

These Still Black Waters **By Christina McDonald**

A Q&A with Christina McDonald

1. What inspired you to write These Still Black Waters?

The initial idea for this book came from a friend of mine who suffered a horrifying home invasion. She was putting her children to bed when masked men broke down her front door and threatened her and her kids with a knife.

Then, during the pandemic, when everything felt so strange and upside down, I started thinking about it more, about what it would feel like and what it would mean if nothing was really the way you thought it was.

During that time, there was such fear, such sadness and grief, and grief is a strong theme in this book. *These Still Black Waters* speaks to the rupture that tragedy brings, about our endless quest to put our lives back together again after the worst has happened. How resilient we humans are. Ultimately, it's about hope and faith.

And from all of that came *These Still Black Waters*. It went through a lot of edits and changes along the way, including making Neve an unreliable narrator, which she initially wasn't, and making Jess more of a leading character so we could continue as a series. I loved writing the story and it really gave me my passion for writing back. I hope you enjoyed it as well.

2. How does your experience as a journalist influence your writing? Do you find any connections between writing news and writing thrillers?

You see some crazy stories as a journalist, and that's where I started. Sometimes the truth really is stranger than fiction. But I was always interested in the story behind the story. How and why the story happened, who it happened to, their past, their reaction, and what happened next. My interest in those questions is what led me to writing thrillers.

Being a journalist helped me be able to tell a story, but it also gave me a deeper appreciation for emotion, the sensory aspect of words, the evocative movements and motivations of my characters. These things are what resonates for me when I read a story, and so it's what I love writing about.

3. You lived in Seattle, Ireland and now London, and you've set this book in a fictional town in Massachusetts. How has living in each placed informed your writing, and why did you set this book where you did?

The best way to understand the world is to see it from different sides. The experience of living in different countries has given me a greater understanding and a greater awareness of the world, as well as a better insight into people. The way someone is raised, their setting, who they become, the things they see in their home country, these things combine to create the person they become.

I think it's made me more tolerant, more open minded, better able to understand how people from other cultures and walks of life communicate, think, process. Encountering unfamiliar people and situations has given me a better awareness of my own values.

And of course, all of these things have shown up in my writing. I now look for character motivations, the ways they think and process, *why* they think the way they do. It helps me create deeper, more fully rounded characters. I wholly believe I wouldn't have the same level of understanding of characters if I hadn't lived abroad.

The reason why it's set in Massachusetts is kind of random. I happened to visit Boston a few years before I wrote *These Still Black Waters*. We rented a car and drove all around New England and I absolutely loved it.

When I sat down to brainstorm places to set my newest thriller, somewhere besides Seattle (where my first three books had been set), I wanted a place where the weather was more severe than Seattle. I planned to use the dry, severe summer heat as a bit of a red herring. You don't expect a book to be creepy when it's hot! I landed on a fictional lake near Boston and created a murky lake with opaque waters. Black Lake. The town where *These Still Black Waters* is set.

4. How do you deal with writer's block? What are your tricks and tips for when you get stuck when writing?

I think writer's block happens when we don't really know what we're trying to say. So sometimes it's just sitting with myself and being clear about what I'm saying.

Failing that, I talk it out. I sit down with my husband or a good friend and describe the plot and whatever is sticking. Sometimes, two heads are better than one.

I also like taking my dog for a walk and going to the gym. Moving my body gives my brain time to zone out, and sometimes I subconsciously unpick things without even realizing it.

My last trick is just to sleep on it. A lot happens in our subconscious brains, and there have been more times than I can count that I've gone to bed frustrated, but in the light of morning, everything seems clear.

And if none of that works, I move on. I try to think of another scene and I just write it and let my creativity flow, and from there I usually find my way back to whatever that sticky thing was.

5. What are some novels and authors that you really love and are always recommending?

I read a lot of thrillers and even run a book club where I choose a book club pick each month and offer a giveaway of that book. Have a look and join if you like books:

<https://christina-mcdonald.com/book-club/>

Some of my favorite thriller authors that I'm always recommending are Sarah Pekkanen, Kimberly Belle, Mary Kubica, Alex Finlay, Clare Mackintosh and Lisa Unger. They are consistently entertaining and twisty and totally immersive. For character driven thrillers, Wendy Walker, Jennifer Hillier and Heather Gudenkauf write gorgeous, completely addictive stories. For something dark and delicious, Jeneva Rose, Samantha Downing, EG Scott and Hannah Mary McKinnon are excellent choices. And you'll never go wrong picking up a thriller by Stacy Willingham, Layne Fargo, David Bell, Lindsay Cameron, Jessica Hamilton, Georgina Cross or Matthew Farrell.

6. What is the significance of the title *These Still Black Waters*? Did you have other titles prior to landing on this one?

Sometimes a title sticks and sometimes it goes through several iterations before you find the right one. The first title of this book was *Dead To You*, but my agent felt it was too close to a show that was on at the time. So we brainstormed new ideas. I thought the idea of having *Black Lake* in there was solid, as it really goes well with the black, murky waters of Neve's mind. Here are just a few of the titles we brainstormed:

- A Death At Dullahan House
- The House On Black Lake
- The Woman In Black Lake
- The Woman At Dullahan House
- The Lady In Black Lake
- The Lady In The Lake
- Death at Black Lake
- The Lady With The Key(s)

These Still Waters
THESE STILL BLACK WATERS
When Still Waters Lie
The Summer House
After The Dark
When The Darkness Comes

7. What do you want readers to take away from Jess and Neve? What emotions do you hope to make them feel while reading These Still Black Waters?

For me, writing a book is always a very personal, and often emotional, process, and I hope readers feel those same emotions. I hope they consider if people who do bad things can step into the light and be washed clean, and debate the meaning of forgiveness and justice. But ultimately, These Still Black Waters is about hope and faith, so I hope they feel satisfied by the resolution while also being emotionally touched.

8. What are you working on right now?

There is a second Jess Lambert book coming out in 2024, and I'm working on that right now! Make sure to sign up to my book club to get sneak peeks at early chapters, cover reveal, and giveaways: <https://christina-mcdonald.com/book-club/>

Synopsis:

Christmas Eve, last year

Sixteen-year-old Alice Harper is heading home with her family when their car crashes in Killer's Grove, a lonely, desolate stretch of road just outside Black Lake reputed to be haunted. When she regains consciousness, she is alone. Her family has disappeared.

Now

A body's been found, a bloody backpack from one of the missing family members with it. Detective Jess Lambert suspects the cases are linked. But as she investigates, she uncovers dark secrets that put her on a collision course with her very own past. Jess's only witness is Alice, a girl haunted by her own ghosts. Ghosts connected to Jess in unexpected ways.

How many secrets can one family hide?

Someone knows what really happened to the Harpers. But the dead don't give up their secrets easily. And Jess and Alice are now in the crosshairs of a killer willing to do anything to keep those secrets buried.

Read the first chapter here:

<https://christina-mcdonald.com/jess-lambert-book-2-first-chapter/>