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A Writer's Odyssey

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FOLLOW AN AUTHOR ON HER JOURNEY FROM OIL INDUSTRY GEOLOGIST
TO AWARD-WINNING NOVELIST.

A Writer's Odyssey



was born a Furman brat. Attended Furman Day Camp, “pride of all the South.” Learned to swim in the lake. Lived near Sistine Stadium where the Paladins used to play football. On rare times when I missed a game, I could hear the cheering and the band music floating on the crisp autumn air.

Fiction came to me when I was very young. Always an avid reader, I would hit a ball against a wall and tell myself stories about people who lived in New York City, a place I’d only read about in Dorothy B. Hughes’ and Jacqueline Susann’s work.

By age 13, hunting and pecking on Dad’s old Royal typewriter, I started writing novels. In addition to New York, my characters roamed Hollywood, Yosemite and Hawaii. I even created a Saudi Arabian princess attending college in America — after careful research into Medina and Mecca in the 1963 *World Book Encyclopedia*. My largest effort was more than 100 single-spaced, typewritten pages. Eventually, concerned that my mother might be reading my material, I decided to have a bonfire in the backyard.

This was certainly a blessing for posterity, as well as for me.

When it came time to choose a college, my father, Raymond Heatwole, professor of business administration at Furman, told me I could go anywhere I wanted. After a brief flirtation with Duke — our family had spent a summer there when Dad had a Ford Fellowship grant — I realized that all my life I had been preparing to attend Furman. As a child I sat on the benches in Furman Hall (known then as the “Classroom Building”) and listened to lectures, and in high school I seized every opportunity to visit the James B. Duke Library. To go elsewhere would have been ludicrous.

At Furman I continued writing poetry and short stories and shared them with fellow writers in the women’s dorm. However, I did not do as well as I hoped in freshman English, receiving

a grade of C-plus on my term paper, “How Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* Follows the Form of a Medieval Morality Play.”

I decided to cast about for another major. After spending the summer between freshman and sophomore years as waterfront director at Camp Ponderosa, the University of Alabama’s program for emotionally disturbed children, I selected psychology . . . until Charles Brewer’s multiple guess tests, in which answers “a” though “e” all appeared correct, swiftly disabused me of that notion.

Still looking, I recalled that in fulfilling my science requirements freshman year with courses in physical geology and historical geology, I had been reminded of some childhood interests, such as collecting garnets out of the gravel in my neighbor’s driveway, or watching films in which crimson rivers of lava ran down the roads in Hawaii. On weekend trips to the mountains, I discovered mineral specimens that my father would ask his colleagues in the geology department (as earth and environmental sciences was then known) to identify.

I had found my major. And sometime during the long hours of research and field trips under the tutelage of professors Van Price, Ken Sargent and Wallace Fallaw — and while putting in 18-hour days as a geology graduate student



BY LINDA HEATWOLE JACOBS

at The Ohio State University — my interest in writing was pushed to the back burner.

After graduating in 1974 I began a career in industry, as one of Exxon Corporation’s first woman field geologists. Later, living in Houston and the Dallas area, I worked for a number of oil and gas companies as an exploration geologist. On the front lines where new fields are found, this fascinating and stimulating career was a roller coaster, with discoveries and dry holes. I stayed with it until 2004, when my husband, Richard, and I retired and moved to New Mexico.

During my writing sabbatical I remained an avid reader of many genres: James Michener, Ian Fleming, Ken Follett, Nelson DeMille, Danielle Steele, LaVryle Spencer and Nora Roberts, to name a few. After a 20-year layoff, in 1992 I decided to pursue my life goal of writing a novel.

Still in Houston at that time, I joined Rice University’s novel-writing program chaired by Venkatesh Kulkarni, the 1984 American Book Award winner. Fortune granted me the opportunity to study for six years with this consummate teacher and author, until his untimely death at age 52 from leukemia.

Following the old adage that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear, I met Rita Gallagher. Renowned for her novels and



treatises on writing, Rita taught more than 200 published authors. She focused on novel structure and helped me go from writing great scenes to putting a book together.

Although Rita turned 80 during our time together, her mind was still sharp enough to find a sentence on page 70 that belonged on page 17. When she died in early 2004, the world lost a grand lady.

Along the road to publication, I attended a number of writer's conferences. Visiting with other aspiring novelists and trading war stories, I learned that one of the most common questions people ask writers is, "Where do you get your ideas?"

I like to compare ideas to soap bubbles — only instead of having a bubble exist and pop into oblivion, this bubble appears from nowhere.

One day, while exiting the locker room at my health club, I was struggling with a plot problem in my novel *Rain of Fire*, about a super volcano in Yellowstone. My characters were to be caught in a canyon, on horseback, during a big earthquake. But what could happen to raise the stakes? I considered injuring one of the three major characters

but knew all of them needed to be fully functional for the book's climax. As I opened the door, it came to me.

"Kill the horses," I said . . . right into the startled face of a woman carrying her gym bag.

People also ask, "What do you write about?"

I write about Yellowstone. Born of fire, the untamed Yellowstone wilderness challenges the hearts and minds of all who journey there. First called Wonderland by the awestruck explorers of the 19th century, Yellowstone was formed in volcanic violence and sculpted by ice over millions of years. America's first national park served as the scene for Indian wars, army occupation and exploitation by the railroads.

