



Author Spotlight

Ally Carter chats to Graham Marks

Ally Carter is the international best-selling author of two hugely successful YA series: *The Gallagher Girls* spy sequence and the crime thriller *Heist Society* novels. Here she talks to Graham Marks about her writing career, how she writes, and what it's been like to work on *United We Spy*, the last in the *Gallagher Girls* series...

I see you work under a pseudonym...

Well it's not something I talk a lot about publicly...it was supposed to be a secret, but it's a secret that got out a few years ago. Publicly I try to very much stay Ally at all times, because I find that it really confuses my readers.

When you're writing, is Ally different from 'you' and does it ever confuse you?

[Laughs] It does not confuse me, no.

Was being a writer what you always had in mind as a career?

It's what I always wanted to do; I didn't, however, ever dream that I would actually get to do it. As a kid some people want to be astronauts, some people want to be cowboys, some people want to be football players; I wanted to be a writer. And not many people get to be their childhood dream, so I know I'm one of the lucky ones.

What was the path you took, how did you make it happen?

It was a very, very indirect path. I attended university and I got a degree in Agricultural Economics, of all things, and I actually worked as an agricultural economist for many years. But in the back of my mind writing was still what I wanted to do, and so [at some point] I had to sort of give myself a stern talking to and say 'This is the time: either you put up, or you shut up. You either write something or you stop thinking that, Oh some day I'm going to do that'. And so I started writing in my free time, and, lo and behold, I was able to get a literary agent and get something published, and the rest, as they say, is history.

But you started out as an adult writer and you wrote two adult novels, right?

They were where what we were calling Chick Lit at the time, and they did not do very well and are now out of print. But it was a good way to cut my teeth and get my bearings.

What prompted the move into YA fiction?

My literary agent, actually, was the one who first suggested it...Harry Potter was out, but it was before *Twilight* and certainly *The Hunger Games*, before the big [Young Adult] boom. She had a sense that YA was on the rise and asked all her clients if they had any YA ideas and I was the only one who did.

Good timing!

It was.

You write in a very pacey, adrenaline-fuelled style – and I've seen you say you also write very fast – did you ever think of being a script writer for film and TV, or was it always books for you?

Interesting you should pick up on that - the very first things that I wrote were screenplays. They were never sold and I never even had a screenplay agent...every writer has the box of books under their bed they hope nobody ever sees and mine is a box of screenplays. And so I do still think of my books definitely in terms of movies; I use a lot of old screenwriting techniques...I storyboard them all, and actually, for the last three or four books, I've written the first drafts in screenwriting software because it's a much faster way to get the story out.

I have that software on my iPad now, and I really, really like the app a lot...there's something psychological about it, because when I sit down at my computer it feels like I'm going to work, but when I sit down with my iPad it feels like I'm going to play. So I can sit here in my chair and dabble at things and before you know it I've been working at something for three or four hours and it feels like I've been goofing off the whole time, which is kind of nice.

I would liken your plots to intricate, Swiss-watch mechanisms...

[Laughs] Thank you very much!

Well they tick along really fast, and all the story cogs fit together perfectly - do you do a lot of planning before you start work?

I do some planning before I start, but I do a lot of drafts and a lot of re-writes, because there are definitely things that I know going in are going to have to happen, but I'm always surprised by things which reveal themselves to me during the writing, things that I would have never predicted when I started the book. So for that reason I then have to go back in - maybe something occurs to you as you're writing page 150, so you have to go back in on the next draft and make that thing make sense on pages one through 149. For example, with the last *Gallagher Girls*, *United We Spy*, I changed the ending of the book, of the entire series, in the very last draft. It was a completely different ending. With these intricate plots I have to allow myself enough time to a lot of re-writes and I have to be willing to throw anything out at any point in time.

Do you use a flowchart, so you can see everything?

I do, I have two huge white boards in my office. Usually one for a book, but sometime I'll need both for one book - *United We Spy* was a two-white board story. I use big Post-it notes and those represent every scene in the book and I just lay them out like the pieces in a puzzle. The advantage of doing that on a white board is that you can take a marker and draw lines between them and questions marks and notes and everything. It's kind of chaotic, but I'd rather have the chaos on the board than in my head...I need my craziness out on the board where I can see it.

It's always interesting to me...I'll look at the board and see that the first four rows [of Post-its] - where usually a row will represent probably an act - are very orderly and tidy and just all neat, and then the last four rows get to be crazy and messy and dirty, and that's because I don't know what happens in the second half of the book. It's very visual, you can look at the board and say, OK, the first half of the book is in really good shape, and the second half needs a lot of work.

Do your characters ever refuse to cooperate?

Absolutely!

Did that happen at all in this book?

In *United We Spy*? Probably, it happens in all of them [laughs]. I think a lot of it is because there are some things I'm able to plot out in advance, and then there are some things that I think would make a great scene or to have a character doing; then, as I'm trying to write it, they don't make sense and it just doesn't happen. It's like trying to drive a square peg into a round hole, and you realise it's because [the scene] doesn't actually belong there...usually when a character quote/unquote disagrees with me, or doesn't behave, it's because there's something I thought, going in, I needed to do that I don't need to do.

How did you organise your life, writing two series at the same time - and were you plotting *Embassy Row* at the same time as you were writing *United We Spy*?

