

My Blog

Rain, Rain, GO AWAY!!! Friday, January 9, 2009

Okay, so it wasn't so long ago when we were snowbound and icebound that I was saying it was time for a Pineapple Express. How many ways can I say this? I was WRONG! WRONG! Wrong!!!

A nice, gentle misty rain--the kind you don't need an umbrella for--would have been very nice. What has arrived instead is rain of Biblical proportions. With roads washed out, towns evacuated, and with rivers higher than they've been in recorded history.

The snow's gone, but. . . The top part of Western Washington is now an island. I-5 is closed at Centralia where flood waters are covering the freeway again. When did that happen before? Wasn't it just last year? And the passes to Eastern Washington are closed as well due to avalanche danger.

Believe me, I'm not joking about this. I may be in sunny Arizona right now, but my heart is with all those people back home whose lives and property are on the brink. My thoughts and prayers are with you.

My Blog

Tears and Laughter Saturday, January 10, 2009

Somehow, in all the snow and rain in Seattle over the holidays, I missed the fact that the world of genre fiction had lost another giant. RIP Donald Westlake. I read the retrospective on him in today's *Wall Street Journal* and found myself nodding, often.

I, too, had a bad reaction to the word prolific. As in how do I manage to "churn them out." I always want to smack those people and say churning is hard work. And so is being prolific. Call me productive if you must, but the word prolific is bound to put grit in my gears. I also found myself nodding about the being funny part.

I did a signing at the Barnes and Noble on Broadway in Tucson this afternoon. My driver, blending with the crowd, overheard a conversation between two B & N employees.

"Who's over there?" one of them asked, nodding in the general direction of my presentation.

"That's J. A. Jance," was the response.

"Why's everybody laughing?" he asked. "I thought she was a mystery writer."

Obviously mystery writers are expected to be a grim, gray bunch, and we're not supposed to make anyone laugh. Donald Westlake knew better, and so do I.

I spent several years in the life insurance business in Phoenix. Those were tough, hanging by the fingernail years. Eventually I got a divorce and moved to Seattle. It was there in 1982, when I finally set about doing what I had always wanted to do--write. In 1985 I met and married my second husband. In 1986, on a trip back to Arizona, I took him by the office on Central to introduce him to the people I had worked with for all those years. None of those people recognized me because they had never seen me smile and had never heard me laugh.

Being married to Bill and being able to write gave me back my laughter. When I do book signings, laughter is always part of the equation. People in Seattle hear my laughter on the radio and know I'm the one being interviewed because they recognize my laugh.

Although I never saw Donald Westlake perform in person, I'm pretty sure laughter would have been part of his presentations as well.

People come to book signings to have fun. People read mysteries to have fun.

Donald Westlake will be missed. Fortunately his books will be around for a long time.

My Blog

Weather and Book Tours

Saturday, January 17, 2009

I'm at the airport getting ready to leave Chicago. We were supposed to be in the air by now, but the plane for Cleveland has not yet arrived. Across the aisle from me, a real version of *Trains, Planes, and Automobiles* is playing out in real life. A man and his son, traveling to Pittsburgh, are, as of now, not going to make their tight connection. He wants the gate agent to book him a rental car in Cleveland. The gate agent says, "No way, Jose." Stand-off. We'll see what happens.

I've been in Chicago for three days. And it really is warmer today--which is to say, above zero. For those of you who have been following this blog of late, you know I've pretty much turned into a major weather whiner. I'm sorry. Can't help it. But that's one of the side effects of having a January book--weather-related issues.

Yesterday at a TV interview in Chicago, the host was talking about the Internet dating site in *Cruel Intent*. He asked me the name of it and I couldn't remember. I wrote that book a book and a half ago. I've also done two book tours. I could remember cutlooseblog.com, but I could NOT remember *singleheart*. I remembered the story but not the exact name. I suppose that will lend credence to the people who are of the

opinion that I don't write my own books or answer my own e-mail, but that's their problem.

