

A Soldier's Duty: Jean Johnson's Newest Novel Available This Month



Articles - Interviews

Written by Jamie Ruby
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By Jamie Ruby

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National best selling author Jean Johnson is possibly as well known for her fanfiction as for her published books. While she doesn't have time to write it anymore, it still has an impact on her writing. "I won't deny I did it--and I did it solely for fun and parody, heeding all author rules on fanfics that I could find--because of two things. Fanfic helped improve my writing skills immensely from the great feedback I received from fellow fanfic readers, and fanfic was what got me noticed by an editor, giving me my chance at getting published."

For published work, Johnson is probably most known for her *Sons of Destiny* series of romance novels. The series follows eight brothers (four sets of twins) who fulfill the Curse of Eight Prophecy and are exiled to Nightfall Island where they will not be tempted by women and therefore not fulfill the prophecy. The brothers stay alone and celebrate until the youngest brother, a mage, brings a woman from another universe into theirs. "It started out with a "what if?" question about if a woman from our world ended up in a realm of magic, but didn't actually get to have any magic of her own to use, breaking the usual trope for such things. Then I had to come up with people for her to interact with, which meant coming up with the eight brothers, the reason why they were exiled, the prophecy verses triggering that exile...and boom, eight book series based on the eight verses. It was just that simple.

"I knew pretty much from the start the general gist of how everything would end from when I first started book one, *The Sword*. There are things in book one which end up being relevant in book eight, as well as the books in between. Some are blatant, most are subtle."

Johnson first started writing at an early age. "I first started the writing thing when I was around eight or so, read a book, didn't like the ending, and thought, "I'm gonna write the ending I want to read!" I wrote it and it was crap. I knew it was crap, but I had fun, so I kept doing it."

Quite a few of Johnson's other books take place in the same universe as *Sons of Destiny* or from that of her newest, yet to be released novel, *A Soldier's Duty*. "All of the novels have been [in the *Sons of Destiny* universe]. *Bedtime Stories* (a collection of short stories) has both science fiction and fantasy and they're in different universes. There are eight stories, two of them are set in the *Sons of Destiny* universe; the rest are not. In fact one of the stories in *Bedtime Stories* is set in the same universe as *A Soldier's Duty*...*Finding Destiny*, the most recent [collection] that came out this last January, that one is all set in the *Sons of Destiny* universe."



When Johnson first started writing the *Sons of Destiny* series, she knew it was going to be long. "As for the book deal, I'd told my editor that it was an eight book series, though the plot came in two chunks of four books. She

read the first book, read the plot synopsis for the second, and offered me a three book contract. I, newbie unpublished unagented writer that I was, suggested a four book contract, since the plot for book one set up two and three, two set up three and four, three set up four, and if need be, I could bring it to a resolution at the end of book four if the series flopped, so that those few who liked it would at least have a semi-satisfactory ending." Thankfully the books didn't flop and Johnson was contracted for all eight books.

The stories Johnson writes are still those she wants to read. "I've been writing the stories I myself want to read, and to re-read. The most gratifying thing I've been told by my readers is that they love re-reading my books, too. That, and they keep finding new things on second and third and further readings."

Johnson's published works so far have all been fantasy or paranormal romance for adults. "Young Adult fiction is hard for me to write, for one huge reason: my huge vocabulary. I don't mean to make that sound like boasting, because it isn't. It's actually a serious problem for me as a writer. I was reading at a collegiate level of comprehension in the sixth grade, which admittedly is unusual, but that level of reading shows up in my writing...Young Adult fiction is written at a simpler level of complexity and vocabulary, with shorter sentence structures, less descriptives, so on and so forth. I don't think that way, and I don't write that way. At least, not easily. Personally, I think children's fiction is one of the hardest categories to write for an adult author, unless you live with kids, in which case it becomes so much easier because your test audience is right there."



