction and publish nonfiction in magazines, I decided to become credentialed to teach writing at the college level.

2. You have earned three degrees; a BA in Radio/TV/Film, and 2 MAs: one in Media and the other in Writing. Have your university degrees influenced your writing? If yes, how?

I learned some basics about radio and TV writing with the undergraduate BA. The MA in Media is really “educational media” with an emphasis on instructional design. The Writing degree is a combination of creative writing and the teaching of writing (college rhetoric and composition in particular). This influenced me mainly by getting me to write ‘literary’ short fiction and poetry where beforehand I’d only been writing so-called ‘genre’ fiction. I studied fiction with David Foster Wallace, the brilliant postmodern novelist and essayist who tragically took his own life recently (September 12). I published most of what I wrote in his workshop. I became very interested in the way storytelling influences a culture.

3. These three degrees complement each other. How were you motivated to pursue them? Tell our readers your story and your final goal.

I should say from the get-go that it is possible to be a fine writer without degrees. My academic work is mainly directed toward gainful employment. So with the BA in Radio/TV/Film I hoped to find work in radio or television production, and I did. With the MA in educational media that followed 8 years later, with an emphasis on learning theory and instructional design, I wanted to produce quality programs with ancillary materials for Christian ministry, and I did. Then, when a recession in the early 90’s closed my job –at the time I was beginning to publish fiction – I decided to go back to grad school at age 40 and become credentialed in the teaching of writing in order to support my writing habit. So my degrees are all quite practical. I have no interest in further, formal academic work. I’d like to continue writing ‘category’ novels and ‘literary’ short fiction, and more poetry with the aim of publishing a collection sometime.

4. You undertook additional studies at two different theological seminaries. Where you considering a religious vocation? Did you find the truth and wisdom you were searching for?

I was an evangelical Protestant at the time, involved in professional lay ministry (which is to say, it was full-time and paid), and I just wanted to grow in my Christian understanding and ministry skills. I briefly considered studying for an MDiv (Master of Divinity) and becoming a pastor but I knew the day-to-day shepherding of a congregation wasn’t for me. Since I was in college ministry, I had summers mostly free, so I attended summer courses at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (Massachusetts) and Union Theological Seminary (New York). It was all for personal enrichment, really: to deepen my relationship with Christ and to be a more effective minister of the gospel. Many evangelicals who are in professional ministry do this; some get certificates and degrees and others do not.

5. You teach English and Journalism at Kishwaukee College. What do you consider the main characteristics of an outstanding journalist? How could your English courses enhance the writing abilities of your students to set them apart from the rest?

The first necessary characteristic for a fine journalist is curiosity, especially about people. As it turns out, this is a quality of good novelists, too. After this comes energy, honesty, imagination, a flair for risks and an ability to be a self-starter. The proverbial ‘nose for news’ helps. Of course, there are the critical thinking skills needed: analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating information from diverse sources. The person must communicate

well and write clearly under pressure. It takes someone with a broad liberal arts background against which to measure data – a person of sound judgment, someone who can see ‘the big picture’ but get the details right, too. The very best have compassion for individuals and a heart for social justice, and they get into the business not for ambitious gain but to serve the public interest. They are mindful of the profession’s ethical codes. Journalists who are Christians, in particular, are always to be conscious about how their work will uphold the dignity of the human person and exemplify kingdom values.

As for how my English courses – especially creative writing courses – can enhance my students’ abilities and set them apart, I’d have to say I really don’t know. There’s an old saying: you can’t teach writing but you can encourage writers. So I can define, demonstrate, and have them do exercises in craft. I can offer constructive critique. I can show them what works and what doesn’t. I can point them to good (and bad) models. Sometimes I feel I’m just a beggar telling other beggars where to find bread. What I cannot teach is desire and vision – and that makes all the difference.

I hope that when students leave one of my courses, they stand out from the rest by being able to write more disciplined, layered, and emotionally complex pieces. I hope they stop seeing creative writing as mainly a means by which to ‘express themselves’ and more as a means to ‘evoke’ a response from readers and make meaning in the world. I hope they learn to love language.

6. Public Radio is an attractive and interesting venue for others with similar academic background like yours. How did you break the ground? What are some of the myths and tales of Public Radio? Share with our readers your biggest accomplishment and your worse blooper.

The truth is that public radio can be just as competitive and ladder-climbing as commercial radio. Now, it might be different at the national level, and I’ve seen more congenial environments in other stations besides the one I was in. But the station I was at was just as celebrity-driven as the commercial radio they like to disparage.

I got in because of a good production resume and experience that outdistanced the college-aged applicants. I don’t think I had a “big accomplishment” – I just did my job producing a national talk show with quality and integrity from week to week. My worst blooper, I guess, was disagreeing with the executive producer about how many callers should be put ‘on air’ during the program, which resulted in my being fired. This is common in broadcasting, by the way. The saying goes: if you’ve never been fired you’re doing something wrong. It was really an act of God’s grace. At about the same time I learned I was accepted into the Illinois State University Writing Program. So it was a clear ‘sign’ that I was not to pursue a career in public or educational radio.