I'm coming close to being able to go home--weather permitting, see paragraph one above. And I'm ready to go home. Being on tour is exhilarating, but it's also tiring. Yesterday, after days of not sleeping well, I failed to respond to my hotel wake-up call. I was finally roused out of bed by a concerned hotel manager who thought I had croaked out in my bed over night.

Yesterday I spoke at a library in Plainfield, Illinois. Some of my fans had driven 240 miles round trip in challenging weather in order to see me. It's really an honor to have fans like that.

I've watched very little news and almost no weather reports while I've been doing this tour. For one thing, there's nothing I can do about the weather. It's going to be what it is. But I did turn on the news the other night to watch the reports about the miracle of the plane landing safely on the Hudson. One part of that news report did make me giggle. "It was a flock of geese," the young reporter said breathlessly standing in front of the night-time scene. "It's a good thing it didn't happen now. It would have made it a lot harder to rescue those people."

Obviously he didn't have a mother like mine who was forever talking about "going to bed with the birds," which is to say early. Before dark. I guess you can grow up and become a network news reporter without ever learning about real birds who tend to go night-night about the time the sun goes down.

As I said, that made me giggle. But the whole event made me proud of ordinary Americans--like the pilots and flight attendants and the guys on the rescue boats, ordinary commuters, who all stepped up. Is this a great country or what?

Still no plane. But the delay gave me time enough to write a blog update, so I'm making good use of the time. Now, if I could just get back to writing the book. The deadline for that is ticking. Ominously.

My Blog

My Personal Chair Monday, January 19, 2009

I'm sitting in my family room in my comfy chair with my laptop on my lap. KING-FM is playing softly in the background. I've just had my first cup of homemade coffee. For those of you who read my earlier rant about the recalcitrant coffee machine, I had to add bean and water. Did NOT get the evil, EMPTY TRAYS or, even worse, CLEAN FILTER messages.

When I got off the plane in Seattle at 9:30 PM last night, it was a balmy 38 degrees. The clothing (four layers) that had been necessary in Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, were way too many layers in Seattle. It's 38 this morning. And green. No snow. At all.

I got off the plane. My luggage did not. One bag did the other didn't. So I spent a lot of last night lying awake in bed and mourning what was lost. That was my "comfort bag." It had my travel pillows, my robe, ALL my underwear--clean and not clean--and, my taser--which can go in checked luggage but not in carry-on.

Just yesterday morning, as I was getting dressed, I was thinking about how I used to tease my mother about her threadbare underwear. But the briefs I bought from Magellan TEN years ago and no longer available for purchase (Of course they discontinued them. They had to. They last FOREVER!) are the most comfortable undies I've ever owned. So I lay awake last night, thinking about trying to replace them and regretting those long ago comments to my mother. Obviously karma was busy working overtime.

But this morning when I crawled out of bed at Oh-Dark-Thirty (My body is on some other time zone!) my comfort bag was right there on the front porch. Complete with all my goods, taser included. (Carried properly for TSA requirements, without the batteries, although Cleveland was the first airport in seven or is it eight that made that stipulation, and also, in the process, sent my luggage to St. Louis rather than Seattle.)

I've learned to carry my pills in my carry-on. And my makeup and my computer along with all necessary electrical cords and jewelry. Now I'm thinking I may want to carry some of my precious underwear there as well.

And if this is too much information about book tours, I'm sorry.
I write what I know.

My Blog

Time Marches On

Wednesday, January 28, 2009

I passed a benchmark this week. I went into a restaurant in Tucson for dinner. (Tucson is a VERY LONG WAY from Chicago and Seattle in terms of distance and in terms of weather. I was wearing sandals. No coat.)

When the bill came, I was surprised to see it listed a ten percent senior discount. No one had asked if I qualified, but the discount was there.

I remember years ago, when I was too young to venture into bars but went anyway that I was glad to dodge being carded. And then I remember a time, in my late twenties, when I was complimented by being carded. This is evidently the same thing--in reverse.

And it's not as though I wasn't grateful for the discount, I was. I paid the bill with a happy heart, but I was struck by it all the same. And it would have been nice to have been asked, "Are you sure you're old enough?" even if the answer was YES.

