

## **Nancy Richard-Akers: Whatever Happened to Mary Alice Kirk?**

In 1985, I met Nancy Richards-Akers. It was "friendship at first sight" for both of us. Though Nancy was from an upper-class New England background, and I hailed from a blue-collar Baltimore family, we soon discovered we had many things in common; we were born in the same year, we'd both gone to private women's colleges, and we were interested in "the big picture" of how the world worked, so much so that Nancy majored in international studies while I majored in American studies. We also discovered we both had spent many years learning ways of expressing our creativity other than writing; Nancy had studied ballet, and I'd studied piano. Most of all, though, we found that we loved the way our minds worked together. It was just plain fun applying our brains to a topic—and almost any one would do; we never ran out of ideas to explore.

Although Nancy had no real interest in writing contemporary romances, she thought it would be fun to work together. I was resistant. I'm very fussy about my writing; I obsess over every word, and I don't want anyone else telling me what to write or how to write it. On the other hand, I hate plotting by myself and find that talking through a story idea with at least one other person is almost mandatory. Also, I'm not all that keen on doing tons of really detailed research—but Nancy's idea of a good time was spending the day in the Library of Congress reading about the various kinds of soups used in 1820. So what the heck, I thought. Maybe it would be fun to write together.

Thus, Mary Alice Kirk was born. "She" published two books: *In Your Wildest Dreams* and *Promises*. In both cases, Nancy and I started with one of my ideas for which I'd written only a synopsis; then we spent a couple of days together plotting the story from beginning to end (I've still got one tape we made of a plotting session for *Promises*). Then I went off and started writing the first draft. Meanwhile, Nancy did whatever research was going to be necessary. When I needed information that her research was uncovering in order to continue writing, we'd chat until I was able to fill in the necessary plot holes. When I finished the draft, Nancy read it, made comments, and filled in whatever blanks I'd left for the remaining information from her research. I then edited the ms. into final form, incorporating Nancy's comments and research, as well as polishing my writing.

I've never regretted my brief collaboration with Nancy. I got to write my own words without someone else telling me what to write and how to write it, and at the same time, I had a partner—a really creative and smart partner—to help me think about the plot and to talk to when I hit sticking points or just felt uninspired. I'm confident that Nancy would say that she, too, benefited from the collaboration—although I can't say that with absolute assurance. Nor can I ask Nancy to confirm the statement. Because Nancy is dead.

It was on the first Saturday in June of 1999 that my friend and collaborator was shot and killed by her estranged husband, who then shot himself. Over a decade, it's been, and I still recall vividly the blood-chilling, stomach-knotting shock that rolled through me when Nancy's and my mutual friend Kathleen Gilles Seidel called to tell me what had happened. In the days that followed, I was bombarded with phone calls from reporters for *The Washington Post*, *People Magazine*, "20-20," *U.S. News and World Report*, and half a dozen other media sources. They all wanted to know whatever I could tell them about who Nancy was and how such a tragic thing could have happened—and happened not to just anyone but to a *romance writer*. The irony seemed, to them, inescapable.

Not to me. Nancy was a brilliant, incredibly talented woman who happened to write romances. The fact that she wrote them didn't make her any less likely to be murdered by her husband. Indeed, her chosen profession had no more to do with her husband's shooting her than the next woman's career as a lawyer or secretary has to do with her husband's murdering her. No woman—not one of us—is immune to abuse and violence.

In all the years since Nancy's murder, hardly a day has gone by that I haven't thought of her at least once. I still find it almost impossible to believe she's gone . . . that I can't pick up the phone and call her . . . that we'll never again talk about our kids and being moms . . . that I'll never again hear her giggle or tell a riotously funny story.

I miss her. I always will.