

SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL™

THE MAGAZINE OF CHILDREN'S, YOUNG ADULT & SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

JUNE 1992
A CAHNERS/RR BOWKER PUBLICATION



LOIS DUNCAN
Margaret A. Edwards
1992 Award Winner

**School Library Media Certification Requirements;
State by State Staffing & Funding for School Libraries**

A Conversation With Lois Duncan

by Roger Sutton

Lois Duncan will be awarded the fourth SLJ/YALSA Margaret A. Edwards Award at a luncheon during ALA's Annual Conference in San Francisco. The award "gives recognition to those authors whose book or books have provided young adults with a window through which they can view the world, and which will help them to grow and understand themselves and their role in society." Duncan has been cited for her books Chapters: My Growth as a Writer (Little, Brown, 1982); I Know What You Did Last Summer (Little, 1973); Killing Mr. Griffin (Little, 1978); Ransom (Dell, 1984); Summer of Fear (Little, 1976); and The Twisted Window (Delacorte, 1987).



You've been around for a long time. How do you think your work has changed over the years?

Duncan: It's changed tremendously. I started submitting stories to magazines when I was ten, and made my first sale at 13. I wrote for teenage publications, particularly *Seventeen* magazine, all during my teens. I wrote my first young adult novel when I was 20. *Debutante Hill*. Well, the title tells you everything you need to know. I wrote *Debutante Hill* because at that stage of my life the only thing I knew about was gentle adolescence. It was

a time when a lot of the threats that are out there for our young people today were not there.

Do you think the world is a different place now?

Duncan: Yes. I started so long ago that I have worked my way through stages as the world changed and society changed. I found my books changed along with what was happening in my life. When I wrote *Debutante Hill* in 1958, it was returned to me for revisions because I had a 19-year-old take a beer. My editor said that no librarian would ever allow it on the shelf. So I had to change it to a Coca-Cola.

It wouldn't have been possible to publish Killing Mr. Griffin as a "teen novel" in 1958, or even in the 60s.

Duncan: No, and it wouldn't have been possible for me to write it then, either. I didn't know about such things. I was raised in a very loving, gentle home, we had rules and I obeyed them and all my friends obeyed them. I didn't know violence existed; we didn't even have television to let us know that. And the books I was writing at the beginning of my career are bounced off the life I'd lived. As I got older and began facing life's problems and had children of my own and saw the things they were facing, my view of life

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Lois Duncan



Chapters: My Growth as a Writer

changed. I was divorced. I'd never known a divorced person my whole life. But I was divorced at, let's see, 27, and had three young children to support. I had not been to college, I'd never held a job, I had to grow up very fast and learn how to handle myself in the rat race. My oldest daughter is now 36, and there was a 16-year difference between her and her youngest sibling. There were five kids, and they fell into different brackets of change. And, they kept growing! My oldest children were born in a time when drugs were not an issue in high school. But later, drugs had come along, and violence was coming into the schools. The whole world seemed to be changing in that 16 year space between oldest child and youngest. I was so invested in all of them that my view of the world, and my view of what teenagers were faced with, kept changing as well. I think my books got stronger, and they were certainly feeding off different emotions than I had earlier.

Sometimes I think we're back to the old days. In a lot of the new novels, for instance, no one smokes unless it's the bad guy.

Duncan: Well, I'm for that.

Do you read YA books?

Duncan: I read 'em in spurts. I go read everything, and then I'll go for a while and not do it. I like to see what everybody's doing, it keeps me up to

"I always thought everything I wrote was pure fiction"

date on what my colleagues are turning out. I learn from them too, because there are so many very, very good writers out there now, I find that reading what they're doing helps me with what I'm doing.

Would you call yourself a YA writer?

Duncan: As far as the fact that most of my books have been YA novels, yes, I'm a YA novel-writer, but I really run the gamut. Until a couple of months ago, I was a contributing editor for *Woman's Day*, doing a lot of woman's-type nonfiction. I have a number of small children's picture books out; my oldest daughter Robin is a musician and producer of audiocassettes and we've collaborated on a series of musical cassettes for young children. I tried my best to make a mix because I didn't want to be the kind of author who wrote the same book over and over. In between novels I would do a little child's book, or I would do magazine articles for adults, to cleanse the palate.