Still, receiving senior discounts is one of the benefits of aging-- that and being able to read menus at great distances. And, having just celebrated what would have been our son-in-law's 40th birthday, I understand that getting older is better than dealing with the alternative.

But the truth is, I am getting older. When I look in the mirror, I see my mother's face. And when I look into a full length mirror, I see my paternal grandmother's figure. And probably my paternal great grandmother's as well. I never met Grandma Madsen--or at least I don't remember meeting her--but I do remember being told that she, like her daughter and great granddaughter, was also six feet tall. (Where those two daunting ladies ever found shoes that fit in a world without Nordstroms of Zappos is more than I can understand!)

I have it on good authority that Grandma Madsen used to walk back and forth to the outhouse summer and winter, even in the face of South Dakota winters. And I've always thought that perhaps, she simply preferred going barefoot just as I do. Having written that previous aside, however, I'm now wondering if maybe finding properly fitting shoes might have been part of the problem. If shoes that fit were hard to come by, they were probably also expensive. Grandma Madsen was a farmer's wife. She probably didn't want to risk the extra wear and tear of walking outdoors in the snow in the shoes she already had.

So here I sit, barefoot in front of my computer in my Tucson family room. Suddenly I feel as though I have been granted the

blessing of some insight into the lives and times of two women I barely knew but whose heritage and genetic makeup I share.

Is this part of the wisdom that comes with aging? Maybe so. Right along with the senior discount.

My Blog

By the Inch It's a Cinch! Sunday, February 1, 2009

Those of you who have followed the blog for sometime are probably accustomed to periods of relative blog silence. For newcomers, here's the scoop. I'm writing. A book. With a deadline. That is coming soon.

So while I'm paying attention to Ali Reynolds and what's going on in her life, I tend to neglect the blog. I can't help it. There are only so many little gray cells available at any one time. But the book is moving. I'm at 70% right now--I know because I count the words every day. That means that any moment, I'll be stepping on the banana peel part of the book--the part that for writer and readers alike--means not wanting to put it down.

Why do I count the words? Know the score, keep the score, report the score. The score will improve. And the score I'm looking for is finishing the book. On time.

I have a bad reaction when people say I'm prolific. It's as though the books simply write themselves. I just dash them off in a matter of a few days or weeks and that's all there is to it.

The truth is, there's a lot more thinking that goes into the background of a book than there is typing, and there's certainly a lot of that. I'm a relatively fast typist--probably 60+ WPM. My typing teacher from Bisbee High School who gave me a C would certainly be astonished. But if you divide 100,000 words (average size book) by 60 WPM, that takes a lot of time in itself, not counting the rewritten stuff that gets thrown away and never makes it into the finished product.

But what isn't as clear are the hours I spend thinking. Sometimes I do that with the computer open on my lap and with a game of solitaire on the screen. Sometimes I do that in the middle of the night, tossing and turning, while I try to sort out characters' motivations. Why do they do the things they do? Can I believe it? I find that, if I can't believe it, my readers won't believe it, either.

Now that I've told you why I haven't been blogging very much, I'm going to stop for the time being and go back to Ali Reynolds. Oh, and then I need to pack. I'm due at the Savannah Book Festival this coming weekend. Saturday, February 7, 12:00 PM. That's the last event on the official *Cruel Intent* tour. And that's the other part of my job. Writing and touring. Both. In equal measure.

And did I mention I have a cold? Too bad. This is a one woman business. No sick days allowed. I think I did have a sick day once, a couple of months ago when I had a case of vertigo and couldn't stand to look at the computer screen. Fortunately, I was over it in a day or two. I had to be. The deadline for that book was actively ticking.

My Blog

How The Internet Has Changed My Life Saturday, February 7, 2009

We all pretend that the Internet has not impacted our lives, but I'm here to announce that's not true. It has not only affected me, it has also affected the state of my husband's and my domestic tranquility.

Here's the most notable case in point: the word FINE.

