

## **Alum's first book named future bestseller by Target**

**by Sheryl Hanson - Wednesday, June 18, 2008**

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/975/target-names-alums-book-future-bestseller/>

Jess (Martin) Riley was writing before she could read.

“Jess would see me writing in my study, and when I left, she would sneak in and scribble in my journal,” said her father, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh English professor and 1978 alumnus Peter Martin.

That little girl grew and enrolled as an English student at UW Oshkosh. Her education gave her a broad foundation and some of her most lasting, closest friendships. It also helped her grow as a writer.

“My professors were approachable and personable, setting high standards,” said Riley, who added she is especially grateful to English professors Doug Flaherty, Jeannie Grant Moore and Ron Rindo as well as history professor Mark Kleinman.

After graduation in 1998, Riley secured a day job as an educational grant writer in Fond du Lac.

But writing fiction is in her blood.

Riley’s unquenchable thirst for writing has netted her book, “Driving Sideways,” a spot on Target’s Breakout Books, a coveted listing of new authors whose books — according to Target — are destined to become bestsellers. The Breakout Books will be displayed in Target stores nationwide from June 19 to Aug. 9.

The book, which Riley wrote in 2004, has received rave reviews and a finalist spot, among 600 contenders, for the prestigious James Jones First Novel Fellowship.

“Driving Sideways” also took first place in the 2004 Get Your Stiletto in the Door Contest, sponsored by the [Chick Lit Writers of the World](#).

### **Road trip puts kidney disease ‘on the map’**

In the early stages of writing the book, Riley decided she would develop a character who was on the mend physically as well as emotionally. The storyline follows the recovery of a 28-year-old kidney disease survivor who takes a cross-country trip after her kidney transplant to find herself and the mother who abandoned her more than 20 years ago.

The story, which has been published by Ballantine Books, adds one more twist: The protagonist also hopes to track down her kidney donor’s family because she believes the transplant included an extra little bonus — the donor’s spirit.

“I wanted to tell a story that was a little quirky, with over-the-top elements of magical realism,” said

Riley.

While researching polycystic kidney disease (PKD), Riley was shocked to learn it causes more deaths than cystic fibrosis, Down syndrome, muscular dystrophy and sickle cell anemia combined.

“I’d heard of all of the other conditions, yet I hadn’t heard of PKD,” she said. “So I decided to do my small part to put it on the map for others who hadn’t heard of it, either.”

Riley connected with two “amazing” PKD patients, who reviewed early drafts of the manuscript for authenticity. Since then, she has discovered many friends and colleagues who have family affected by the disease.

As a result, Riley has joined the effort to find a cure for PKD, which affects more than 12.5 million people worldwide.

“By raising awareness of this condition, perhaps we can help hasten the march to the cure,” Riley said.

### **Behind the razor wire**

The idea for Riley’s next book was drawn from her senior year at UW Oshkosh, when she worked as a teaching assistant at Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution, where she helped inmates learn to read and study for the GED.

She describes the job as one of the most rewarding experiences of her life.

“There was so much pathos behind the razor wire — I always knew I wanted to integrate some of those experiences and that setting into a future story,” she said.

The story features two people who work in a medium security men’s prison: a social worker in a wheelchair and the teacher he falls for. As with “Driving Sideways,” the book includes many references to Riley’s home state.

“It examines the binge drinking culture of Wisconsin, the class divide found in resort towns and how you rebuild your life after an awful heartbreak, with lots of the same warped humor and unflinching honesty that made “Driving Sideways” so fun to write,” she said.

Riley hopes the book will be published next year — pending approval from her agent and publisher, of course.

### **The magic ingredients**

When asked for advice for any budding authors out there, Riley offered an enthusiastic response.

“First, read and write daily. Support and befriend other authors and always work to hone your craft,” she said.

Perhaps most importantly, she encourages writers to write what makes them happy.

“But understand that what makes you happy may be completely different from what sells,” she added. “If you’ve written a novel you’d like to see fly off the shelves, be prepared to adopt a more professional, business-like approach to things.”

A great novel, Riley said, follows a three-ingredient recipe for success.

“I’ve heard it said the magic ingredients are talent, perseverance and luck. Rejection and criticism are part of the process, so don’t be afraid of them,” she said.

**Related links:**

- “Driving Sideways” — [www.jessriley.com](http://www.jessriley.com)
- Jess Riley — [www.myspace.com/jessrileywrites](http://www.myspace.com/jessrileywrites)
- Group blog for debut authors — [www.thedebutanteball.com](http://www.thedebutanteball.com)
- Polycystic kidney disease — [www.pkdcure.org](http://www.pkdcure.org)