

Writer to writer to reader

An exclusive interview

by

Esther Luttrell

Peter Shianna is the author of the critically acclaimed novel, *Take Off: A Time for War, A Time for Love*. The novel takes place during World War II.

Luttrell: Why did you write a novel set during the War?

Shianna: The 40s and the War fascinate me. It was indeed the greatest generation ever, fighting the greatest war ever.

Luttrell: But your story takes place on the home front.

Shianna: Many years ago I worked with an old crop duster who had been a flight instructor during the War. A rugged individualist, he was also a wonderful story teller who regaled me with tales of training cadets and of his crop dusting days following the war. He never went overseas, but his experiences on the home front told me that the times were exciting right here at home. He also sparked my desire to get a pilot's license, which I did years later.

Luttrell: Did his stories make it into your book?

Shianna: No, but the spirit of them did. I had meant to incorporate some of them, but the story kind of took on a life of its own once I got into it.

Luttrell: Jimmy Tucker, the crop duster in your book, is a marvelous character who reminded me of a grown-up Huckleberry Finn. Is he based on your old crop dusting friend?

Shianna: Not at all. My friend was a fiery, go-for-broke renegade who was twenty years older than I. Jimmy is more laid back; kind of an *aw shucks* type, though mentally quick as a whip. Then again, now that you mention it, maybe there are some similarities.

Luttrell: You're not old enough to have understood the War. Did TAKE OFF require a lot of research?

Shianna: Sure did. On the other hand, my interest in the era had provided me with quite a store of knowledge about the times. I was born in early '41 and remember my uncles coming home on furlough in their uniforms and again at war's end. And my mother using ration stamps at the store, and sending cookies in Karo syrup cans to her brothers in the Pacific. In our small town of 100 people, the men would nightly gather at the general store to discuss and argue current events. My father often took me along. I remember some of the conversations, and I'm sure many more of them seeped into my subconscious. I vividly recall the celebrations that marked the end of the war. We went to the nearby town of Freeport, Illinois. Everybody went a little crazy.

Luttrell: When you say a small town, you mean a small town. What was it like growing up in a town of 100 people?

Shianna: Idyllic. I knew most of the farmers in the area and worked for many of them. I could hunt and fish anywhere. We had a grocery store, a post office, a community center, and a Methodist church with a part-time minister, Reverend Bruce. The Illinois Central railroad tracks ran by the edge of town, though passenger service had ceased before my time. My grandfather, a section foreman for the IC, lived in what had been the depot, which was only nine feet from the tracks. It shook so bad when a freight train passed by that you almost had to hang onto something to maintain your footing. I loved sleeping there, which I did often.

Luttrell: In *Take Off* your hero, Max, goes on the run from authorities, including the Selective Service. Later in the story, he is very proud of the military and wishes he could be part of it. Why is he initially unwilling to serve?

Shianna: Actually, he can't wait to enlist after Pearl Harbor. But his older brother Ben will probably be drafted, so if Max enlisted it would leave his father, a widower, alone on the farm. Max knows his father can't work the farm on his own; it would probably kill him. When brother Ben is murdered by a local dignitary, Max becomes disillusioned, does things that get him into trouble with the law and has to take off. He is never anti-military or anti-war.

Luttrell: Your send-up of the evangelist is a hoot. Some have remarked that his sermon in the revival tent is worth the price of the book. Did you have fun writing it?

Shianna: It was hard fun. The sermon runs a fine line between humor and pathos—it mixes the two—given the subject matter and the times. Once I got on a roll, it kind of ran onto the paper, and I had to shorten it quite a bit. The Bible, aside from its obvious inspirational qualities, is an absolute mother lode of language and insight.

Luttrell: Three women enter your hero's life. Which is your favorite?

Shianna: I love them all.

Luttrell: But aren't you at least a teensy-bit partial to one?

Shianna: Nope. And I wouldn't tell if I were.

Luttrell: So you're not a write-and-tell guy?

Shianna: I guess you could say that.

Luttrell: Are you working on another book?

Shianna: My second novel is in progress. I'm hoping for a 2008 release.

Luttrell: Should we look forward to a sequel?

Shianna: The next one is totally different. It takes place in the present, and has love and hate and betrayal and all kinds of mayhem.

Luttrell: Want to share any of the plot?

Shianna: No, but I will tell you the title. I call it *Love Tag*.

Luttrell: Sounds delicious.

Mystery writer Esther Luttrell has spent much of her life in Hollywood as a writer and producer. Her current book, *Murder in the Movies*, takes readers behind the scenes in Hollywood, Beverly Hills and Los Angeles in a breath-taking attempt to solve the murder of a player in the movie industry.