People send me jokes on the Internet. One that came to me very early on was a guide to husbands on the meaning of everyday words which, when used by the female of the species, can turn out to be loaded with plenty of unexpected and important meanings. The missive went on to explain how at times, the simple word "fine" may turn out not to be fine at all.

There are plain fines which are probably just that--fine. For example, you say to your wife, "I'm going out to wash the car." She replies, "Fine," and most likely, you're good to go.

Then there's the one-eyebrow "Fine." This one is a little more iffy. For example, you say to your wife, "My parents are coming to dinner tomorrow, and I'm sorry I forgot to tell you." She says, "Fine," and raises one eyebrow, which probably really means that she thinks you're a thoughtless jerk but she will go to the store and get something to cook because she really does like your parents and she wishes you had given her more time to get the house ready and to make your father's favorite dessert. (If she does NOT like your parents, disregard this paragraph entirely and move on to the next one.)

This would be the dreaded two-eyebrow "Fine." This one is dangerous. You need to be aware that this is only one step down from "going postal" or "going nuclear," whichever you prefer.

In this instance, you deliver the same message--about the arrival of the not so welcome parental units--or you say, "I'm going down the the _____ (fill in the name of your favorite watering hole) to watch the game/match/tournament" whatever when she has asked you please, please, please to do something horrendous--like clean out the garage. A two-eyebrow "Fine," can often be accompanied by the addition of "Okay, I'll do it myself." In which case, when you return from the watering hole your life may not be worth living.

So now that you have an idea of the lexicon, here's how that particular e-mail changed my life. I thought it was funny. I thought it was hilarious. I thought it was too true. I forwarded it to my friends and acquaintances. I forwarded it to my husband. And everything was fine--or so I thought.

Then last week, as we were finishing breakfast, Bill asked me how was my omelet. Did I prefer it folded or pleated? I said I liked it fine either way. This was NOT fine with him. He suspected me of engaging in the use of suspect language. He suspected that when I said fine, I didn't mean fine at all, even though I swear neither eyebrow was raised at the time I said it. Besides, I was supremely grateful that he had cooked a perfect omelet. (See number one above, the part about going out to wash the car.)

So now I'm trying to scrub the word "fine" from my vocabulary. But it's not working because sometimes fine is . . . well . . . just fine.

My Blog

Arizona. . .Some Advice Friday, February 13, 2009

Sometimes the e-mails that come to me are absolutely priceless. The following e-mail came in today, and I think it's worth sharing. It's from a fan who shall remain nameless. I thought my blog fans might enjoy reading my reply.

Good Morning,

I have several questions for you. We still want to move to Arizona and will be visiting this summer in an r.v. Several friends and relatives are cautioning us against moving.

1. How bad is the crime in Casa Grande area? abducting people and cutting their throats?
2. Rattlers?
3. Scorpions?

This is what I wrote back:

When my parents decided to move from South Dakota to Arizona in 1948, all of our South Dakota relatives were convinced that we would surely die of a: heat or b: Apaches. We did NOT die.

I've lived in Arizona about half my life. I was never bitten by a rattlesnake, not even when I lived thirty miles from town and seven miles to the nearest neighbor and or telephone. Our dog Huck, a bluetick hound was bitten by a rattlesnake. On his nose. His nose also got into a porcupine (twice) and a skunk (once only.) I did try to shoot a rattlesnake in our yard back then. I fired 9 shots from a 22 pistol. Unfortunately, the snake was still laughing as he went over the wall and disappeared. In answer to your question--snakes are pretty much homebodies. If you don't go into their yards, you generally won't be bothered.

I was stung by a scorpion once when I was six and my mother was in the hospital having one of my younger brothers. I was stung on the big toe. It hurt like a bee sting. Mrs. Whiteaker,

our next door neighbor, put some of Mrs. Stewart's Bluing™ on the sting and it was fixed. I didn't know if anyone still sells Bluing. (It turns out you can get a three-pack of Mrs. Stewart's Bluing™ by ordering it over the Internet. <https://www.mrsstewart.com/> I believe this would be a lifetime's supply for bites and stings. But you could use it in your laundry too!)

