From her genre-defying hit series to her mind-boggling writing process, nothing about Diana Gabaldon has ever fit neatly into a box. And that’s just how she likes it.

BY ZACHARY PETIT
What does Diana Gabaldon write?
That’s a tough question, one that in many ways has just kept Gabaldon up for the past 38 hours.

It’s been an impossible quandary since the very start. Outlander, her debut novel and adventure-laden signature series about a firebrand nurse who time travels back to 18th century Scotland, has so many elements from so many genres, that Gabaldon’s publisher nearly canceled the contract and gave her the book back.

“They couldn’t decide how to publish it,” she says. “They said, ‘Nothing we can do with this—it’s going to fall flat on its face.’”

But it didn’t. Dell eventually decided to release the paperback as romance—after promising Gabaldon they’d use dignified covers, and reposition it as general fiction if it hit the bestseller list (she didn’t want to cut off the entire male half of her audience).

Well, it hit the list—dominated it, in fact—and people have been trying to categorize the series ever since. But Gabaldon doesn’t like genre labels, and she believes her multi-genre style has played a part in the books’ appeal. It’s safe to assume her publisher does, too: One reason she’s been up for 38 hours straight is because Dell sent her on a cross-country conference circuit to showcase her versatility, everywhere from the Romance Writers of America conference to the Historical Novel Society Conference to the ThrillerFest conference.

Truly, she’s a bit of an outlander in the authorial world, a testament to the fact that when it comes to writing, there really are no concrete rules or parameters. She earned a Bachelor of Science in zoology, a Master of Science in marine biology, and a doctorate in quantitative behavioral ecology; freelanced comics for Disney (her favorites were the Donald Duck books); worked as a professor for more than a decade and became one of the first experts in scientific computation; and then began writing about her specialty for mainstream outlets.

Eventually, she decided she wanted to write a novel for practice, and figured a historical novel might be best. While watching the British cult hit “Dr. Who,” she became intrigued by a lesser Scottish character from the 1700s—and chose to run with it, even though she’d never been to Scotland. Eighteen months later (after developing a fascinating outline-free, puzzle-esque writing process) the book was finished.

Following the release of Outlander, Gabaldon penned six more books in the series; an Outlander compendium; a handful of tie-in Lord John books (the latest, The Scottish Prisoner, debuted in November); an Outlander graphic novel; and numerous stories for anthologies. Right now she’s even contracted for two contemporary mysteries set in Phoenix, where the Arizona native lives.

Through it all, she’s sold more than 17 million books, scored No. 1 New York Times debuts, and even won the RWA’s RITA Award for Best Book of the Year in 1991.

Like her novels, Gabaldon’s career defies convention—and so do her brilliant wisdoms on the craft. In her fast-talking, laugh-laden manner, here are her thoughts on her process, genres, how to never get writer’s block and everything in between.

Not many people write a novel for practice and end up having it be a bestseller. Do you think writing a book for practice is a good step for a writer?
I don’t know that I would totally recommend it. It has a lot of advantages, though, in that if you don’t expect it to be published, you feel no constraint whatever. And that was the chief advantage for me. If you are sure yourself that you’re not writing for publication, you feel very free in what you do. I hear people talk about their inner critics all the time, and evidently I was born without one. People worry a lot; they’re afraid to write intimate scenes for fear that their mother will read it or their first grade teacher or something. Well, I wasn’t worried because nobody was going to read it. [Laughs.] So I was able to be totally honest in what I wrote.

Do you think people should write with audience in mind?
No. I don’t see how anybody writes with an audience
in mind. … It’s not that I don’t care what the audience thinks—and, in fact, I love to talk to them and hear what they think and all that—but it’s not going to affect anything I do.

Let’s talk about genre labels. Your books were originally sold as romance and were reshelved as fiction. So far my books [have] sold with evident success as literature, fiction, historical fiction, historical nonfiction … also science fiction, fantasy, mystery, romance, military history … gay and lesbian fiction, and horror.

If you had to peg them down, where would you put them?
They’re just fiction. Because when I wrote them, when I wrote *Outlander*, I didn’t intend it to be anything in particular. Consequently I have been reading since I was 3 years old—I read everything—and consequently I just used any literary element that I liked. So they really are indescribable.

Do you think writers should label their work as a certain genre when they’re trying to sell it?
Now it’s become a little less important than it used to be. It used to be you really had to have a genre even to start, but as it is, the lines have blurred quite a lot of late, and people are now beginning to much more commonly use elements of different genres, of this, that and the other. There are romantic suspense or romantic thrillers, there are medical thrillers, there’s paranormal romance, there’s paranormal suspense romance, you name it.