Probably more than some writers who handled the heavy subject matter, I made a conscious effort to entertain. I was always aware that I was competing with television, and that fiction books today need to utilize many of the elements of television in order to capture and hang on to the reader. Kids are so conditioned to being able to flip that channel if they don't get instant entertainment that I realized that I could lose them early on by starting out in a manner that was difficult for them. I had to pull them into the story quickly and also use a good many television techniques: a lot of dialogue, not too much description, and pace that kept moving along. So I tried to use entertainment techniques to develop a readership who would want to read my books, who wouldn't just drop them and run and turn on the tube.

What do you think that is, the ability that you have to write a real page-turner? Do you think that's an inherent gift, or do you use conscious techniques?

Duncan: I think it's some of both. I certainly use conscious techniques, but also it seems to be a natural way for me to write.

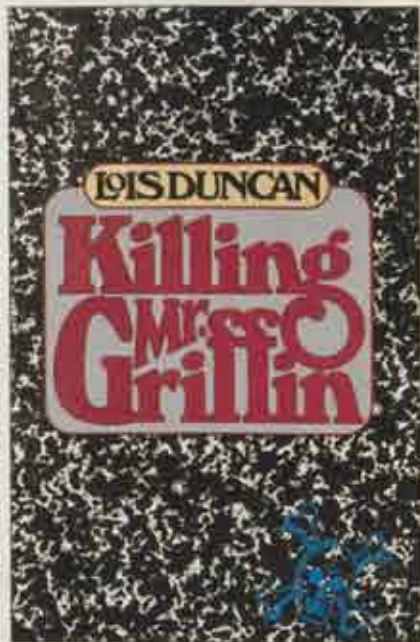
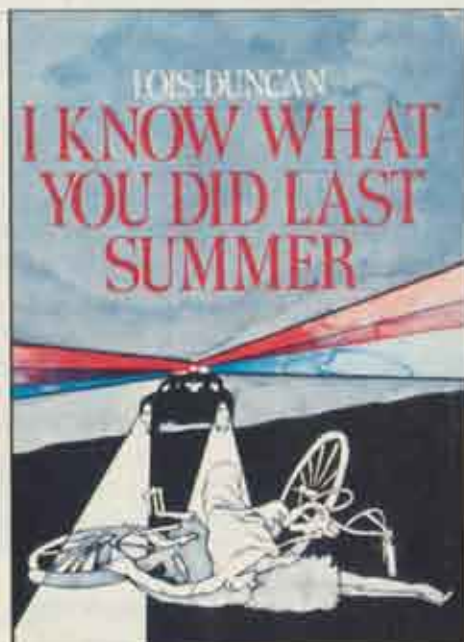
Do you know what's going to happen at the end when you start?

Duncan: Yeah, I know how it's going to end. I basically know the major developments that will lead me toward the end. I know about where they're going to happen, and I know that I'm probably going to catch the reader early on, and once I have him caught I will establish my characters and set up my situation. Then I will have things starting to happen and will build towards the end of the book, and the pace will pick up as we near the end. And I know I'm going to need certain suspenseful scenes, certain strong scenes strategically placed to pace the book correctly. I have all that in my mind before I get started. I don't have every detail of the book in my mind, but I have my road map so I know where I'm going to be at different stages of the book, and I know where the destination is.

Your books—I'm thinking particularly of Killing Mr. Griffin as well as some of the supernatural books—have had trouble getting into some schools and public libraries because people don't approve of your subject matter or your way of handling it. Have you heard from people who were troubled by your books in that way?

Duncan: Only secondhand. I don't usually know about the times that they're challenged unless somebody tells me after the fact. So I just have not been very involved in that. It's hard—you invest in one book so thoroughly, and when that one's done, it's done; then you turn to the next book. So it's quite hard for me to go back and re-immense myself in *Killing Mr. Griffin*. The jump-off point for that book was the psychopathic character Mark, who was based upon my oldest daughter's first real boyfriend. He was a very sick young man, and he was the most charming young man you could ever meet. It wasn't until things got very bad that we discovered he was

the kind of guy who would swerve in the road to run over a dog. The personality of that young man stayed in my mind long after my daughter had broken up with him. I couldn't write about him right away, but I started thinking, "These people—they're *there*." They don't just spring full-grown out of an oyster shell. The Charles Mansons of this world, the Hitlers of this world, they are children, and they grow up, and they go to high school. As young people, they are becoming what they're later going to be. They're very charismatic people, usually, and teenagers are so easily influenced, so easily led by charismatic people, that I started thinking about what could happen with a teenage psychopath of that type in a high school setting and what type of young people he would attract as followers. They would need to have certain weaknesses, they would need to be needy young people, and yet I didn't want them to be bad because I don't think they're all bad, by any means, those who are attracted to such people. So I began building on that concept. Then I thought "What could he make them do?" The book moved from there. Also, I liked the character of Mr. Griffin. Looking at my own children, I realized that some of the demanding teachers that they couldn't stand when they were in school were later, when they grew up, teachers they remembered with great affection and gratitude, because those were the teachers who had made the biggest