I've been told I am THE MOST POPULAR AUTHOR in the Casa Grande Public Library. They have running water there. And lots of nice people. I write books that put a lot of crime out there, but please remember my books are FICTION!! There's not nearly as much crime in the REAL Bisbee as there is in Joanna Brady's Bisbee. And I've never heard of anyone having their throats cut in Casa Grande. That's a lot more likely to happen in Iraq.

As for kidnapping? Yes, they're having a big problem with people being kidnapped in Phoenix these days (40 miles from Casa Grande), but most of the people involved--perpetrators and victims alike--are involved in illicit drug smuggling. See my comment about rattlesnakes in their own yards in the previous paragraph. Stay out of the drug trade and you probably won't be in any more danger in Casa Grande than you are in . . . say, Richmond, Virginia.

And finally, I would take a careful look at the people who are advising you against making the move. They are probably friends and relatives who love you and don't want you to

MOVE FAR AWAY!!! And they're trying to scare you into staying.

I say go. Try it. Casa Grande in the summer is HOT. Summer is not the best time to give Casa Grande a try. On the other hand Casa Grande in the winter isn't HOT. But it isn't snowy or icy, either. And the good thing about Arizona? When it gets too warm in the summer, head up to the White Mountains or the Mogollon Rim to cool down.

And if you go and REALLY hate it? The road goes both ways. As August Wilson said, in *Two Trains Running*, there are plenty of ways to get back home if your move doesn't work out. And if that happens, I'm sure your friends and relatives (the ones who didn't have nerve enough to try anything new) will be glad to say they told you so.

My Blog

One Writer's Life

Tuesday, February 24, 2009

We're in Tucson. The sun is shining. We have played 3 rounds of golf and another one is scheduled for Thursday. Why are we playing golf? Because I finished writing the book. I wrote the last chapter of next winter's Ali book, hated it, and had to hit the rewrite button. Now it's better.

After the first round of editing, the manuscript will be going to New York by the end of this week. Monday the galleys for next summer's Beaumont/Brady book landed on the doorstep. They're due in New York by March 5th. Last weekend I was the Author in Residence at Loews Ventana Resort in Tucson, where I spoke for two hours, primarily discussing this winter's Ali book, *Cruel Intent*.

So there you have my life in a nutshell. Write one book, edit another, and promote a third. For all you people who are wondering if I write more than one book at a time, the answer is NO! Absolutely not. That would drive me nuts. But I generally deal with three books at a time--writing, editing, and promoting.

A lot of people are under the mistaken impression that all a writer has to do is be a hermit and write. NOT! Maybe that was true at one time, but it's not true now. Or at least, it's not true for me. My life is more like juggling--and trying to keep all the balls in the air without dropping any.

Someone asked me if I'd talk about what it was like when I first started writing. When I sat down to write my first (never published) novel in 1982, I was a divorced single mother with two little kids, no child support, and a full time job selling life insurance. I wrote from four AM to seven AM each morning before I got the kids ready to go to school and got me ready to go sell life insurance. Those three hours were the only hours I could carve out of weekdays that also included T-ball, soccer, Cub Scouts and Girl Scouts. On weekends I wrote while my sister took the kids to bargain matinees. If you've ever

wondered about the dedication in *Until Proven Guilty*, now you know.

The first book I wrote never sold to anyone. Part of the problem was it was 1200 pages long. I took it to an agent. She told me, without even touching the manuscript box, that the book was too long and I should cut it in half. I did, but she still couldn't sell it.

Sometimes wannabe authors manage to snag an agent for their first manuscript. If the agent is unable to sell that book, the author dumps the agent, keeps the manuscript, and goes searching for another agent. I did the opposite. I dumped the first book but kept the agent. She is still my agent almost forty books later.

And so the first book I sold was actually the second book I wrote. But writing that first book was vitally important. In the process, I learned how to write dialogue; how to create pictures through words; how to do pacing; how to put in the telling details and, when there were too many of those, to edit them back out. Writing the first unsold book was on the job training for writing the second book--the first one that sold.