My love affair with Yellowstone began in 1973 when I attended Idaho State University's geology summer field camp, held near the park. I have continued to visit the park in every season since, accessing the archives for the rich history of the land and of humans' brief tenure there.

The first two novels in my Yellowstone series are *Summer of Fire* (2005), a tale of the heroes who fought the spectacular wildfires of 1988, and *Rain of Fire* (2006), about geologists with their fingers on the pulse of the world's largest super volcano . . . and what might happen if it reawakened.

Summer of Fire, however, was not the first story I wrote about Yellowstone. That honor belonged to *Lake of Fire*, a historical novel that chronicles Yellowstone's bold history and details the lives of the ancestors of the main firefighter in *Summer of Fire*.

How did this "prequel" to the other books become the third in the series, to be published in October? While researching the Nez Perce War of 1877 and the turn of the 20th century, I kept finding what seemed to be extraneous material about the 1988 fires.

The more I read, the more I recalled that summer when the world watched on the nightly news as more than half of Yellowstone burned.

Up to 30,000 people fought the fires directly, and more than a million visited the park while the fires raged. Drawn in by images of air tankers discharging crimson clouds of fire retardant, helicopters dipping bucketfuls of water from mountain lakes and endless lines of yellow-shirted crews marching with their pulaskis (a combination hoe and axe) to the front lines, I wound up completing *Summer of Fire* first.

As I continued my research, I was reminded of something I had learned years before: The world's largest volcano rests not beneath Hawaii's mountains or in the state of Washington, but in Yellowstone. Faced with the compelling question of what would happen if the Yellowstone volcano erupted tomorrow, the geologist in me couldn't resist writing *Rain of Fire*.

But the adventure novel is not the only type of fiction with which I've found success. I also write romances, under the pseudonym Christine Carroll.

It took several years to place the Yellowstone series, as general fiction is a difficult market for a new author to crack. Advised to "write for the market," I created *Children of Dynasty* (2005), a modern-day Romeo and Juliet story with a happy ending, set in the San Francisco Bay area.

Although I wrote the romance thinking it would sell first, my agent, Susan Schulman, actually found my romance publisher, Medallion Press, through the Yellowstone series. Medallion publisher Helen Rosburg bought the Yellowstone books first, asked to see everything I had, and chose to buy Christine Carroll as well.

It's actually not difficult to write in two different genres — to switch from romance to action. The adventure stories contain love interests as subplots, as you might find in works by Ken Follett or Nelson DeMille, and the romances are suspense-filled. The critical difference is that, in a romance, the love story carries the plot, so the characters dwell at greater length on the resolution of the relationship.



Yellowstone National Park serves as inspiration for the author's work. Old Faithful is a familiar scene; an emerald pool offers a quiet place for reflection. Photos courtesy Linda Jacobs.

Surprisingly, although a lot of effort goes into promoting the Yellowstone series, the romance has sold just as well. Sixty percent of all paperbacks sold are romance novels, and each month millions of readers eagerly await the new releases.

The fiction industry is as tough as the rest of the entertainment business. As a result, many writers turn to vanity presses or e-publishers that make them pay to see their work in the public arena. It took me two agents and six years of submissions to land a book contract.

When my first agent, Charlotte Sheedy, sent out an early (and rough) version of *Summer of Fire* in 1999, I grouped the rejection letters into “the good, the bad and the ugly.” The good said that it was a “great first book” and that my landscape descriptions reminded them of *Cold Mountain*. The bad used phrases like “not compelling” or “couldn’t muster enough interest.” The “ugly” came from a senior vice president at one of New York’s biggest houses: “There is no great literary sensibility at work here.”

The rejections hurt for more than seven years, even after Medallion began publishing

my books. Then I came home in August 2006 from a trip to Yellowstone that had featured book signings at Jackson Hole, Old Faithful Inn and the Lake Hotel — and confronted the inevitable bin of mostly junk mail.

In the pile was an envelope from Women Writing the West, an association for writers and others whose works promote the “Women’s West.” At first I thought it was a newsletter and almost set it aside. What a surprise when the first sentence said, “Congratulations. Your book, *Summer of Fire*, has been selected as the 2006 winner of the WILLA Literary Awards for Original Soft Cover. The award is named for Willa Cather, the early 20th century novelist who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for her work, *One of Ours*.”

Sweet revenge for my “ugly” rejection.

In addition to the WILLA award, both *Summer of Fire* and *Rain of Fire* made the short list of finalists for the 2007 Zia Award for novels by New Mexico authors, presented by the state chapter of the National Press Women. Last year *Children of Dynasty* was nominated for a Reviewers Choice Award from Romantic Times Book Club.

Despite critical acclaim and excellent reviews, my books have yet to make any bestseller lists. The odds of doing so are even greater than of becoming a multi-published author or winning an award.

Still, all authors have to believe that their next book will be the blockbuster. If I learned nothing else during my years as an oil exploration geologist, where the odds of success are one in ten on a good day, I know that you have to take the dry holes in stride and focus on the possibilities ahead.

I’m also certain that writing and reading will remain a major force in my life. For ever since my mother shared the Golden Book versions of *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* with me, I have found fiction — whether I’m immersed in someone else’s book or spinning my own yarn — to be a magical escape. |F|

To learn more about the author and her work, visit www.readlindajacobs.com.