



Continuing our series with [Space Grunts: Full-Throttle Space Tales #3](#) authors, we present an interview with Jean Johnson, author of “It’s Not a Game”. Jean lives happily in the Pacific Northwest, close to friends and family.

Jean Johnson has published several books and short stories with The Berkley Group, including the popular Sons of Destiny fantasy-romance series: *The Sword*, *The Wolf*, *The Master*, *The Song*, *The Cat*, *The Storm*, *The Flame*, and *The Mage*, plus short stories in *An Enchanted Season* (“Gift of the Magi”) and *Elemental Magic* (“Birthright”), most of which have hit national bestseller status. She also has a story in *The Mammoth Book Of Paranormal Romance* (“How to Date a Super Hero”) . You can find out more on her website at www.JeanJohnson.net.

This author frequently takes the time to thank every service person she runs across for their willingness to serve their country, along with law enforcement officials, emergency medical teams, and many other people who manage the dangerous, nasty jobs that make everyone else’s life that much safer and better. Thank you all for serving; it is truly, deeply appreciated.

How did you get involved with *Space Grunts*?

Last year at [Norwescon 31](#), I chatted with David Boop, a friend of Dayton Ward's, about books and writing. I expressed my interest in wanting to write science-fiction as well as fantasy-romance, and exchanged business cards with him. Dayton contacted me a few months later with the offer to submit a story for consideration, and the one I submitted was quickly snapped up for inclusion in the anthology. (In fact, he asked if I'd ever served in the military, which I found amusing. No, I have not; I just have a lot of friends who have, whom I have cornered and interrogated ruthlessly, plying them with cookies and questions galore.)

There is a certain perception in the science-fiction community, a stigma that says romance writers couldn't possibly write serious, good sci-fi stories. I'm happy to say that Flying Pen Press believes in finding people who can write a good story, regardless of the author's previously established genres. After all, that is what it's all about: Publishing a good story that people will enjoy reading, and finding the writers who can supply them. I'm happy to be considered one of them.

For myself, I love to read three genres, science-fiction, fantasy, and romance; obviously by correlation, I love writing all three. (Well, actually, I don't like writing straight romance; I'd rather blend it with sci-fi or fantasy, because that's more fun to write.) In fact, the only reason why I got published first in fantasy-romance is because that was the first door in the publishing world that opened for me, and I charged straight through, to the point where most of my books have hit national bestseller status, and even international with the translation of my first novel over in Germany. Now that I have my foot in the straight science-fiction genre door, I plan on charging through this one, too.

What angle did you explore on the theme of soldiers in space in your story "It's Not A Game"?

The psychology of Service has always fascinated me. Why do people voluntarily choose to risk their lives and limbs? People can talk about "survival of the species" and "duty to one's country" all day long, but when it comes down to it, the feeling most volunteer soldiers have can't be put into words. It can only be put into action. This makes it hard for a civilian--who doesn't feel this driving urge--to understand why they do it.

Jana Bagha has this feeling, this driving need within her to throw herself, her body, her weapons, and her life between her people and whatever threatens them. When she's among her fellow soldiers, they understand; it doesn't have to be explained. By putting her into a situation where she's surrounded by civilians, where it's not literally a life-and-death situation as it would be on a mission, this gives her the opportunity to try and bridge that gap in understanding. Not only for the civilians around her, but in a way for herself as well.

Where do you get your story ideas?

Luckily for you, I have a serious answer to this question, instead of the standard one involving the alimentary system. Jana Bagha and her husband are minor characters in a much larger science-fiction story I have been writing on and off for the last several years. When flipping through my copious notes on the crew roster for that story, looking for some appropriate "space grunts" I could write about, my notes on her particular background and prior history caught my eye. I instantly had the seed of a story at that moment, and it didn't take long to work up the plot in my head.

Writing this particular short story was easy; I had most of the world-building done, I had a solidly established character--albeit a minor one--and I had a skill and a slice of history for that character which instantly supplied a story. All I had to do on top of that was a little bit of research to make sure the technical details would be accurate, and write it out.

As for other stories...well, my answers usually involve a rotating roster of snippets of dreams, random "what if" questions, and the aforementioned alimentary canal.

