

SPECIAL FEATURE:

Interview by J. Allison

INTERVIEW WITH NOVELIST MORGAN HUNT

Author Morgan Hunt has written a series of scintillating sleuth stories featuring the smart, strong, and witty protagonist, Tess Camillo – database expert by day, detective by night. These artfully spun mysteries include: *Sticky Fingers*, *Fool on the Hill*, and the award-winning *Blinded by the Light*, excerpts from which are featured in GAY e-magazine's April, May, and June issues, respectively.

Both Morgan and Tess are breast cancer survivors, and you'll find the topic approached with compassion and humor in Hunt's work. Hunt's novels combine both mystery, and our favorite genre, humor, a compelling combination which will capture your imagination and keep you locked in through the very last page.

Morgan was born and raised on the Jersey shore in Brigantine. Following two years at a Midwestern Bible college, she joined the Navy and served as an educational services representative. Now residing in Oregon, she works with FEMA's on-call reserve cadre as a public affairs writer. We recently caught up with her to learn more about her creative process, Tess' future, and other projects she has in the works.

GAY: The protagonist in your novels is Tess Camillo, database expert by day, sleuth by night. In what ways would you say Tess is similar to you?

MH: Well, I sleuth often by night. I sleuth by nature; I'm a curious monkey, always wondering how, why, and "what if." I draw from my own life to create Tess, including

that insatiable curiosity, my experience with breast cancer, my Navy service, and my Italian heritage.

GAY: Describe the relationship between Tess and her housemate Lana, the New Age massage therapist and Tai Chi instructor.

MH: Tess is a lesbo from the get-go. Lana has always been straight except for a few years when she and Tess were lovers. When the series begins, Lana has gone back to men. Tess has residual romantic feelings for her, but she's moving on. It's one of the ways the character of Tess grows within the series.

GAY: Why did you decide to write Tess and Lana as virtual polar opposites?

MH: From the outset I wanted to create an Odd Couple kind of dynamic. Partly it's a literary wink at the "opposites attract" phenomenon in romance. Tess is an analytical, linear-thinking, street-smart east coast native. Lana's thinking could be considered, well... gelatinous. Put them under one roof and there's inherent humor. I also wanted to show that we all need one another. Tess may get 90% of what she needs to solve a crime with her own logic, but Lana always contributes something essential.

GAY: How would you characterize each of the books in your series? Are they all similar or does each have its own personality?



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MH: The first book, *Sticky Fingers*, launches the series. It's probably the only book around that deals with snakes, breast cancer, and the legality of vibrators all in one novel. *Sticky Fingers* placed as a finalist in the 2008 Reader Views Reviewer's Choice awards, and was also a finalist in the Golden Crown Literary Society's awards (mystery category).



Morgan's office—where the magic happens

Fool on the Hill, the second in the series, has the most whimsical humor and the fastest pace. It's about a rock musician who is murdered by crucifixion. In 2008, *Fool on the Hill* won the Best Books Gay/Lesbian Fiction literary award, sponsored by *USA Today*.

Blinded by the Light is unique in several ways. The first two books are set primarily in San Diego; *Blinded* takes Tess to New Mexico. The romantic subplot is stronger and represents a character-changing experience for Tess. *Blinded by the Light* won the 2009 Indie Excellence Award (for books published by small independent presses) for Gay/Lesbian fiction.

GAY: You set most of *Blinded by the Light* in New Mexico instead of San Diego, at a place called The Lightning Field, an earthworks art piece constructed of 400 lightning rods in the desert. Why?

MH: My best friend lives in Albuquerque. About a year after she moved there, she visited me in San Diego and told me about this cool place she'd heard about. "You pay to stay inside this cabin," she said, "and watch lightning bolts strike all around you." I asked her to share whatever she was smokin'. I couldn't believe that any U.S. state would allow such a hazard, let alone encourage tourism there. "You don't

know New Mexico," my friend replied. Well, curiosity bit me on the ass, so I visited The Lightning Field. It's one of the most unusual places I've ever seen. The high desert terrain is gorgeous, the patterns in which the lightning rods are laid out mesmerizes, and the potential danger is almost palpable. There's no guarantee a lightning storm will strike when you visit, but even if it doesn't, distinctive visual phenomena make it well

worth seeing – something I tried to describe in the book.

GAY: In *Blinded by the Light*, Tess develops a new romantic interest. Does this pose any challenges to Tess' concentration?