Once I signed a contract on the first two Beaumont books, and once I understood that it would be a year before the first one came out, I realized that some day, I'd need to be able to go out and talk about the book in public. In preparation for that, I spent the next year in Toastmasters learning how to do public

speaking. And now, not only do I talk about my books on tour, I also have a speaker's bureau that sets up paid speaking gigs.

The first nine Beaumonts, the first Joanna Brady, and the first Ali Reynolds books were all original paperbacks. There was no publisher paid tour. But tour I did, on our nickel and in our vehicles. We considered it an investment in our future, and that has turned out to be true. In spades!

For each of those early books, I did a minimum of 30 signings that we set up ourselves. Bill worked at his job all week--the one that paid actual money--while I wrote at home and ran the washing machine on the side while earning what was then less than minimum wage. On weekends we did signings, sometimes formal ones and sometimes stock signings, everywhere we could find bookstores--in Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona. I remember walking into a Crown Books in the LA area once. When I went up to the clerk and told him who I was and asked if he wanted me to sign books, he went to the back and called out to his manager, "Hey there's a lady out here who wants to sign some books. I don't know why."

We did signings in Pullman at the Bookie for Mom's Weekend and for Dad's Weekend. We went to Kiwanis Clubs and book clubs and Rotary Clubs and the Ballard High School Bash. Now, we are fortunate enough to do some of our touring on a corporate jet, but that's a long way from where we were in the beginning.

In January of 1987, I drove to Portland in my 1978 Cutlass Supreme Brougham, the vehicle I bought used in 1979 and about which my first husband said, “You never should have bought it and you’ll never be able to pay for it.” Eight years later, the heater core had given out, but the Cutlass was still drivable. It was cold as blue blazes on the trip to Portland. I had to drive with the windows open to keep the windows from steaming over and to keep from being poisoned by anti-freeze, so I drove with gloves on and a scarf wrapped around my head to keep from freezing.

The first printing of *Until Proven Guilty* was 30,000 copies. In paper. Now my books start out at 100,000 or so hardbacks. And the print runs for the paperbacks are closer to 500,000. What would have happened if *Until Proven Guilty* had been an amazing blockbuster success the first time to bat? I don't think I'd be as appreciative as I am now. Because the journey has been a blast. Seeing advance copies of the cover for the upcoming book is always a thrill. And holding that first author copy in my hand is gratifying. And so is doing that first signing.

I have readers who've been fans from the very beginning who go back to those initial signings we did at The Doghouse back in the old days. And I have brand new readers who can't understand why they've never heard of me. (Hey, guys, I'm doing the best I can!) Touring gives me a chance to interact with those folks.

This year, at a library signing, I met a young woman who said that reading my book of poetry, *After the Fire*, had changed her

life because in reading it she realized how her life would be if she stayed with the man she was dating who was heading down the same alcohol-drenched path that my first husband followed. *After the Fire* gave her the courage to break up with him BEFORE she married him rather than after.

So now it's time to go wash and iron my hair, put on my signing clothes, and go be author under glass for the afternoon. Loews is a lot different from the Motel Sixes we stayed in early on, where the lamps would routinely fall apart when we touched them or the old Americana in Redding where we actually set the mattress on fire--but that's another story! (By the way, we learned from that mistake. My husband always checks, even here, to see if there's a plug-in on the wall behind the mattress.)

Doing this Author in Residence gig is part of the job, yes, but it happens to be a part of the job that I enjoy.

My Blog

A \$400 Vowel

Wednesday, March 4, 2009

Yuma was last week. It's pretty amazing to say nothing of gratifying to go to a town where I've never appeared before and have an auditorium full of adoring fans. And it's nice to be in a situation where the signing can take as long as it takes without having to shut down the line at some point because of travel dictates getting to the next event.

