

Julie Rogers

Falling Stars

Q & A



1. What is your seventh book, *Falling Stars*, about?

In *FALLING STARS*, nine-year-old Tommy Lucas needs a bone marrow transplant to survive. But he's convinced he's a vampire, that his cancer is a curse on his bloodline. His mom, June, an oncologist, allows Tommy his fantasy because she doesn't want him to lose hope. Tommy's stoked when he discovers an e-zine series about urban legend Viscount Claudius Fallon, a dhampyre from Cardiff who traveled to Eureka Springs seeking a cure for his own leukemia during WWII. Tommy's quest to find Fallon leads him to befriend a local artist, who struggles with his growing affection for June—for he *is* Fallon, cured in 1939 at Baker Hospital. Fallon must decide whether he'll risk helping Tommy or falling in love with June.

2. What inspired you to craft such a story?

Life-extension theories fascinate me. An ample number of creatures among us don't exhibit evidence of aging like functional decline or rising death rates with age. Some show no increase in mortality after maturity like the Greenland shark, starlings, and mole rats. In *FALLING STARS*, the doctor treating the vampire for leukemia is aware of this phenomenon and believes Fallon's own biological mortality comes from an arrested process of cellular division and telomere shortening. Fallon's human half has the disease, and the treatment for that further confounds the process, like getting stuck at one age for a while. And, of course, the bigger question about aging: do we find more value in living longer, or is there more value in living better while we are?

3. One aspect of your story is about a parent-child relationship, where the mother doesn't want to kill her sickly son's hope, even when death seems imminent. What did you draw upon to write those parts?

One of toughest experiences for a child growing up differently, whether by illness or some other abnormality, is knowing they are not like others. One of the toughest experiences as an adult is how to go about raising such a child, how to introduce and integrate them into society. In Tommy's case, his disease was somewhat manageable and yet potentially deadly. The unpredictable nature of his disease process was something his mother, a practicing oncologist, was forced to levy against all the practical medical know-how available to her in 2023. Her medical opinion about what could potentially heal him involved allowing him to concoct and continue his fantasy because she saw this was attached to hope, and she believed hope is *that* powerful.

4. Your book is about mortality but also of life’s magical resilience. We can use more of the latter, huh?

The idea about life’s magical resilience trumping mortality piggybacks on question two and the quest to live better and deeper while we do live. In the book’s prologue, I introduce an array of life that survives even in Death Valley—the pupfish, the chuckwalla—a few biological examples of just how amazing and resilient corporal entities can be. The fact is, even in the face of horrible devastation and destruction, life keeps popping up. We’re still trying to understand the genome sequences that support negligible senescence and perhaps when we do, it won’t seem so magical anymore. I’d prefer to think we’ll never completely deconstruct life’s magic, however, that there will always be another mystery to explore.

5. You describe it as “not your typical vampire story.” How so?

Before writing FALLING STARS I’d ghostwritten several garden-variety vampire stories with feral, bloodthirsty creatures that were traditionally reliant on maintaining parasitic lifestyles to survive. The great thing about vampire lore is, it’s malleable. I wanted to find a different twist, so I started researching dhampyres, or vampire-human hybrids. I then had to decide what the rules were, particularly if this dhampyre was sick himself. How would that affect his own biological immortality? His need for blood? His family-of-origin connections? When and where would he actually be born? Could he be healed from this blood disorder? Could it be done medically, or would it need to be something that appeared to work magically? And of course, could he ultimately extend that cure to others?

6. Your book alternates between two time periods. How does that help tell the story?

On the premise that FALLING STARS isn’t typical vampire lore, I began dhampyre Claudius Fallon’s history in 1939, his human birth in Wales in 1922. I wanted to show some of his childhood, how he grew up sick, the efforts made to find a cure. The ruthlessness of blood disorders hasn’t changed much since then. To get into the mindset of a noble and dhampyre living off grid in 2023, we need to understand the history and culture that shaped him—The New Deal Era, WWII, Industrial America, and so on. This brings more to the page when he finally meets a boy in 2023 with a blood disorder much like his. A deep dive into someone who lives and endures a 101 years too.

7. Who was your muse for this book?

A boy in my third-grade class was an avid fan of the TV cult classic *Dark Shadows*. He hurried home every day after school to watch it. This was in the daytime soap’s heyday after Canadian actor Jonathan Frid joined the show and ratings went through the roof. My classmate *could* pass for a vampire—the complete package with dark hair and eyes, and long cuspids. He had a flashy cape too, with which he regularly entertained us performing Barnabas Collins impersonations. Years later I revisited the memory, this whole LARPing thing he did. His theatrics were fun-and-games when school got boring. But it posed a question: what if a young boy role-played a vampire for a much more serious reason?

