

Lief's Book is JPP—Just Plain Perfect

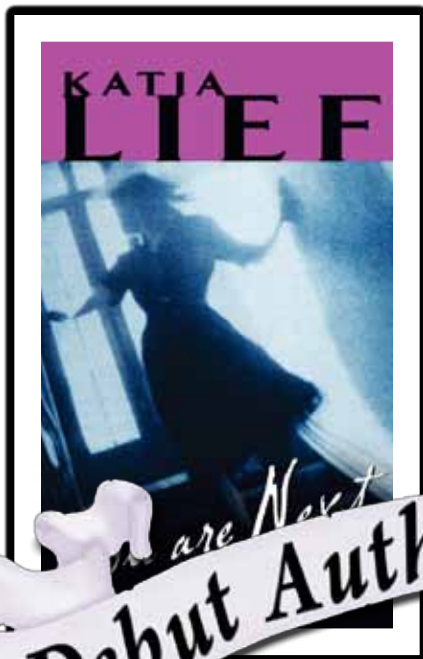
Interview by: Suspense Magazine

We were sitting at the bar of the Grand Hyatt Hotel Time Square when we were first introduced to the writing of Katia Lief. Having met with several publishers throughout our day, we were now slugging around a small but growing heavier by the minute bag of books we had begun receiving during our stops through the city. Sitting down, drink in hand, with our contacts from Harper Collins, I was frankly relieved they clearly didn't carry the offering of additional books. I love a good book, in fact, I love a lot of books, but I didn't want to have to plead with my husband to add to his already heavy load in the stifling summer heat.



We sat discussing their work, our work and the changes in the publishing industry when one of our new friends grabbed her purse and smiled stating she had brought me a present. I mentally groaned and laughed out loud at the excitement on her face. Harper Collins signed a new author—one that she knew we would love—and handed me a small card with the download instructions.

We don't often have the opportunity to see the excitement on the faces of publicists as they present new found treasures. Hearing about Katia's writing style, talent and personality first hand had us sold before the second drink was ordered and after reading her work, we're sure our fans will be sold too.



Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): "You are Next" is an *amazing* serial murderer story. You weaved the clues from the "Domino Killer" (JPP) in a way that completely threw and enthralled me at the same time. How did you come up with the idea?

Katia Lief (KL): *I was inspired to write "You are Next" after reading an article in The New York Times called "Suicide Bigger Threat for Police Than Criminals" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/08/nyregion/08suicide.html?pagewanted=1>). The story moved me deeply and got me thinking. I'm a crime writer, but I'm also interested in the psychology, life experiences and motivations of my characters, so I was naturally intrigued by the overwhelming stress cops experience while doing their jobs. I imagined what would happen to a cop who lost everything that was really important to her—her family and her career. I asked myself how it would feel to be suicidal and then be confronted*

with the killer who destroyed your life. I knew she would want to die, but she would also want to protect other family members who might be threatened. I knew instinctively that she would be energized, enraged, distraught and fearless. That morning, the first five pages of “You are Next” flowed out—including the title, the protagonist Karin Schaeffer, the bad guy JPP, the domino theme and the conflict that would drive the story forward. I can honestly say that my best ideas have hit me out of the blue, so I try to be ready for them.

S. MAG.: Without telling the ending, did you mean for it to end the way it did? I don’t mind telling you, you had me going; I was scared.

KL: I always think I know the ending when I start a book and then I always change it as I go, so I end up surprising myself along with everyone else. I had no idea when I started “You are Next” that JPP would have a partner who would turn out to be even more dangerous than he was. Karin, Mac and I were really surprised by that!

S. MAG.: Your killer was truly evil. How did you come to write him?

KL: The scariest adversaries are the ones we don’t understand. The inscrutability of evil is compelling and terrifying—I try to work with that. I imagine the scariest bad guy I can think of and I also take inspiration from real life stories in the news as well as other fictional criminals that have struck a chord for me. I think the most terrifying fictional bad guy I’ve ever encountered was Frederick Clegg in John Fowles’ 1963 novel “The Collector”. I often think of Clegg when I write my bad guys. The extent this man was cut off from the humanity of his victim, and yet so effectively camouflaged as an average bureaucrat, was chilling. I also often think of Patricia Highsmith’s Ripley character. The innocuous killer, the one you don’t expect to hurt you, is the most terrifying.

S. MAG.: I know it can be very scary to read about certain characters such as JPP. Were you scared when you wrote him? What scares you?