Johnson's favorite part about the writing process is when her ideas amuse her, and her least favorite comes after the book is written. "[My] favorite part is when I come up with a plot idea that has me giggling and snickering and [laughing] evilly out loud. My least favorite and the hardest is coming up with plot summaries and book cover copy. Not my favorite part of the job."

It is impossible for the author to choose a favorite scene she has written. "[There] are too many to list. Pick a book, and I'll easily have four or five each."

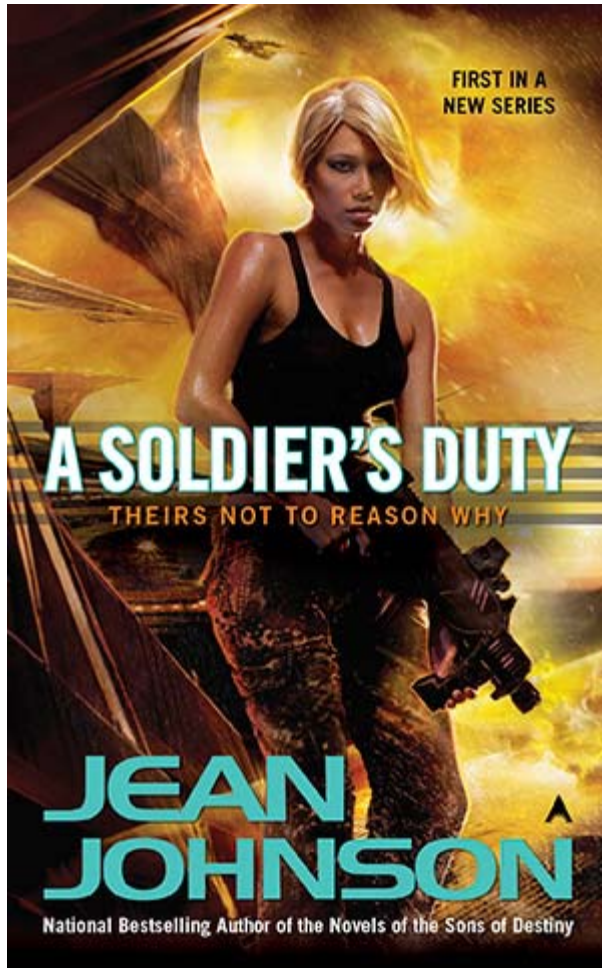
Johnson's writing process is never the same. "My writing process varies, depending on

how close I am to reaching my deadline. I can write a couple hundred words in a day, or a couple thousand. My personal best was over ten thousand words in a single day, in a write-off contest with Bart Leib, chief editor of *Crossed Genres*, which is an online short story magazine. When it's a "deadline month," my usual word goal is 3,000 minimum a day. I don't always make it, but I do try.

"...If you don't count the odd hours here and there coming up with the story idea, it takes me about three months to write [a novel], one month to edit it, so it ends up in the hands of my editor in four months. From there, it takes about eleven months at The Berkley Group (Johnson's books are published through Berkley and Ace, romance and sci-fi respectively) to get its status changed from "completed manuscript submitted" to "stocked on the bookstore shelves." Other publishers will vary, of course. More complex novels will take four months plus a month of editing, and if I'm in a hurry, two months plus a month of editing. But the average is three plus a month—not every author takes that much time to edit theirs, but I've built it into my schedule."

There is always some research involved in Johnson's writing. "Research for me is on-going. Most recently I did research on tea plantations and cheese making for my next novel, *The Shifter* (due out sometime next summer), and I am always reading *Science News* articles."

After her novels go to her editor, there are of course some things that end up cut from the final copy. "[For] the science fiction novel (*A Soldier's Duty*), my editor doesn't like songs so much in stories. But it's part of the culture. So she had me rip out some stuff...and then I insisted on putting back in one particular thing, and explained why it was so necessary. It literally made the scene work; without the song, the scene made no sense, and it would've gotten my main character into far too much trouble without it."