One of the fun things about Yuma was having one of my college dorm mates show up with a University of Arizona yearbook photo from 1963. I lived in Pima Hall, a co-op dorm where we did our own cleaning and cooking and where the rent was lower than any other dorm on campus. It was a dorm for Arizona girls only, ones who were smart but not well off. Most of the girls who lived there were on scholarships and most of us also had jobs over and above our “duties” in the dorm. We also ushered for events in the university auditorium and in the drama school. The three dollars a night we earned ushering was like found money at the end of the month.

These were the old days. Freshman girls had to be in the dorm by 10:30 at night. No one was allowed to wear pants to dinner. And the dorms weren't co-ed back then, either. If we were out in the hallway in our undies, the warning shout, “Man in the Hall!” was enough to send us scurrying into our rooms and into something “decent.”

This weekend is my Saturday afternoon event in Prescott. I haven't been to Prescott to do an appearance since I started writing, and I understand that the Elks Theater is booked to capacity. If there are six hundred people waiting in line and wanting to have books signed, I'm not sure how we'll manage because we need to be out of the venue by a specific time. This is one of those times when I may not be able to sign everything. I have a short name, and I can sign fast, but maybe not fast enough.

Which brings me to the name thing. People ask me over and over if J. A. Jance is my real name or just my pen name. This week someone wrote to say that her 92 year-old aunt claimed that my name was supposed to pronounced Jansay like, fiancsay. So if you've been to an event and heard me speak about the origins of my name, you probably already know this story and you can afford to skip the rest of this post.

My first husband's name was Jerry Janc. It was supposed to be pronounced Jance like Dance but it was mostly mispronounced, Jank like Tank. (I'm sure when his forebears arrived at Ellis Island from Eastern Europe, some helpful bureaucrat whacked off the last part of his name--the part that was hard to spell and harder to pronounce.) When I married him, that became my name, too, and I spent the next years of my life fighting the good fight trying to get people to say it properly.

As for those smart girls at Pima Hall? The four years I went with him, they called him "Jerry Janc, the Jerk." Obviously they were a lot smarter about some things than I was, but then love is blind, right?

My husband was hospitalized for more than a month before his death at the end of 1982. When Mary Grandma, my first mother-in-law, asked me to come help, I went to the hospital and heard the doctors and nurses who had been treating him all that time referring to him as Mr. Janc like Tank. Mary Grandma was too beaten down to raise a fuss about that. I wasn't, so at least by the time he slipped into a coma, the doctors and nurses were saying his name correctly.

After my first husband died, I didn't feel like fighting the name battle anymore. So in 1983, the kids and I went to court in Seattle and bought a vowel. King County charged \$400 at the time for me to buy that "E" so people would call me Judy Jance like Dance instead of Janc like Tank.

But my name wasn't all that changed in 1983. I also sold my first book. When I submitted the manuscript to my agent, the title page said, *Until Proven Guilty* by Judith A. Jance. But my agent knew that this was a police procedural written in the first person by a middle-aged male homicide cop.

The agent had worked in publishing in New York and knew about the prejudices at work there, so she retyped the title page to read: "*Until Proven Guilty* by J. A. Jance." The second editor who saw the manuscript called her and said, "Hey, the guy who wrote *Until Proven Guilty* is a good writer." She said, "What would you say if I told you the guy who wrote *Until Proven Guilty* was a woman?" He replied, "I'd say she was a hell of a good writer."

We sold the book. Then the marketing folks got hold of it. They said, "Readers (meaning *male* readers) won't accept a police procedural written by someone named Judy. We want to keep the initials." I wanted to ask them if they had ever heard of P.D. James, but I didn't. A former Pima Hall girl from Bisbee, Arizona, was about to have a book published by a major New York publisher. They could have called me "Late to Dinner" and I wouldn't have minded.

And so, Judith Ann Jance became J.A. Jance. I can tell you that J.A. is much easier to sign than Judith Ann. And yes, it *is* my name--bought and paid for.

Time passed. My daughter grew up. Ten years ago she was engaged to marry a very nice young man by the name of Jon Barbaro. On the night before the wedding he told her that his last name had come from a stepfather who had long since disappeared from his life. "My last name means nothing to me," he said. "Yours means a lot to you. How about if I take your last name?"