8. How do you incorporate generational serendipity in this story?

In FALLING STARS, the vampire Claudius Fallon serves as a protagonist behind incorporating generational serendipity because he’s lived over one hundred years. Through his eyes we see generations of fortunate and unfortunate events, revival after destruction, and so on. Serendipity

really comes out to play when Tommy fantasizes he's a vampire because his fantasy actually happened to a real vampire two generations before him. Some people are drawn to each other at precise times when it's needed; we see this in "real" life. Some serendipitous ideas don't get a foothold—like several of the inventions in the 1939 New York World's Fair—but circle back around again in subsequent generations when we really, really need them.

9. Your story touches upon the true events of charlatan Norman G. Baker's cure for cancer. Why do quacks like him find so many willing believers?

Cancer treatment continues to be an enigma. What works for one person doesn't for another, which has always created an environment ripe for quackery and greed. Baker himself was a good-looking man, quite a showman. He believed in the power of the mind, but he also exploited mind-body healing to line his own pockets. He started with tricks of the trade like staging his own mental shows and appealing to the vanity of bettering one's station in life with mail-order education. *FALLING STARS* shares a few scenarios about the way Baker operated in a town already set up to receive visitors arriving for its curative springs. Eureka has since gained a more urban appeal and converted from a collection of sanatoriums into a tourist destination.

10. Do you agree with one reviewer who said: "By combining love, sacrifice, hope, and loss, this is a story that will remain in your heart long after you close the book?"

I've actually had several reviewers render similar reviews. When I outlined *FALLING STARS*, I was thinking about all the elements in stories that stayed with me—ones, for example that I read years ago, or while I was still in high school. Universal themes of love, loss, and survival are always powerful tools in good storytelling because we each understand those in our own way. The characters in stories I've read that stayed with me are usually characters that either bring in some larger-than-life components into the mix or wrangle with a plight that I can't get it out of my head—even if they overcome it. There's an audible resonance and depth these stories maintain even after you reach the end.

11. Where does your book title come from?

Titles usually come intuitively, though from a marketing standpoint I suspect there's always room for improvement. The term "falling star" is inaccurate, and the story explores that. We live in a world of deepfakes; even our best science can redact its deductions. At the time of writing, we generally accept that we are composed of stardust and if anything fell, we fell here. We're here until the atmosphere carries us elsewhere. And the reality of aging happens to many of us, even seemingly permanent icons and celebrities. The idea of a falling star also brings to mind the stark contrast of these gas giants to the average size of our daily dilemmas. Our tiny part compared to the mind-boggling size of our universe.

12. *Falling Stars* is urban fantasy. Are you seeing this as a growing genre? Why?

I really think of *Falling Stars* as a sub-sub-genre, a cross between urban fantasy and magical realism. I wanted to write a story where fantasy and reality operated side by side, to blend magical elements inside a real world with a few low-lying social critiques. For marketing, I had to pick one, and I see urban fantasy growing as exponentially as fantasy. Instead of traveling to a distant land and evading flying monkeys, urban fantasy brings the monkeys to your doorstep, monkeys that could happen to be a group of teens hanging out with their smartphones on your high-rise

rooftop. The genre's true charm turns our mundane world into a pipeline of magical possibility where ordinary becomes extraordinary, and magic is hidden in plain sight.

13. What do you hope readers will get out of reading your book?

A deeper exploration of our own biological mortality and insights from generational redundancy. On a road trip across America in the story, Lt. Gaye tells Claudius Fallon about the 1939 New York World's Fair, specifically the Trylon-Perisphere attraction. Out of recovering industrial capitalism in a world that had yet to see the Second World War or even nuclear deployment—environmental engineers were already demonstrating a model world of symbiotic regions. We displayed some incredible human ingenuity for making the world a better place even way back in 1939. If that utopia had truly taken off, we would've begun making huge inroads against global warming *then*. But a world war was brewing, and collective trust had been flattened by hard times.