I was not...well, I was and I wasn't. The idea for *Embassy Row* actually came to me years ago; I got the idea for it in 2007, right after I sold the first *Heist Society* book, so that meant that I was firmly committed to *Gallagher Girls* and *Heist Society* and have been since 2007, so *Embassy Row* was always something that

was always ticking in the back of my mind. I didn't clear off a white board and start putting stuff up there until *United We Spy* was actually finished. I find that I can't really go back and forth between [the series] that well; for me, I need to finish one book off and then start a new one from scratch...it's not that I get confused about what's going on in in what book, it's more that I need to feel like I have a lot of momentum.

Did you ever confuse Kat and Cam at all?

They've very different characters, and they're not fictional to me...so, no. The thing I would have trouble switching gears between would be the 'voice' of the two books, because voice is more of a flavour that lingers in your head.

Would you ever write a male lead?

Possibly...who knows, maybe some day that will happen, but for the most part I'm very happy writing female leads. I think that we live in an age where books by and for girls, no matter how successful they are, they are still put down because they are by and for girls. I like to say that I get some of the most insulting positive reviews ever – it's usually 'This book is really good...if you're a teenage girl' – because teenage girls do not deserve nice things, everybody knows this.

Cam's mother is the head teacher at the Gallagher Academy, and your mother taught at your school...

She did.

How was that?

It was very good...I wouldn't have had it any other way. And definitely that was something that I drew upon when I was writing Cammie; there were many reasons for that, one being I wanted her mother to actually play a role in the book, because in a lot of YA books the parents are absent, or dead, or the kids are at camp and the parents aren't anywhere around.

I wanted Cammie's mother to be a character, both in Cammie's life and in the readers' lives, and I thought probably the simplest way, maybe even the only way, to have her be a regular feature in Cammie's day-to-day life would be to have her be at the school in some way. Especially because in the first book or two, a big part of the plot is Cammie trying to pull one over on the school - not just sneaking out of school, but under the nose of her own mother. Which is something that I think a lot of regular teenagers certainly appreciate.

Did you read school-set fiction as a child, and is the Gallagher Academy, which is a kind of Hogwarts for spies, the type of school you would like to have gone to?

I don't know anybody who didn't want to go to Hogwarts, and before that we wanted to be a part of the Fellowship to the Ring; you want to be a part of a group, and you want that group to have a special calling. It's a very big part, not only of the of the reading experience, but particularly of the YA reading experience; going to school you're exposed to a small group of people and books are a way of learning that there are more people out there, and somewhere out there is a group that you are going to be a part of.

The lists and reports from Cam in the book seem to me to be like pauses for breath in the middle of all the action, but are they also put there to add to our understanding of how she thinks?

Yes, very much so, but I also started doing them because I hate writing transition scenes...you have something very exciting on Wednesday night, but nothing exciting happens again until next Tuesday, and I have to address the fact that things probably did happen in the course of that week...but I don't necessarily want to write about it. I'm skipping that week for a reason: because it wasn't all that interesting. The lists and covert operation reports are a way, as you say, of taking a breath, of showing that time is passing and something is happening off stage, but we don't have to spend a whole lot of time dwelling on it.

At the heart of *United We Spy* there is a geo-political nightmare of a plot device – were you at all worried at any point about giving someone evil an idea?

Not really, because it's all so incredibly vague – people are more than welcome to try and start to war with Caspia as Caspia does not exist. I feel pretty confident that we're safe there.

The world of spies and spying, by its very nature, is hidden from us, so did you have to do much research, or simply, as nobody knows exactly what happens, let our imagination run riot?

It's a combination, I definitely did some research – there is actually a surprising amount of information available, not on specific spy missions, but covert training tactics are very well known. You can buy entire

books, de-classified operations training manuals, on how to tail someone or how to do counter-surveillance. That information is readily available and I tried to have all of the trade-craft things that the girls learn and do in the books all rooted in real trade-craft.

So are you a dangerous woman?

I am a very dangerous woman, yes.

Did you go out and do any field research?

I did not, but I am the most hyper-aware person in a parking garage that you have ever seen!

While there is a lot of emotion in the book – mostly it's panic, fear and hormones – Cam's relationship with Amy was a real moment; did you plan that or were you surprised when it happened?

That was one of those happy surprises...although in hindsight I was not surprised, but very pleased with how the Amy arc turned out; I'm excited for readers to meet her, I think they're going to be very upset that they don't get more of her because I do think she's someone they're going to relate to a lot.

It struck me, towards the end, that there was a whole level of plot and story that we never got to hear about, and that was what Cam's mother and Mr Solomon got up to – any chance of that story ever surfacing?

Initially I thought that whole off-screen plot was going to be the plot of the sixth book. But the problem with that is the classic problem that YA authors always face, that there has to be a reason for the teenagers to be doing something on their own. Nobody's going to say to Jack Reacher that he should stand back and let the authorities handle [a situation], because he's a grown-up, he's the authorities; but there's a degree of disbelief you're asking people to take on when you say, OK, now these four teenage girls are going to go after these international terrorists on their own. I just don't think anyone would have believed that...I decide to let the parents handle that, and give the girls something only they could stop. That was how that all came about.

Did you at any time think you didn't want to finish the series?

I think most authors have that – there's 'I don't want to finish', and then there's 'I don't think I can finish'. For me the dark days were when I was writing Book 2, *Cross My Heart and Hope to Spy*; I think sequels are very tough and definitely there were times when I thought *I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You* was maybe a stand-alone.

Luckily not! So where are you now with *Embassy Row*?

Very close to finishing a first draft – but, as I've told you, that doesn't mean a lot with me! I may just throw it in the bin and light it on fire, who knows...

ENDS