

Lizzy and Jane: An Interview with Katherine Reay

How long did it take to write *Lizzy and Jane* and is this typical for your novel writing schedule?

L&J took seven months. I'm not sure if that's normal for me or not. I think I'd prefer nine months. I don't write epic literary tomes so that is probably just about right, but I do try to dig around in a lot of emotion and that takes me some time.

What inspired you to use the 'feast' as a key element and the character of Elizabeth as a gifted chef within the novel?

L&J is framed upon CS. Lewis's book *The Four Loves* – more on that later – and I see the Eucharist (the “Feast”) as a vital part of our journey with Christ. Timothy Keller's book, *The Prodigal God*, and *Babette's Feast* by Isak Dinesen played a huge roll in firming up the symbolism for me.

I love the idea that to truly make a difference in another's life and to live richly in relationship, we need to seek the deeper things, look a little closer, spend the time in really getting to know someone first. This concept seems to be more difficult to live out today in our busy lives...how do you pursue meaningful relationships with friends and family and does it involve food?

It almost always involves food! When we lived in Ireland we had huge meals every Sunday with another family and it was a very special time. Hours of cooking and sharing -- and we carried that tradition back to the States with us. So now we often invite others to dinner and it's a way we connect as a family. In fact, my husband and daughter are known to make birthday cakes for anyone they hear has a special day coming up.

The idea many of us carry, even subconsciously, that those who live 'good' lives should be exempt from pain (as mentioned on p 280) can create a sense of rebellion or even outrage that God would allow something like cancer into our lives. We balk so easily at the pain and grief that is inevitable in this life. In this story, you created many angles to the pain within Elizabeth's life - loss of her mother, her sister's cancer, knowledge of her own propensity for the same disease, loss of her skills as a chef etc. How did you keep the story flowing without losing the truth of these different threads, is there a particular way you go about weaving the story on paper first?

I love the threads and do work to have them weave together. This comes back again to *The Four Loves* – I tried to take all forms of love from Lizzy's life. Lewis talks of affection, sibling love, romantic love and God love. I then wove each of the four back in

– in the proper order – so that Lizzy could emerge, or have the hope to emerge, whole. In order to do so, I did need to come at her from all angles and thread hope into her character and journey so that the strings pulled tight at the end.

I loved the way you described the artistry of cooking and the passion in Elizabeth once she had found new purpose in that. Is writing your first passion and if and when there are slumps - even in the writing of this book - how did you regain purpose in your passion?

Writing is – story is. And it does get frustrating at times because I see what can be and my inability to get there. (I think I stole that hacked-up statement from Jane Eyre, but it’s true.) When in a slump, I go back to my purpose for writing and to the SINGLE IDEA in a story. For each, it is very different. God is saying something different. If I can capture those, I can usually move forward.

Do you enjoy cooking?

I do, but not as much as other members in my family. I believe I am the sous chef’s sous chef. But I am Chief Kitchen Cleaner and that’s is a very important position. No one is encroaching on that territory.

If yes...what is your favourite time, place and meal to make?

I love Moroccan food so when we get the tagines out and the spices going I am very happy – because that takes all hands on deck and some time to prepare. Thus, the perfect meal and experience.

What was your favourite part of this book to write?

I loved L&J’s relationship. There was so much meat there. Siblings are fascinating. You can look at your sister and feel love, loyalty, anger, envy and pride all in one second – and that’s just a quick glance. It was fun to really examine their love, perceptions, personalities – when and how they were formed – and what that meant for a future between them.

What was your favourite scene?

I’m partial to when they are sitting on Jane’s bed talking and Lizzy pulls out the face creams. There is something so “sisterly” and vulnerable about that scene.

What was the initial prompting or seed for this story?

Lizzy first. I knew her and she was a chef. I could see her. Then God put *The Four Loves* on my heart and her journey began to fill out. Then... Jane came along and we were really cooking.

What do you hope your readers take away from this book?

There is a lot of pain in our lives – that is true and it’s unavoidable. But there is love, truth and beauty as well. Those are more enduring and it’s important to chase those.

How has writing this book changed or sharpened your perception of God?

The whole writing journey is a gift from him, but with each novel I learn new aspects of his grace and mercy for me as a writer, and new things about him as he shows up differently with each novel. The more I learn about him, the more I realize how little I know.

What is your favourite genre to read?

Contemporary – and really good writing. I also love YA. AND fantasy. I read everything. Seriously. Right now I’m reading *Rules of Civility*, *Boys in the Boat*, and *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

Do you relate more to Lizzy or Jane?

Neither. Both. And I think it would be very imprudent to let anyone know the secret recipe.

You are a sister! What do you love about that the most?

My sister and I are the same age difference as Lizzy and Jane – 8 1/2 years. I’m the older. Unlike L&J (at least at the beginning), my sister is my closest friend and confidant. I trust her and she’s got my back and I have hers. We have only come to this as adults – our age difference being what it is.

And it’s just fun to be able to KNOW someone’s quirks so well.

We’d love you to ask your three children what they think of having a mum who is a writer, and share their responses with us!

EMR: “I think it’s cool. It’s good.”

MMR: “It’s really neat to see my mom’s name in stores and airports.”

MAR: “Ahh.... (big grin).... I plead the 5th.”

They can't help themselves... They're teenagers.

Romantic novels, or even ones with threads of romance, are often criticised as being shallow or unrealistic, even unchristian! What is your response to such attitudes?

Absolutely not!! And here is why – as I said L&J is based on the framework of *The Four Loves*. That book and God are all about love. It is the most powerful, defining force in the universe. Now, that said, I'm not a fan of a single thread romantic story. *Boy meets girl, gets to know her, boulder in path, leap boulder, claim girl*. But I think stories that examine human motivation, human experience and really dig into those, must bump into love and, if they don't, they miss out on a crucial part of our elemental natures.