7. You have been listed in three different Who’s Who Directories: *Who’s Who in Entertainment*, *Contemporary Authors*, and *Who’s Who Among America’s Teachers*. Briefly explain the nomination and selection process with our readers as well as your reaction to them.

It’s a mystery to me. A form shows up in the mail saying ‘you’ve been nominated; please fill out these forms and verify your information’ and that’s that. I think that with the ‘Teachers’ one, a student who has been listed in “Who’s Who Among American College Students” nominates a teacher who has been most influential in his/her life. So that’s rewarding. As for the others, I just shrug. I was notified last month that I was included in “Who’s Who in

America,” too. That, and a dollar, will get you on the subway.

8. Racing greyhounds is a major sport in some parts of the USA. How did you get involved with the rescue of these retired racing dogs? Where do you find them? What can be done to create more awareness about this sport and its consequences to these racing dogs? Is there a website where our readers can go and get more information about it?

The so-called sport is on the decline – thankfully – due to the success of casinos that are stealing their customers. Anyway - My wife went to a county fair with a friend where an area advocacy group had a “meet and greet” with a group of hounds and she fell in love with these gentle creatures. We did a little research and discovered how horribly these lovely dogs were treated – I will spare you the gruesome details – and how thousands of them were routinely euthanized every year when they outlived their racing usefulness due to injury, illness or by losing races. There are several agencies that receive dogs from the tracks and nurse them to health and make them available for adoption to qualified families. Some tracks, to their credit, also retire some hounds and offer them to the public.

Greyhounds are not ‘hyper’ or nervous at all; in fact, they are lazy couch potatoes. They like to curl up in a surprisingly small ball and sleep for 14 hours a day. They need to be walked a couple times a day, but not far – and they do not need to run in large open spaces. A secure fenced yard is necessary, though. They are quiet and gratefully affectionate – they know they’ve been rescued from certain death. They are obedient and accustomed to being handled by people. They are excellent with children and the elderly. They are 70-pound cats, quiet and a little independent, but will follow you room-to-room.

They have some special needs. They were trained with live ‘bait’ and their ancient instinct is to kill prey, so they cannot live in homes with cats (also known as ‘lunch’) or even small dogs sometimes (aka ‘appetizers’). They are pack animals and will do best with another dog around, but they can be on their own. They are accustomed to – and desire – a kennel, as long as it is big enough and softly padded. They have zero body fat (this contributes to their swiftness) and so they need lots of big-doggie pillows around and specially-made sweaters/jackets in cold weather. They are couch and bed hogs. Gain a hound, lose a bed – or your place in it, at least.

Racetracks don’t have stairs so they need to be taught how to go up and down stairs in a home. They need to be shown what a window is, especially at their eye level. This is important for glass doors, for example, because if they see a ‘fuzzy’ – a squirrel or chipmunk or whatever – they will lunge for it – crashing through the glass. They reach 45 miles-per-hour in three strides.

For that reason, then, they require a special collar called a ‘martingale’ that won’t snap their neck if, on a walk, they spot a fuzzy and lunge for it. This behavior can be trained out of them gently, and no one need fear about being dragged across the street by a panting 75 pound dog intent on killing the neighbor’s cat.

Well – enough about that. We adored our grey “Hero” until his quick and peaceful passing from a heart attack. We have a mutt from the local animal shelter now (we had the two dogs together for a few years), but when she goes – sigh – we will get another grey for sure.

For information, visit www.regap.org (Retired Greyhounds as Pets) or

www.rescuedgreyhounds.com . Be careful: they have photo galleries of their available adoptees, and you will lose your heart to them!

9. Your blog *Johnny Dangerous* has an unusual introduction "*Read with caution. Always think responsibly.*" What do you expect to accomplish with your blog? Should the reader be prepared for a potential reality check with a twist and a punch on every entry?

"Think responsibly" is a play on those ads that say 'drink responsibly,' of course, and what I mean to suggest is that my blog will have discussions of things that will challenge conventional thinking – especially with regard to spiritual things. The Christian faith is intellectually subversive, radically counter-cultural, and a form of extreme non-conformity. Secularized people see Christians (Catholics in particular) as quite the opposite: intellectually shallow, unthinking and conformist. I want to challenge that. I don't know if every entry will have a 'punch.' Whenever Jesus was confrontational, it was with religious people, not unbelievers.

The blog began when some thoughtful students asked me about my Christian faith, and since it is proper to be circumspect and restrained in my secular college, I invited them instead to check out my blog where I could answer their questions politely. It's not just secularists who I hope to engage cordially; as a former evangelical, I talk to Protestants about why I 'crossed the Tiber,' and as a Catholic I talk to Catholics about the need to get beyond rotteness and ritual to a real relationship with Christ.

I expect to have another blog soon directly related to my mystery novel, "Bleeder," which is being considered seriously now by a small house and might be coming out sometime next year if they decide it is a 'go.' As of this writing in mid-September, it's still being evaluated and I hope to hear from them in three weeks or so. By the time this interview is posted, we'll know.