14. How would you describe your writing style?

As a ghostwriter I'm a bit of a chameleon, an admirer of many voices and styles. I've been told I write like Richard Bach in my children's book, *Hootie*. Dionysius the Areopagite in my channeled book, *Simeon*. Stephen King in my book of horror short stories, *Seven Shorts*. Reviewers have set comps for FALLING STARS as Jodi Picoult meets Stephenie Meyer and Suzy McKee Charnas meets Sara Flannery Murphy. Then we throw it in that I also write screen and stage plays. With a journalism degree. So, I'm pretty much all over the map. And in comes technology, AI, little things we can do now like writing on our phones. All of this shapes and redefines writing style. I'd like to think it's an evolution.

15. Do you emulate any authors? Who? Why?

Where to start? Those authors I would choose to emulate are ones who make me read between the lines and can be all-consuming with their craft. Some are from formative years and many, quite old: A.A. Milne, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, C.S. Lewis, Paulette Jiles, Jane Roberts, Ernest Hemingway, Karl Vonnegut, Thomas Harris, M. Scott Peck, Thomas Aquinas, the reformed Baptist preacher C. H. Spurgeon, John Grisham, Annie Dillard, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Robert Greene, and Toni Morrison. In FALLING STARS I wouldn't say I set out to emulate any particular style. I did endeavor to make readers think, to go behind the words and discover more than just the words themselves.

16. What challenges did you overcome in the writing of this book?

I'd written inspirational pieces about people recovering from cancer, but I wasn't sure I could pull off a story with cancer as arch-nemesis. I wrote a screenplay treatment after my grandmother passed away from melanoma and pitched it at Maui Writers' Convention in 2001 to Alison Rosenzweig, a co-producer of *Windtalkers*. She didn't go for it, and I put it away with other pitches that weren't greenlighted. My father lost a five-year battle with multiple myeloma in 2018, and Mom, adrift without him, died during the pandemic. I didn't write for a year. In 2021, I pulled the project out of the closet and wrote it as a novel. I realized then I was the wrong person writing this in the wrong way in 2001.

17. How does this book compare to your prior ones?

FALLING STARS doesn't get in a hurry. First-off, I felt strongly about addressing what I believe is an epidemic issue we call the Big C. It's not going away, and modern treatment options haven't found the medical miracle yet. I also wanted the reader to enter the mindset of someone who has journeyed from 1922 to present, that particular range of history that carries our silent generation, our war heroes, and how very influential they remain even today. In the story you see a striking model of history preserved in Eureka Springs, so exemplary of early America. And of course, we have the vampire element. But even with this, I wanted to take a different turn. It's dark but it's not indulgent or graphic.

18. As a freelance ghostwriter and editor, what trends are you seeing in book publishing?

I think we're in somewhat of a humpty-dumpty book industry today. Before POD, AI, and other online technology took off, publishing options were far more limited. Traditional publishers were the gatekeepers. Vanity publishers and offset printers were the wildcards, other options for writers who didn't want to keep sending out SASEs. With the advent of the Internet and all the options available today, the lines have blurred. As new online author tools join the pile-on, many indie books can stand on the wall alongside the big boys. Many don't, however. Within this self-publishing explosion we've created, we'll continue to need even more book-wise advisers in the industry to bring up the independent publishing standards.

19. A short story of yours won a Writer's Digest Writing Competition Grand Prize. It was a horror short story. What draws you to that genre and format?

I've always enjoyed short stories, an absolute fundamental for learning writing craft. As for the genre, I believe darkness comes on many levels. I think we find our way back to the light by acknowledging, even understanding things that go bump in the night. With "House Call," I had to cut 4,000 words for the story to be eligible to enter the competition, a true Hemingway endeavor. *That* taught me nothing is sacred when it comes to how many ways we can say any one thing. Feathered Quill Reviews says *Seven Shorts* contains intriguing story arcs, complicated characters, and bewildering conclusions that invite the reader to . . . take a good hard look at our current lived reality with fresh eyes.

20. You live in an Austin, Texas suburb but will be relocating to Eureka Springs, Arkansas. Is there a special history behind that town that draws you to it?

In so many ways, Eureka Springs is like stepping back in time. The architecture there ranges from Italian Romanesque to Queen Anne to craftsman cottage. My husband and I have vacationed Eureka Springs almost every year since we met. Over time I collected more and more about its fascinating history as a go-to location for the healing springs, along with the many triumphs and tragedies that happened in this place. Norman G. Baker wasn't the first entrepreneurial mind to arrive in Eureka Springs or to try to bilk the community. It had its own gangster, bootlegging, and madam history as well as the tunnels to hide it. Several doctors discovered Eureka's unusual endemic properties and hung out their shingles with their patented cancer-cure formulas.