

Author Interview: Nancy G. West by C.A. Rowland

I started reading *Fit To Be Dead* without knowing exactly how Nancy's mystery would be different from others in the market. Then I realized that I shared something with the author—the setting was my old stomping grounds in Texas. Nancy's mystery takes place in and around the hill country of Texas (near San Antonio), where I lived for many years. I found that we also shared the same sensibilities in humor and that I was able to identify some of the places she has fictionalized, as well as a few of the inside jokes that Texans will recognize. Since I am also writing about a real place, I was very interested in how many real places she uses and how she handles the accuracy question when readers will recognize what you have described.

As you'll find in the interview below, Nancy's third in the Aggie Mundeen mystery series, *Smart, But Dead*, is in preorder, but I started with the first one, *Fit To Be Dead*.

C.A. Rowland: I've read *Fit To Be Dead* and there are a few things I noticed that I am curious about. I love the play on Aggie's name and Texas A&M University. Texans will recognize it immediately.

Nancy G. West: Aggie is short for Agatha (as in Christi), since my Aggie is a natural sleuth. She's unaware of this personal trait because she's been busy working her way up to VP in a Chicago bank "like a squirrel counting nuts," and attending college at night to earn a business degree. But she's always been so curious it makes her feet itch. When she decides to move to Texas, where Detective Sam (her secret love) spends his life investigating crimes, her sleuthing skills are unleashed.

Texans think she has a tie to Texas A&M University, which is fine with her. She prefers to be called "Aggie" because she thinks "Ag-gatha" sounds like somebody gagging.

C.A. Rowland: I saw in your blog that Aggie showed up in another book you were writing. I read the conversation but I wondered how and when you decided she was a main character who needed her own series? (See stayyoungwithaggie.wordpress.com for more of this conversation.)



Photo courtesy of Nancy G. West

"I find humor in almost every situation. The things we humans do and how seriously we take ourselves are funny."

— Nancy G. West

Nancy G. West: The protagonist in my psychological suspense novel, *Nine Days to Evil*, Meredith Laughlin, is a serious 24-year-old facing a deadly dilemma. When Meredith meets Aggie in her Shakespeare class, Meredith and I are both tired of being serious. Aggie is older, wiser, and funnier. Meredith and I needed her.

C.A. Rowland: I enjoyed all the humor. I know that's a challenge for a lot of writers. Any tips on how to interject humor or, as in your books, a dry wit? I know some of it comes from who the character is, but I wondered what your method is. How do you decide what's funny and what you need to change or leave out?

Nancy G. West: I find humor in almost every situation. The things we humans do and how seriously we take ourselves are funny. My method for showcasing Aggie's humor is to put her in settings and situations that are inherently humorous. If you put a klutzy woman averse to exercise in a health club where she has to shape up before anyone discovers she writes the how-to-stay-young column, do you expect funny things to happen? That's the setting for *Fit To Be Dead*.

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C. A. Rowland writes short stories in multiple genres and is currently finishing her first humorous cozy mystery, set in Savannah, Georgia. Carolyn is a member of the Virginia Writer's Club, Riverside Writers and Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She blogs at www.mostlymystery.com. When not writing, she volunteers her time for Quilts of Valor and the Linus Project, as well as designs and creates her own quilts. Visit her website at www.carowland.com.

Author Interview, continued

In *Dang Near Dead*, Aggie and her city-bred friends vacation with other neophytes at a ranch in the Texas Hill Country. The landscape, wranglers, and customs are foreign to these dudes—a ripe combination to produce fiascos waiting to happen.

C.A. Rowland: Being from Texas, I recognize some of the landmarks, like the neighborhood of Alamo Heights. I wonder how you decided to set the first book in San Antonio and the second one in the Texas Hill Country near Bandera.

Nancy G. West: There's so much to consider when you're creating characters and plots and weaving them into a good story. It's more comfortable to use San Antonio and the surrounding country because I'm familiar with them.

C.A. Rowland: In *Fit To Be Dead*, I know you combined several universities into one. How do you decide when to use a real place and when to use an imaginary place?

Nancy G. West: I thought it was only fair to incorporate weird elements from all the local campuses. In addition to the University of Texas Health Science Center and the new Texas A&M campus in San Antonio, there are five other colleges and universities here. I've attended classes at every one of them. Either the universities will all be angry with me, or they'll decide I'm writing about one of the other schools.

C.A. Rowland: Any thoughts for writers who are using a real place as their setting? Tips? Pitfalls?

Nancy G. West: Tips: You need to check to see exactly where streets, buildings, and landmarks were in the year your book is set. Pitfalls: Readers familiar with the area search for errors like scientists probing for amoeba.

C.A. Rowland: Do you use real places as inspiration or are they like the university, combinations of places? Do you visit all the real places or rely on maps or other references?

Nancy G. West: I use maps, news stories, the Internet, and all available sources for verification. Then, just for fun, I make some stuff up.

C.A. Rowland: I like the fact that Sam is a recurring character and there is a relationship developing. I know you don't want to give too much away, but I wondered if you knew he would play a role in each book when you started. And if so, do you let the relationship develop organically as you write or do you already have a story ARC planned for him over the series and for each book?

Nancy G. West: I knew from the beginning that Sam would play an important role. He and Aggie are soul mates, yet they're opposites. How fun is that? Their rocky relationship adds suspense, and their conflicting approaches to crime-solving add humor. All I can reveal about their relationship is that they grow closer with each book. Stay tuned.

C.A. Rowland: With a series, I know it becomes important to know what happened in the books before and what the reader has already learned. How do you keep up with all that information?

Nancy G. West: I make notes on what each character has done or said previously and an outline of what happened in each book, so I can refer back to it.

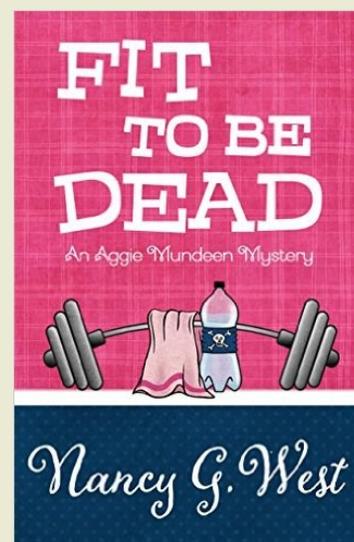
C.A. Rowland: Can you give us a preview of what to expect in your third book, *Smart, But Dead* (now available in preorder, with a release date of Nov. 17)?

Nancy G. West: Pushing forty and appalled at the prospect of descending into middle-age decrepitude, Aggie Mundeen blasts off to the local university to study the genetics of aging. When she finds a dead academic, Detective Sam reminds her not to "help" with the investigation. But dangerously curious and programmed to prod, she races to expose the killer, winds up prime suspect, and is on target to become the next campus corpse.

C.A. Rowland: Is there a fourth book on the horizon?

Nancy G. West: Only if Aggie gets out of the mess in *Smart, But Dead*.

Find out more about Nancy at her website, nancygwest.com.



Nancy G. West's books

Aggie Mundeen series

Fit To Be Dead

Dang Near Dead

Smart, But Dead

Others

Nine Days to Evil