A Soldier's Duty is Johnson's latest novel, due out later this month. "*A Soldier's Duty* is the story I've been wanting to tell for a very long time. The premise is basically, what if you could see the future and all of its possibilities, and what if looking into that future, 300 years from your point in time which is late 25th century, you suddenly realized the great invasion is going to come and wipe out the entire galaxy. What would you do to stop it, when it's going to happen long after you're dead and gone?"

Johnson believes the novel will appeal to many readers. "It's a story about choices and consequences, with sacrifices and heroism. It explores the mental reasons why people serve in the military, plus it has all the physical reasons of kick-butt combat with explosions, aliens, and so forth. I've received numerous compliments from military personnel who have heard or read excerpts, and compliments from civilians who have worked on military bases. Now I know I'm setting up myself for all manner of complaints from military personnel who'll want to yell at me, "We don't do it that way in the real military!" But...It's fiction, set several hundred years into the future at that."

Johnson's novels generally have different challenges attached to each. "Some characters are always harder to write than others. It's rarely a conscious thing for secondary and tertiary characters, but an author has to at least subconsciously keep in mind a character's habits, mannerisms, speech patterns, education and knowledge level, prejudices, preferences, and

motivations. All manner of things. Particularly the motivation. If you don't know why your character is in the scene, your readers won't either. A waitress is a waitress is a waitress, and if they're a tertiary character that just blends into the general ambiance, fine, but if your waitress is acting like a prima donna and trying to be a secondary character, stealing some of the action and the drama, there had better be a sound, plot-related reason for it."

Generally the characters Johnson writes about are completely unique, though sometimes she sees a bit of real life creep in. "Every character I write is unique, though there may be bits and pieces melded together. The only character I've written so far whom I could base on any particular person, is the general physique of Serina (book three, *The Master*), who is tall and thin. I had my friend Fiamma in mind for that body-type. But Fiamma is a fiery redhead with freckles, and definitely Serina isn't.

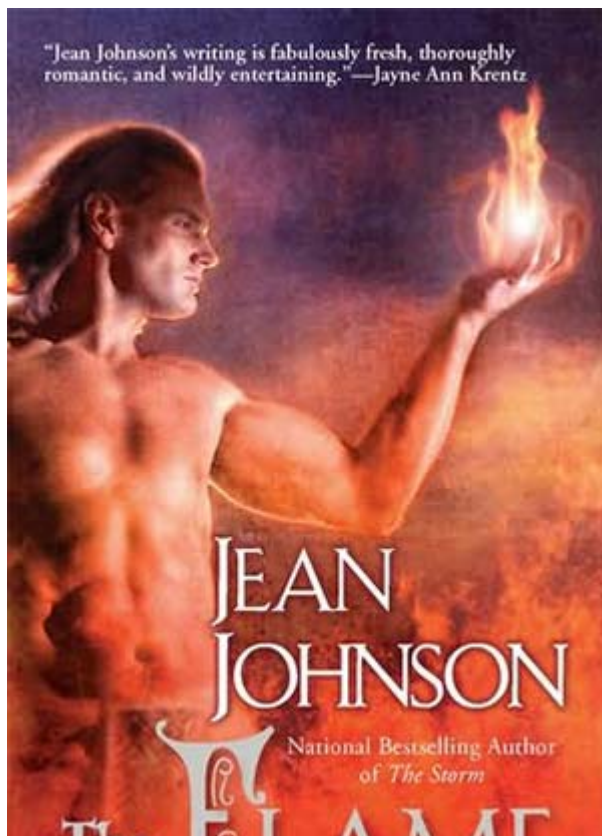
"As for Serina's inner characterization, she's definitely not like Fiamma, who is a very sharp, organized lady. Serina is an absentminded professor type, which is basically how I view myself. However, I am most definitely not adept at manipulating mathematics, magical or normal, and I've never lived in a nunnery. So even then, the character of Serina is only vaguely like so-and-so, and is still an amalgamation of several different physical, mental, and personality traits. Literally, any similarities to living or dead individuals are coincidental.