MH: A zesty romantic like Tess can woo a new lover, track a killer, design esoteric database programs, and remember to change the batteries in her smoke alarm without breaking into a sweat. In the first two books, Tess handles all sorts of involvements quite smoothly. But in *Blinded by the Light*, Tess falls so hard that she temporarily acquires cerebral-rectal syndrome.

GAY: Do you recommend that your books are read in the order in which they were written or can they be read in any sequence?

MH: The plot of each book is independent from the others, so they can be read in any order. It's probably a bit easier to appreciate the character growth of Tess and Lana if the series is read in sequence.

GAY: Does Tess have any bad habits?

MH: You mean other than sticking her nose into other people's business? And making incredibly bad puns? Oh, Lana told Tess that she actually makes noise when she flosses her teeth. So, no, Tess has no bad habits.

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GAY: What makes Tess tick?

MH: A finely machined, precision-calibrated rare titanium timing mechanism. Or so I've heard.

GAY: While your novels are of the mystery genre, you use elements of humor in your writing, as well. Was this a conscious choice or your natural writing style?

MH: Both. Personally I believe a sense of humor is a saving grace. It sure helped me when a hetero male plastic surgeon had to poke and prod my boobs and belly to assess my fitness for a breast reconstruction surgery. (He was actually a great guy with a wicked sense of humor, all of which helped that not-so-fun process.) The 1997 Nobel Prize winner in literature, Dario Fo, said, "Laughter is not a lack of seriousness. On the contrary, irony and lightness are some of the highest forms of intelligence." While the humor comes naturally to me, it's also intentional. I began writing this mystery series while I was recovering from my own breast cancer surgery, and I really appreciated anything that could make me laugh then. I hope all readers, but especially any cancer survivors, will also appreciate Tess' wit and whimsy.

GAY: Do you have plans for another book?

MH: I've outlined a fourth book in the series, set in my current hometown of Ashland, Oregon. Dubbed "Berkeley's northernmost suburb," actors, artists, writers, philosophers, gurus, and many New Age thinkers gravitate to this home of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. And (of course) while there, Tess tries to track down a nefarious murderer.

GAY: Are you currently working on that fourth book?

MH: The outline is done, and I have some notes, but right now I'm finishing a mainstream mystery thriller screenplay. I also have a political caper novel scratching at my brain.

GAY: So you write mysteries, screenplays, and political novels?

MH: As well as [magazine articles](#) (here's one I wrote for *Writer's Digest* on how to sprinkle profanity into a novel), and poems, some of which have been published in literary journals.

GAY: Who are your literary influences?

MH: I read all kinds of books from traditional murder mysteries to astrophysics, theology, geopolitics, history, and poetry. Among my literary influences are Rita Mae Brown, Annie Lamott, Christopher Moore, Erica Jong, Kathleen Taylor, Kurt Vonnegut, May Sarton, Christopher Buckley, Kinky Friedman, and Janet Evanovich.

GAY: What's the most exciting thing that's happened to you since publishing your mysteries?

MH: I received an inquiry last summer from a thriving Hollywood production company regarding TV rights to the Tess Camillo series. No further news on that yet, but that definitely gave me a rush.

GAY: Are we more likely to find you relaxing in the mountains or at the beach?

MH: You're more likely to find me relaxing in the arms of a sensuous woman.

GAY: From the following list, tell us which one item you absolutely could not live without: television, air conditioner, microwave oven?



The inspirational view from Morgan's office window

Interview with Morgan Hunt

MH: Definitely the air conditioner. With global warming headed our way? Hey, mama didn't raise no fool.

GAY: When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

MH: At six I wanted to be an explorer like Lewis & Clark. In high school, I considered becoming a theologian. (Yeah, I was a nerd.) In college, I wanted to be a film director. Fortunately I discovered a career where I could explore, negotiate with the Divine, and be creative all at once: I'm a writer.

GAY: Finally, what makes you laugh?

MH: A friend wrote in my high school yearbook, "You have both a joie de vivre and a penetrating manner that cuts through all that is contrived and pretentious." Human pretension still cracks me up, which explains my interest in politics. Oh, and looking in the mirror – that always makes me laugh!

Next month in GAY,
excerpts from Morgan Hunt's
award-winning novel
"Blinded by the Light"

For more information about Morgan or to purchase any of the
Tess Camillo series, visit:
www.morganhuntbooks.com