So you can get away with a little more, but at the same time it’s difficult when you’re pitching something because what an agent or editor is looking for is a very strong, compelling story, and if you start right out by saying, “Well, it’s a paranormal suspense thriller with elements of this and that,” it gives the impression that you may not be adequately focused. And if that’s your case I would just not mention the genre thing at all. I would just start, “Well, it’s a story about—” You know, tell me the character, tell me the conflict, tell me the resolution.

You had a lot of writing experience even before you started writing *Outlander*.
My query letter to the man who became my first agent—he was the only one I queried (I picked him carefully)—was a short query letter, and it said, “Dear Mr. Knowlton, I’ve been writing and selling nonfiction for myself for several years.” Subtext here being, *I am a professional,* I write, I know one end of a sentence from the other, people are willing to pay me for what I write, I do it well, I’m a professional, I know the business, I meet deadlines. And that’s something very important to say in your first sentence. So [the] second sentence was, “Now that I’m writing a novel, I understand that I need good literary representation.” In other words, *I know what you are, I know your value.* I said, “You’ve been recommended to me by John Stith and Judy McNaught, and several other people.” And the subtext there is, *I have researched you, I’ve talked to all these people, all of whom will tell you about me, I have references.* …

I didn’t even try to describe the books. I knew I couldn’t. I said, “I have this very long historical novel; I don’t want to waste your time—would you be willing to read excerpts from it?” I didn’t tell him I wasn’t through writing it, excerpts were all I had, but he very kindly called back and said yes, he would. This was a very short query letter—I didn’t say anything about genre, I didn’t describe the story, I just made it clear I was worth looking at.

Did your science background have any impact when you were writing *Outlander*?
Well, yes and no. It’s not direct. Most people are confused by this because they say, “How did you get from being a scientist to being a novelist?” The answer is simple: I wrote a book. [Laughs.] But what they’re really saying is science seems to us to be cold and linear and clinical, and writing seems to us to be creative and warm and fuzzy and colorful. They think it’s a dichotomy, and it’s not. Science and art are just two sides of the same coin, and what they both rest on is the ability to perceive patterns in chaos, and be able to draw those out and lineate them for a third party. And that’s what you do, whether it’s science or any kind of art, whether it’s fictional writing or otherwise.
In terms of your writing philosophy, I read that you don’t plan a book out ahead of time. That would not be fun.

Tell me more about your process. I talk to a lot of writers, and about half of us are linear. And they need to know where the beginning and the end is, at least in rough terms, and they have sort of a moderate outline at least, some with very detailed stuff with index cards and wall charts. And they benefit from this kind of analytical approach. I couldn’t possibly write that way to save my life. My brain does not work in a linear fashion. And consequently I don’t know anything about a book when I begin, except roughly who it’s about. … I think in shapes and patterns, and so what I need to start on any given day is what I call a kernel, which is a very vivid image, a line of dialogue, an emotional ambiance—anything I can see or sense concretely. And so if I’ve got this image I will write it down in a line or two, and then I sit there and stare at it; I take words out and I put them back; move clauses around. And what I’m doing here is using the conscious part of my mind to make that sentence as clean and elegant and euphonious as it can be, and to describe this whatever it is in the clearest terms I can.

Well, while the front of my mind is occupied with this, the back of my mind is going around kicking at the compost and asking questions, and I’m thinking in the back of my mind: How is the light falling? It’s coming in low. Well, it’s a glass window. I’m not in a cabin, I’m in somebody’s drawing room because there’s a glass window. What kind of light is it? It’s low, it’s blue, it’s winter light, it’s a late winter afternoon. … That’s how it works. And so gradually, little by little by little, this scene accretes around that kernel.

Because you don’t write chronologically, how do you make it all piece together? Or is that just sort of the inherent magic? A little bit of it is magic, I mean, truth be told. But there is actually a conscious aspect to it. It takes me usually two to five days to finish a scene because by the time I have been through it, I will have been through it hundreds and hundreds of times. I don’t write and then revise; it’s a continuous process. But when I finish a scene, it is finished. It’s as good as I can make it then. Well, I don’t usually know what happens next, so I go and look for another kernel somewhere. Often that comes from the research material, sometimes just from the little bits of daily life you’re going through all the time. And so I begin to write these little kernels and do the research at the same time. Usually they’re not connected, so I have these handfuls of disconnected chunks.