"I found my books changed along with what was happening in my life."

difference in their lives. I wanted Mr. Griffin to be one of those teachers, symbolic of that kind of teacher—of the ones who aren't appreciated at the time but later are.

I think that you probably have been characterized as a genre writer; that is, of thrillers, suspense, supernatural stories, which often people don't take as seriously as they do "real books." Is that a distinction that you have felt from people?

Duncan: I never thought about it. It was what I wrote. What I've written isn't all based on metaphysical subject matter, certainly not *Killing Mr. Griffin*, and *Daughters of Eve*, and some of the others. I thought of them as adventures, things that happen to other people. Unfortunately, I now know that's not true.

I think kids like that mix of safety and scariness that thrillers provide, and that they especially enjoy your books for being firmly based in a teenage world.

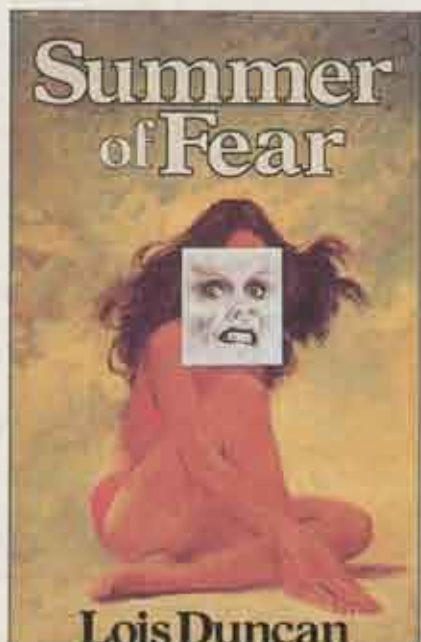
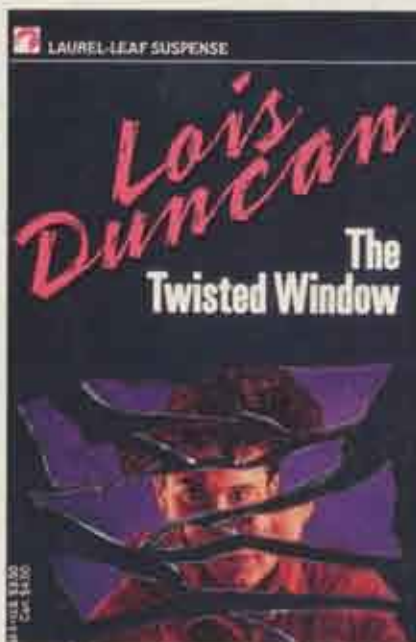
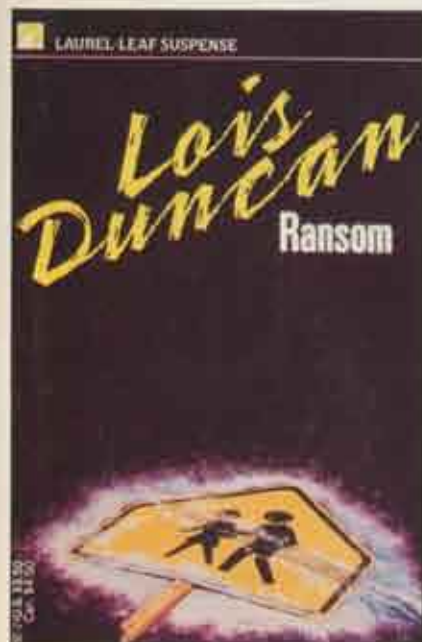
Duncan: Kids like reading these things as fiction and having the feeling that everything will eventually come out all right. Kids all think everything will come out all right. They don't think anything bad could really happen to them. They're used to—there again—watching TV, seeing all these

awful things happen in a television show, but next week turning on the same program and everybody's starting all over again. When characters get shot down in one show, they then show up in another show. Disaster is unreal. The fact that you have to take care is something they don't take in. I don't know that it's just this generation—maybe more this generation because they're the television generation—but I think all young people have that sense of immortality. Don't you?