10. Your book *Relics* also known as *The Sign of the Cross* takes the reader back to the Medieval Crusades, a dark period in Church history. Did your theological studies inspire and prepare you to write the plot for this book? If yes, how? If not, where did you get the idea for this book?

I've always been a student of church history and as a Protestant I found the whole trade in relics to be both odd and fascinating. I wouldn't say my 'theological studies' got me interested, because it wasn't the seminary work but just part of my general study meant to deepen my faith (many, many of my evangelical friends also read widely in church history, apologetics, theology, etc. – something I wish more lay Catholics would do). I also had an interest in the collision of cultures, and the collision of medieval Christianity with militant Islam interested me in particular. This was back in 1990 – way before 9/11. As I did research, I thought the crusade of St. King Louis IX was heartbreakingly tragic (well, the others had their issues, too, especially the awful "Childrens' Crusade") and decided to have the story revolve around it.

We should recall that while the Crusades were zealously misdirected in many ways, this period was actually rather vibrant in intellectual, spiritual, and social growth. The great universities began, Francis of Assisi preached to birds and Egyptian sultans, cities were formed and guilds developed. It was a very complex period.

And the crusades themselves, we should recall, began as a defensive measure against

militant, expansionist Islam. The Christians of Constantinople knew they could not resist them alone and called upon the West for help – where nearly-barbarian, landless and bored warriors of high birth saw an opportunity for land and riches and took it. Nothing to be proud of, to be sure – but the Moslems had, in truth, been harassing pilgrims in the Holy Land and desecrating holy places, and they posed a serious military threat to Europe.

11. *The Throne of Tara* seems to be so far your most prominent book. Out of print in 1999 but reissued by a different publishing house, iuniverse.com, in 2000. This book also earned an award nomination by Christianity Today Readers Choice Award. What aspect of the life of Columba of Iona impressed you so much that inspired the plot for this book?

Oh, golly – this is my hero. This was the best man the 6th Century could produce: a scholar and warrior, a prolific poet, a holy man with endless energy, having a glorious voice and the Gift of Second Sight – albeit with the curse of a hot Irish temper and the kind of ambition that could easily go wrong. His fearless devotion to Christ inspired me. The great drama of his inner conflict – would he be the warrior and king his father desired, or the scholar and saint his mother envisioned – moved me.

I was also deeply intrigued by the stories of his ‘contests’ with the druids, miracles versus ‘magic,’ to prove the power of God. Here, again, is a cultural collision that mirrors one in our own time between the truth of the gospel and the imitation of New Age ‘spirituality’ that is fooling so many otherwise-thoughtful people.

Columba and all the monasteries he inspired in Ireland, Scotland and elsewhere in Europe saved Western civilization. At a time when barbarian hordes were burning cities and libraries, the Irish monks copied and saved all the great works of literature – not just the gloriously illustrated Scriptures, but the Greek and Roman classics, too – and by so doing kept the lamp of learning lit in Europe’s darkest age.

12. All your books are available in English and in German. How did you manage to do that? Share your insight with our readers who might want to pursue that venue, too.

My agent arranged that. I had nothing to do with it. The check just showed up in the mail.

This is one reason why it is important to have an agent to represent your work – to get the best initial terms, to arrange for subsidiary rights, and so on.

My agent, by the way, is no longer in the business and I’m looking for a new one.

My mystery novel is not being represented by a traditional ‘agent,’ but by a freelance editor who is working closely with a Catholic press to acquire genre fiction for them. She is more of a ‘book packager’ or broker, a go-between who is looking out for the interests of both publisher and writer. It’s a very different arrangement from what I’m accustomed to.

13. Imagine God appears to you in a dream and said: "John, I am giving you a second chance to make changes in your life. So, what would you be willing to sacrifice for me? What would you rather be?"

I’d probably have more than one child – though having one was a miracle, the doctors told us. I’d rather be remembered as a good Dad than a good writer.

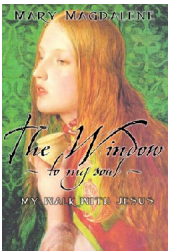
And I think I might have become a Catholic sooner. Even so, the richness of the Bible study and devout fellowship I enjoyed during all those years as an evangelical have deeply informed my new sacramental life.

14. How can our readers contact you?. Where can your books be purchased?

My college email is jdesjar@kishwaukeecollege.edu, and my books can be purchased via www.amazon.com. "The Throne of Tara" is also available through www.iuniverse.com; I had it re-issued there when it went officially out-of-print in 1999 after a pretty good 9-year run. You'll find that "Relics" is only available in used copies; that's because the publisher has declared it 'out-of-stock' (not "out-of-print"). They will not revert the rights to me so that I can have it re-issued another way. That's a clause in the contract my agent and I didn't notice, to our regret.

15. A word of advice to new writers or aspiring journalist.

Never give up.



Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés, author of *The Window To My Soul; My Walk With Jesus* (ISBN 0975393359; 2004 Tate Publishing; www.tatepublishing.com).

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