KL: I probe for a visceral sensation of anxiety when I create the bad guys. You can’t write “he looked scary” and expect a reader to feel it; instead, you have to find a way to evoke it, which can be tricky. When I revise, repeatedly reading and editing and to some extent rewriting the manuscript, I need to feel fear every single time the bad guy steps onto the page and that’s how I know it’s working. But to be honest, even though I’m not a great sleeper, I don’t lose sleep over the evil-doers in my novels because I know they’re not real (even if they could be). If you really want to hear me scream, set loose a mouse in my kitchen!

S. MAG.: From the moment you were born in France to an American couple, you have been on the go, doing a plethora of things. What drives you?

KL: I was ambitious and independent from a young age, partly due to circumstances and partly by nature. I learned early to be self-disciplined and work hard, and I love to write. When I found I could earn a living writing novels, I went for it.

S. MAG.: You have books written under the pseudo name Kate Pepper. Any plans to write under Katia Spiegelman as well?

KL: My first two books, literary novels published by a respected small press based in London, were put out under my birth name Katia Spiegelman. A decade later, married with kids, I impulsively took a pseudonym when I began publishing thrillers. Then I realized that I had taken on too many names...so I am consolidating now and plan to write under the name I live by, which is Katia Lief.

S. MAG.: You started writing as Kate, but then you—in your words—integrated with Katia and then put Lief at the end of Spiegelman. Does each pseudonym have her own way of writing even though they've both done suspense?

KL: *No. I am the exact same writer regardless of what kind of novel I'm writing. The voice of a given story belongs more to the narrator and the events in the novel that propel the story forward, than to me personally. If it's a fast-paced story, as in "You are Next", the tone naturally tightens. I follow the demands of the story and at the same time I try to learn and grow as a writer from book to book.*

S. MAG.: Since the supportive note from your third grade teacher to your parents, have they encouraged you?

KL: *Both my parents have always encouraged me to write. My mother was an elementary school teacher—in fact in fourth grade, she was my first creative writing teacher—and my father is a classical musician and retired college professor. I grew up in a family of artists and my children are extremely creative. In my family, nearly everyone is a writer or painter or musician or actor or filmmaker or photographer, you name it. It's in the blood.*

S. MAG.: What do your children think about mom being an author?

KL: *I get the sense they're proud of me for writing and publishing, but I've never allowed them to read my work because of the subject matter. I'm an infamously overprotective mother, which I ascribe to all the true crime research I've done. I imagine someday they'll pick up my books and then I'll find out what they really think of me as an author.*

S. MAG.: After enrolling in Simon's Rock Early College at the age of fifteen, graduating from Sarah Lawrence College at the age of nineteen and then writing so many well-received books, what's next?

KL: *I always say the three professions I regret not pursuing are gymnast, pastry chef and Supreme Court justice. Maybe I can train for one of those professions now. But back to reality, I expect to write novels until the day I die...though I would very much love to do it in an Italian villa, and eat pasta every night with my husband Oliver, who is the funniest person I know.*

Suspense Magazine would like to thank Katia for taking the time to chat with us. We can't wait to see what's on the shelves next! To learn more about Katia and her books, please visit her website at www.katialief.com. ■

Suspense Magazine Review of "You are Next"

When former police detective Karin Schaffer's family is brutally murdered, she comes apart at the seams. She is an empty shell in every sense of the word and feels she'd be better off dead. Both her husband and daughter were murdered by JPP (Just Plain Psycho) or as he was also known, "The Domino Killer" because he would leave dominos at the crime scene as a clue about who his next victim will be. Mild-mannered Martin Price—if that's his real name—does his best to torture Karin and keep her chasing him while trying to figure out what he'll do next in order to catch him.

It's not long before they get their man. With JPP in prison, the question now becomes, who took her niece Suzanna and is she still alive—unlike his other victims? With dominos left behind as a clue, it's a race against time to find out if they have a copy cat killer or if JPP has a partner. What do you think?

Lief pens a diabolically brilliant story and takes us on an amazing, wild ride of, I can't wait to see what happens next, all the while keeping uppermost in our minds what's driving Karin. Her family, along with her very caring psychiatrist Joyce somehow keeps her going, even in her darkest moments. With her old partner Mac, Karin will not rest until she finds Suzanna and untangles the web of lies and murder to find out what's really going on with all the players in this fantastic mystery.

Reviewed by: Terri Ann Armstrong author of "Morning Menace" and Executive Editor for *Suspense Magazine* ■