"For the character of Serina, I wanted someone tall and thin and an absentminded genius in type. I wanted that because the brothers were all related, so they all had to be at least somewhat similar, but I wanted the ladies to come in all shapes and sizes. Mariel, who shows up in book three and is the heroine of book four, *The Song*, is short and plump...she is one body archetype. Serina is another. Kelly is one type; Hope is another."

Fans sometimes try to give Johnson creative ideas, but she doesn't use them. "With rare exception, I don't listen to them. I don't want the copyright liability from someone with "a really great idea," and I don't need the help. I honestly have more stories waiting to be written than I could write in twenty years. And they breed new ideas. All the time. The only exceptions are my beta-ladies, whom I will bounce ideas off of, and solicit opinions. They and I have a trust system. They know it's my story, and they know I trust them to help me make good decisions. I do the same for Alexandra, who is working on her own stories—hers are in a completely different genre from mine, aside from romance being one of the elements, and she knows my suggestions aren't to write her story for her, but to help her make up her mind. Which is part of that trust, a very vital part. I may get suggestions from my beta-ladies that I'll accept, or maybe I'll like the original idea better. Sometimes it's like flipping a coin, where if it comes up heads but you really wanted tails and are disappointed, then you dig in your heels and go with tails anyway."

Johnson, whose creativeness is never idle, still has many other ideas floating around. "I have the *Sons of Destiny* universe to play around in, but I also have *The Flame Sea* universe...which is similar to *Sons of Destiny*, but is not the same universe - they only have one moon, for starters. Then I have the *13 Hours* universe, which hasn't even seen the light of day yet; I'd have to rewrite that one a bit. I also have the *Vulland* universe, where magic and machinery collide (steampunk fantasy), which I'm working on for a potential short story in the near future, plus possibly a series of steampunk fantasy romance novels, but I don't know yet.

"On the science fiction side, I have the *Theirs Not* universe which has several more books planned beyond the four of the current series, and the *Gengin* universe, which was featured in two of the tales in *Bedtime Stories*, which I could take in a dozen different directions easily. And then I have a dozen or so one-shot stories scattered throughout several more universes."



Johnson does not know what her decision would be if she was approached to make a movie from her novels. "I think visually and kinesthetically, and then try to describe what I'm seeing/feeling/sensing. It's a movie in my head, and I'm just doing my best to write it down. Except unlike movies, I also get to peer inside my characters' heads. I have tried picturing various scenes through the interpretation of a cinematographic media, and I think there could be some really cool visual effects, particularly for the *Theirs Not To Reason Why* series as the main character transitions in and out of the timeplains, as you'll understand when you read the books.

"But I'm leery of some executive or producer getting ahold of the story and trying to rip it to pieces in order to "market it better." And I put that in air-quotes because most of these guys have no clue what really gets the attention of the science fiction and fantasy communities. They may be good at making business decisions, but they're not necessarily fellow geeks.

"I also don't want any of my stories ending up in a "Beastmaster" situation. The original stories were science fiction written by Andre Norton. The first novel was tapped

for a movie, but the Hollywood types literally turned it from an awesome science fiction drama into a cheesy prehistoric/fantasy flick. Norton pulled her name from the movie, but that was all she could do at that point."

Johnson gives this advice for aspiring authors out there. "To borrow a famous ad quote, *Just Do It*. Sit your butt down and write. Write write write write write. And when you're done with that, write write write write write some more."

The seventh book in the *Sons of Destiny* series, *The Flame*, is being rereleased in mass market paperback tomorrow, July 5th from Berkley Sensations. Johnson's new novel, *A Soldier's Duty*, will be released July 26th from Ace Books. All of Johnson's books are available wherever romance books are sold.

To learn more about Jean Johnson or her books, you can visit her [official site](#) or follow her on [twitter](#) or [Facebook](#). She also has a blog on [Tumblr](#).

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