



Inside

RACING CALIFORNIA

An interview with award-winning author, former cycling journalist, and teacher

JANET NICHOLS LYNCH

Q: Janet, what inspired you to write this book?

A: I have had a love affair with the bicycle since the day before first grade when my dad got on my sister's bike alongside mine and showed me the two-mile route to school. I commuted by bike throughout elementary school and college, and as a teacher today, I continue to pedal to work every day, rain or shine. If I were confined to a metal box on wheels, I just wouldn't feel like myself. Also, I've raced and cycle-toured in Europe and the United States, including a three-thousand-mile trek from Phoenix to Washington, DC.

Q: As an avid cyclist yourself, tell us how you chose to focus the plot around the Amgen Tour of California, versus something like the Tour de France.

A: While I'm a fan of both tours, I stick to the axiom "Write what you know." I've lived in California my whole life except for a few years spent in Arizona. Evan, my main character, is from Phoenix, so those stomping grounds are covered in the novel, too. The route of the eight-day Amgen Tour of California changes each year, and I chose to use in my novel my favorite stages: my birthplace, Sacramento; the foothills south of Yosemite; my hometown, Visalia; the delightful Danish community of Solvang; and the jewel in the crown—the breathtaking ride along the Pacific coast between San Francisco and Santa Cruz. I have access to it all, and I pedaled nearly every mile of the course. In the future, I'd love to write a novel about the Tour de France, and I even think it might be intriguing to follow Evan to the big time; however, I'm not one to write sequels, unless of course, readers clamor for one.



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Q: *How many Amgen Tours of California have you attended yourself, and have you participated in any?*

A: Every year I attend as many stages as possible. The years 2009 and 2010 were especially exciting because in those years Visalia was designated as the start of a stage. Seeing the riders and entourage up close and personal is better than watching the circus come to town. Everyone comes out for the race, cheering on the sidelines and writing fan letters to the riders in yellow chalk on the streets. I worked as a volunteer on a single block of the course, making sure no car backed out of a driveway and plowed into the riders as they passed. It takes thousands of volunteers and months of planning for the race to come through; then—*Swish!*—it's gone in a whirlwind down the road. This year is going to be particularly exciting for me because my book tour precedes the stages in Santa Rosa, San Francisco, San Jose, Clovis, Bakersfield, and LA. I get to sign some books, watch a stage, sign some more books, watch another stage—all through California.

Q: *Evan, the main character in the book, is an incredibly talented athlete who takes a lot of risks to make his dreams come true. When you raced, did you face these same challenges?*

A: Bicycle racing requires nerves of steel, which I never possessed. Evan and his ilk have to be dauntless gladiators, willing to risk bloody crashes and serious injury. Even on a good day, bike racers suffer severe pain in legs and lungs. Evan also has the strength and speed that I never had. Furthermore, the training is extremely time-consuming; a rider puts in at least two hundred exhausting miles a week. In my day, my best event was the twenty-five-mile time trial, out alone and apart from the packed peloton. I took some years off competition to start my family, and later I returned as a runner and a triathlete. A run or swim workout can take only an hour, while cycling usually takes several. The bike leg in a triathlon is like a time trial. I like the independence of running and triathloning as opposed to the teamwork of bike racing. I'm a fierce competitor, but I'm competing against myself, and after all these years, I'm still setting personal bests.

Q: *What was your greatest challenge when writing **Racing California**?*

A: I was focused on masterminding a thrilling bicycle race, while my fabulously talented editor reminded me that Evan's personal life needs to be compelling, too. Honestly, I struggled to get the sparks flying between Evan and his girlfriend, Glory, and I can only hope that I finally succeeded. Another big help I got from my editor was the reminder that I wasn't writing a travelogue, and an eighteen-year-old cyclist tearing through the terrain at top speed would not notice every rock and cow along the way.



Q: *You are also a teacher. What grade do you teach? Did any of your students inspire the characters in this story?*

A: I teach sophomore world history and senior English, and my students give me about ten ideas a week. A student will do or say something hilarious or off-the-wall and I'll say, "I'm going to put you in a book!" or "This is why I write young adult." I didn't set out to be a YA novelist, but since I live in a kids' world, that's what I find myself writing. My two previous YA novels from Holiday House, *Messed Up* and *Addicted to Her*, actually grew out of students I've had and incidents in my classroom, but this time I started with a topic, the Amgen Tour of California.

Q: *You have a master of music degree and taught piano when you were younger. Do you still practice and teach? What was your musical focus, and how did you venture into writing?*

A: My love of music has never strayed from my heart, and I've poured it into my forthcoming novel from Holiday House, *My Beautiful Hippie*. My first two books were nonfiction works about American and women composers. I still practice the piano at least an hour most days; however, I no longer teach or perform. I believe music and writing are very closely associated in the brain; many people are drawn to both. Studying the piano has given me the discipline and stick-to-itiveness novel writing requires. Just as with learning a piano piece, I have to go over and over each section, then struggle to fit each of those sections into a cohesive story, which also requires repeated honing. And just as I'm most productive in piano playing while working on several pieces in various stages—I'm also working on three novels: while promoting *Racing California*, I'm editing *My Beautiful Hippie* and pounding out the first draft of *Ring of Fire*, about a teen who becomes ensnared in a destructive cult.

Q: *With the summer Olympics coming up this year, who are you rooting for in the cycling race? Any predictions based on who you think is most talented?*

A: The Olympic Road Race is a single-day event, often over an unchallenging, flat course, ending in a field sprint. There are so many talented riders throughout the world that it would be hard for me to predict a winner; however, if it does come down to a sprint, the gold medalist may very well be Mark Cavendish. There's also a women's road race at the Olympics, while women do not race the tours. The Olympic Road Race is a short story, while the tours are novels. It's much more compelling for me to watch the drama of a race unfold over days and weeks. My favorite Amgen Tour of California riders are three-time champion Levi Leipheimer and last year's winner, Chris Horner. They were teammates for several seasons but have gone their separate ways this year, so the plot thickens. As for the Tour de France, Andy Schleck has been the Best Young Rider for three years and has come in second overall the last two years. I'm rooting for him to capture the yellow jersey.

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