To be honest, I don't really keep track of where most of my story ideas come from, because it's like trying to keep track of the family history of every single student attending a large school district. I have too many plot-bunnies, all hopping around and demanding my attention, to remember where most of them came from. Particularly as a good portion of them were bred from other plot-bunnies that have been hopping around for years. So you got lucky with this particular story since it's one of those few where I knew exactly when and how it came to be.

What do you see as some of the advantages of the short story format over longer fiction formats, such as novels?

It's short. It's the equivalent of a literary snack. If you don't have a lot of time but you do want to relax and escape for a little while, it's perfect for that. Short stories are great for our activity-filled lives, because if you only get through three stories into a ten story anthology, you can set it aside and come back to it a week or two later, and not have to struggle to remember where the plotline last left off. But most of all, it's short, which makes it convenient.

For example, if you're standing in line at the pharmacy and you have fifteen minutes or so to wait while they fill your order, you can either wander the aisles of the drugstore, bored out of your mind, or you can crack open an anthology and read a short story, and most likely get it done before you're called up to the counter. It's the mental equivalent of milk-and-cookies at 4pm after you come home from school. It's the mid-morning triple-shot grande mocha with caramel whip before you go off to that budget meeting. It's a mental/emotional snack. A mini-vacation you can take in your head: Short, but satisfying.

Did you choose to write, or did writing choose you?

This is a sort of chicken-or-egg question. Technically the egg wins: When I was around eight or so, I didn't like the end of a story I read. So I blithely rewrote the ending the way I thought it should've gone. It was crap, and I knew it was crap, but it was also a lot of fun. So I kept doing it.

But writing has become so integral to my existence that I get cranky/snarly/irritable if I don't have the opportunity to write after four days of abstinence. I have told past boyfriends that if they ever demand that I must choose between my writing or them, I'll choose my writing without a second thought or a backward glance. (I believe in being honest and up front about my obsession/addiction--and no, I don't want to be cured, thank you.) But most of all, I feel a bone-deep need to write these stories, to inspire and enlighten and educate my readers even as I entertain them. So in the end, the chicken wins, too.

Or as my personal motto reads: *Scripto Ergo Sum*. I write, therefore I exist.

What advice do you have for someone who is just starting out as a writer of short fiction? What is the best writing advice you've ever received?

For me, these are the same question, because they both have the same answer: Write.

Seriously. Write write write write write write write, eat something, visit the bathroom, get a drink of whatever, whatever you can get done on a short break, and then sit back down and write write write write write write write write write. And when you're done writing that, write write write write write some more.

There are three major hurdles a writer **MUST** overcome in order to succeed. The first is sitting your butt down and writing in the first place. Simply starting is the hardest thing for a lot of people who have a story in them they want to tell. "Oh, I plan on writing a novel *some day*..." Well, congratulations! *Some day* is NOW. Sit yer butt down and start writing, soldier! Write now! Don't delay! Computer keyboards, pens and notepads are standing by, waiting to record your ideas! Write write write write write!

...For completeness' sake, the other two hurdles are finishing the story--another difficult task for many would-be writers with too many unfinished tales on their harddrives--and then the delicate balance of editing it enough without editing it too much, i.e. both knowing how much to polish your prose so that it's not crap, and knowing when to let go of your precious baby plot-bunny so it can hop off and entertain others, before you edit it to death. Too little editing and too much editing are both very bad things for a manuscript. Learning how far is enough and how far is too much are judgment calls that only comes with experience and the help of good beta-editors.

What can readers expect from you next?

I just had the eighth and final book in my Sons of Destiny series, *The Mage*, come out at the start of April 2009 (Berkeley Sensations). If you like in-depth fantasy worlds with complex, engaging plots, and don't mind a fair amount of romance mixed in with it, you might want to try this series, which starts with *The Sword*. (Um...don't start with the eighth book; any of the others you can read in any order and still make sense, but there's just too much plot in that last one to start with it, trust me.)

My next full-length novel, *Shifting Plains*, will also be released by the Berkeley Sensations imprint in December 2009, and I'm currently working on an anthology of revised fairy tales for Berkley, which is due to be released in 2010.

Somewhere in there, I will finish my science-fiction novels and submit them for publication. They're particularly persistent plot-bunnies, trust me; they won't fade away. They just have to compete for my attention with the straight fantasy plot-bunnies, and the mixed-genre romance bunnies, and the...