I do. But I think they get a charge out of the possibility that life may not in fact be that way, as long as it's a charge that's safely contained within, as you say, TV or it's in the pages of a book.

Duncan: Well, the only real criticism I've gotten from young readers who write to me is when they say, "Why did you make it end like that? Why didn't you make them get married and live happily ever after? Why did you have so-and-so die? And why is so-and-so going to go to jail? And why couldn't it all have come out like it was meant to?" They think happily ever after is what life ought to be and what life in reality is. I did too—when I was their age.

One thing I think that all of your teenage novels have in common is that at some level or another they're very scary. Do you think that the world is scary?



"Fiction books today need to utilize many of the elements of television in order to capture and hang on to the reader."

Duncan: Yes. I certainly do now. The greatest tragedy of my life has also proven to be the most bizarre experience in my life. I always thought everything I wrote was pure fiction, right out of my head, and when I wrote my recent YA suspense novel—it's called *Don't Look Behind You*—I modeled my heroine April on the personality of my teenage daughter Kait. In my book, April and her family had found out about interstate drug trafficking, and she was chased by hit men in a Camaro. It came out in June of 1989 and in July of 1989 my daughter Kait was chased down and shot to death by a hit man in a Camaro. It was as if these things I'd written about as fiction became hideous reality. In that book April's family was whisked into the Federal Witness Security program, and forced to go into hiding. Well, three men were arrested for Kait's death, and the relatives of one of them threatened to kill the rest of us. We went into hiding. It wasn't the Federal Security Program but it certainly felt like it. The police work was very poor, and the investigative reporter for our local paper began turning up all kinds of information that the police had not discovered. The reporter's name was Mike Gallagher, and my heroine's boyfriend in *Summer of Fear* was named Mike Gallagher. These connections began to pile up to such a degree that I wondered if I was going crazy. I contacted Dr. William Roll, the director of the Psychological Research Foundation. I said, "What's happened? Am I crazy?" And he said, "Not at all." He said that precognition is very much a proven reality, that it's also been proven that people who are creative individuals have much more psychical ability than others. He had a colleague who did research using students from the Juilliard School (for music, drama, and dance in New York City) and found that they scored far above the average on all the various ESP tests. He said that very often, as far as writers go, future events will turn up in their fiction, especially if the situation has to do with violence.

So I have certainly opened my mind to things that I never truly believed in before. And the next book I'm going to do—I have not been able to write a murder mystery—is a collaboration with Dr. Roll. It's a nonfiction book called *The Psychic Connection*, based on psychical phenomena that Dr. Roll explored with the late Dr. J.B. Rhine. This won't be one of those *Ghostbuster* books. It's

going to be based totally on Dr. Rhine's research and the research of his colleagues. I think it will be a fascinating book to write. I look forward to doing it both because I think it will be an interesting book for young people and because I can't wait to read all that research.

Some people looking at the events around your daughter's death might say, "Gee, this sounds like a Lois Duncan book." How is this different from a Lois Duncan book?

Duncan: It isn't, and that's what's so horrifying. If I had written about this experience four years ago as fiction, everybody would say exactly that, it's a Lois Duncan suspense story. It's as if every book I wrote was getting ready to write about this dreadful thing. I started writing *Who Killed My Daughter?* (Delacorte, 1992) as the events of our investigation unfolded, with no idea what was going to happen next, or what the ending would be. As things happened, I'd just sit at the computer and write another chapter. Then I'd stop until more things happened, and then write the next chapter. It fell onto the page so that I didn't have to change anything. It just came out like a Lois Duncan novel.

And now you're the Lois Duncan heroine. Aren't you? I mean, you have to solve the murder.

Duncan: I guess. I'd say I'm the protagonist; I don't know if I come out as a heroine. But it's in first person, and I'm solving the murder with the help of my family and psychic detectives and this newspaper investigative reporter and some private investigators. At this point I still owe Delacorte another book on a three-book contract, and they've been very patient letting me work through my situation before having to go back and do that book. I've really had to solve our own murder before I can make up a murder and that's what I hope to be achieving in *Who Killed My Daughter?* My hope is that its publication will bring informants out of the woodwork and we can finally close the door on this nightmare and move on.

Do you think you could go back to writing mysteries?

Duncan: We'll have to see. □