

# *Behind the* 'INHERITANCE GAMES'

An OU professor combines her love of writing, psychology and hidden corridors to create a best-selling novel.

BY TAMI ALTHOFF

**W**hen Jennifer Lynn Barnes' father retired in the mid-2000s, he began designing the family's dream home. One day, he asked his daughter if she had any special requests for the house. Without much thought, she had an answer—a secret passage. Years later, the house was built, complete with the secret passage Barnes requested.

After seeing how much creativity and effort her father put into designing the home, Barnes began imagining a fictional story about a man who spends more than five decades living in an uncompleted mansion because he is continually adding new rooms or making modifications. In this imaginary house, there wasn't just one secret passage, but dozens.

"I thought a lot about the kind of man who would build what I, at the time, called the 'puzzle house,' and the one thing I knew was that he would love mysteries and games," says Barnes, a University of Oklahoma associate professor who serves a dual appointment with the OU Department of Psychology and the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication's professional writing program. The author of more than a dozen young adult novels, she says, "I sat with this idea for years. I had the setting, but not the story."

Nearly a decade later, the idea became the premise for Barnes' latest young adult novel, *The Inheritance Games*.

"In 2018, I was brainstorming ways that a normal teenage girl could become famous overnight, and one of the ideas I came up with was 'a billionaire leaves her his fortune,'" Barnes says. "I knew immediately that this was the premise that my puzzle house book had been waiting for, and the book took shape very quickly after that."

A personal experiment of sorts, *The Inheritance Games* is Barnes' most successful book to date. The novel made the *New York Times* young adult bestseller list in 2020 and is the

basis of a television series in development at Amazon with Sony Pictures TV and Osprey Productions. Barnes has already completed a sequel to *The Inheritance Games* and is working on a new young adult mystery in the same vein but is keeping its concept tightly under wraps.

A Tulsa native, Barnes knew she wanted to be a novelist at an early age. She began pursuing writing seriously when she was still in high school, finishing her first novel during winter break of her senior year. By the start of her sophomore year in college, she had completed several books. Her seventh was the first one she sold, and she continued to write and publish while a student at Yale University, working on a degree in cognitive science. She followed that with a graduate degree in psychiatric science from the University of Cambridge, where she was a Fulbright Scholar. She returned to Yale for her Ph.D. in psychology.

"Aside from a brief period in kindergarten when I wanted to be a veterinarian, I have always wanted to be a writer. But, for most of my childhood and teenage years, I wanted to be a writer and something else," she says. "What that 'something else' was changed over time—lawyer, neuroscientist, biomedical engineer and, finally, psychology professor—but I always pictured myself having a dual career."

When writing *The Inheritance Games*, Barnes drew from her roles as both writer and researcher. She designed and wrote the book based explicitly on psychological theories about why readers enjoy fiction.

"For the last several years, I have proposed why the human species is so driven to tell and consume stories. Based on those theories, I generate action steps that a writer can take to make their books maximally appealing," she says. "*The Inheritance Games* was my attempt to put all of those theories into action at once and test whether psychology could be used to write



Jennifer Lynn Barnes, an OU professor of creative writing and psychology, is the author of *The Inheritance Games*, which made the *New York Times*' young adult best seller list in 2020.

books with mass appeal. So far, that experiment has been a success. *The Inheritance Games* has been wildly more popular than any of my other books. It's my first *New York Times* best-seller, my first time making major industry Best of the Year lists, and the first time one of my books has inspired an auction for TV/film rights."

Sofie Caruso, an OU senior vocal performance and psychology double major, works in Barnes' psychology lab as an undergraduate research assistant. Caruso has also taken Barnes' classes in social-cognitive development and imagination and development. She says Barnes is just as engaging in

class as she is on the pages of her novels.

"She is absolutely one of my favorite professors. She is so focused, has contagious positive energy and truly wants her students to learn and succeed," Caruso says. "She is a wonderful writer as well and is absolutely brilliant at creating engaging storylines filled with well-woven twists that are not just for the sake of having them."

Caruso says she's learned more than subject matter in the classes she's taken with Barnes, including how to look at the world differently and research in new ways.

"Every semester, she starts class by telling us to carry around a notebook for jotting down ideas and observations. I've come up with some of my favorite ideas for research or projects at a random point, and I was able to write them down whenever because I took her advice. She has an uncanny ability to incorporate psychology into her writing. She takes what she knows about personality, motivation and theory of mind and puts it into every page and every character. It's brilliant how well those two passions—psychology and writing—fold into each other and how she takes full advantage of it."

Barnes says there's always overlap in her teaching. In her writing classes, she talks a lot about the psychology of fiction and why humans are interested in stories. In her psychology classes, she talks about her writing career to illustrate how psychology researchers can turn personal passions into a research program.

She says teaching a young adult novel writing class at OU is her way of passing on everything she's learned in the 16 years she's been in the business, including the craft of writing young adult books, marketing and trends and the business of being a professional writer.

"One of the things I try to convey to my students is that you do not have to limit yourself to a single interest or passion. Being a writer gives me so much inspiration for doing psychological science, and being a psychologist affects both what I write and how I write," she says. "I was not a writing major myself and took very few creative writing classes. I learned by doing, and the purpose of my classes is two-fold—to teach students what I have learned over the years and to teach them how to teach themselves going forward." 🍷

*For more information on Barnes and her novels, see [www.jenniferlynnbarnes.com](http://www.jenniferlynnbarnes.com).*

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