As I write, I’m evolving this timeline across the back of my mind and picking out those specific historical events that I kind of want to live through, and those that I want to refer to obliquely to anchor the reader in space and time. Things begin to accrete, I write something [and] I think, Oh this explains why that happened. So I put it in front, and I see this longer piece, I know what has to happen next, and I can write that. And so they begin to stick together in larger and larger pieces, and they begin to stick to the events on my timeline, and you say, well, this has to have happened before the battle of such and such, and if that’s the case, it has to have been spring. … I write usually about 1,000 words a day—[it’s] kind of my quota through most of the book. But then I hit the final frenzy, which is where I’ve seen the shape, and there’s enough of it there that I know everything about this book. I don’t need to do any more research, I know what happens, and it’s just, how long can I sit at the computer without falling over? So at that point I’m working 12 or 14 hours a day.

You’ve said your three rules of writing are: Read, write, and don’t stop. If you had to add a fourth, what would it be?

[Laughs.] Restrain yourself. The thing is, especially with beginning writers and all that, they’re excited by their material—they’re thinking, Oh my God, this is such an exciting scene, there’s all this stuff happening … and I’ve got to get that on the page. And they get in their own way. They pile on adjectives and more words and extra phrases, and you get these long convoluted paragraphs, and it’s because they’re sort of jumping up and down and saying, “It’s really exciting, it’s really exciting!” As my husband says, it’s like laughing at your own jokes; don’t do that. Stand back out of your way. Anybody who works in graphic design will tell you that the white space is as important as the image. That’s true of writing as well. You don’t want to be in your own way, and you don’t want your emotion to be preeminent; it is the emotion of the people on the page. So, you know, that’s why you can the adjectives and be very careful with the adverbs and all that.
What do you do when you get stuck?
I never do. I learned early on. When I began writing *Outlander* I was a full-time research professor at ASU, I also wrote full time for the computer press (I was an expert in scientific computation—it's easy to be an expert if there are only six people who do what you do), and I had three small children. So I had to keep writing, and I had to deliver things. I learned long since that anything I write, it sticks two-thirds of the way down the page. Anything—fiction, nonfiction, whatever. And I get that far fairly easily, and then—nothing.

Well, this happens to everybody and usually the response is, *Get up, go to the bathroom, get a cup of coffee, take the dog for a walk.* Well, often people don't come back—that's why they don't finish their books! I couldn't do that; I had to stay in there. And so I learned pretty fast if I was writing a grant proposal and it stuck, I would just pick up the next software review project on my pile, start writing that; when it stuck, I'd pick up a scene from the novel and work on that; when that stuck, one of the other two would have come loose. So I was able to rotate through these and stay there, keep being productive.

There's a lot to be said about being that insanely busy. There is. You get stuff done. But, you know, I profited by that, and I still work on multiple projects. I usually am working on two books concurrently at least, and I have a nonfiction thing going in the back, and then there's all the little things that people want you to do.

We've talked about a lot of good writing advice. **What do you think is the worst writing advice that you hear out there?**

*Write what you know* is by far the most damaging and stupid thing I've ever heard people say about writing. I mean, I know what they *mean* by it, but it has an imposing effect because it causes people to think that you can only write about your own life, which is, you know, silly on the face of it. I mean, you have an imagination for a purpose. You also have intelligence for a purpose. It really should be phrased as, *Don't write stuff you don't know about.* But the thing is, you can find out about anything you want to write about, therefore you're not constrained, or you're constrained only by your own laziness.

**Is there anything you'd like to add about writing in general?**
It really, really is *read, write, and don't stop.* But on the personal side, perhaps, a lot of beginning writers—and not just women, but particularly women—have a tremendous amount of guilt over doing it because they do realize that it's not a sure thing, and they're risking a lot of time and energy and so forth, and they have a tremendous amount of demands on that time and energy.

You know, everybody wants a piece of you if you're Mommy. And they want it all the time—everybody wants all of you all the time. And therefore to see you doing something like this, I can say they feel threatened—they don't like it, and they will let you know in no uncertain terms. And so you are constantly having not only to fight off your family, but also your own feelings and guilt. What I do say to people who come up and tell me this, I say, “How much television do you watch?” I say, “Do you feel like you're depriving your family if you're watching television? OK, write during that time. Don't watch television, and don't feel guilty.” [Laughs.]

How do you achieve balance nowadays, if there is any balance?
My kids grew up. [Laughs.]

You've branched out in so many areas over the years—where else do you want to take your writing? I actually have a contract for two [new contemporary novels], but the publisher is not jumping up and down waiting for those because they are jumping up and down waiting for the next main *Outlander* book, and the next Lord John and all that. So those will be along in due course, and then the contemporary novels are down there.

Now, there is a small character from my second book, called Master Raymond, who intrigues everyone—they want to know, who is this guy? Well, I know who he is, and he has his own book or books to begin. And other than that, things come along and talk to me. You know, I just listen. **WD**

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