The first I knew about his intention was the evening of the wedding when the minister introduced the newly married couple as Mr. and Mrs. Jon Jance. If ever a son-in-law figured out how to turn his mother-in-law into a complete sap-head, that would be it. It worked. When Jon lost his long battle with melanoma going on three years ago now, he left us with a little miracle, his son and our only grandson, Colt Stephen Jance. (That's Jance like Dance.)

And now you know, as the late, great Paul Harvey would have said, "the rest of the story."

My Blog

**The Tucson Festival of Books
Sunday, March 15, 2009**

I've spent this weekend at the Tucson Book Festival. It's been an amazing event put together by a grass roots community effort of individual people and corporate sponsors. The weather has cooperated by being cool rather than hot. And the festival has been very well attended.

The event was held on the Mall at the University of Arizona. (That's possible because it's currently spring break time for the U of A.)

The university is plunked down in the center of Tucson, stretching from the far side of Speedway on the north and to the far side of 6th on the south. The western border is at Park and the eastern one is at Campbell. The buildings are all of a piece--red brick--and so people driving by on those tend to see this as a fortress of sorts, and they don't often venture inside for any reason.

This weekend changed all that. For one thing, parking was free. There's nothing like free parking to draw a crowd. I saw a lot of kids at the festival yesterday and today. I suspect that for many of them, this was the first time they had ever set foot inside the university's red-brick boundary. I'm hoping that some of those children will come away from this weekend wanting to come back here. I'm hoping they'll begin to dream that dream that someday they, too, could go to the U of A--that it's an exciting place; a learning place; a welcoming place.

It was interesting to be back here as a celebrity of sorts, back in the place where I took those first baby steps in the direction I

wanted to go. It was gratifying to be welcomed and greeted by name by University President Robert Shelton. And it was wonderful that a former president of the university, John Schaefer and his wife, Helen, were seated at our table. Those things didn't seem very likely to be part of my future back in 1964 when I wasn't allowed in the Creative Writing class because, as the professor pointed out, I was a "girl."

The upshot of that conversation was this: I didn't take his class. In fact, I didn't take ANY Creative Writing classes. Rejection isn't fun, and for a very long time after that, I carried a lot of baggage about that. (It's no accident that the crazed killer in my first thriller turns out to be . . . a former professor of Creative Writing from the University of Arizona!)

But as this weekend clearly shows all is forgiven--in both directions. I was proud to be given an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, by the U of A in 2000, and I was astonished when U of A President Shelton greeted me as Doctor Jance. (I wasn't wearing my poker face, and I'm sure my amazement at being greeted that way was readily apparent.)

Hindsight, however, is always 20/20 because we have the benefit of knowing how things turn out. Not being allowed in that Creative Writing class didn't keep me from writing. In fact, telling me no always has a tendency to make me more determined to do whatever. But I also realize now, that if I had taken that class from a professor who had a preconceived notion that I would fail at it, I might well have had the creativity rubbed out of my soul.

So this weekend, at the Tucson Book Festival, I'm grateful for the volunteers who have done all this amazing work; for the booksellers who have packed up their stores and workers and taken them on the road; for my fellow authors who came and gave of their time and talent; for the university for opening its doors to one and all, including me; and for the fans who stood patiently in line, waiting for an autograph or the opportunity to say hello.

But I'm also grateful to that professor--the one who wouldn't grant me admission to his class. Having the door to that classroom slammed in my face is part of what made me the woman I am today.

I was mad about it for a long time, but I'm over it now.

Time to put my nose to the grindstone and shoulder to the wheel and write another book.

My Blog

Farewell To The Post Intelligencer Tuesday, March 17, 2009

Today is the last day of publication for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and my mailbox is running over with e-mails about it. What's going to happen to poor Maxwell Cole? (People actually feel sorry for Maxie?!!!) And what about the

young woman who worked downstairs in the library? What about her? And how is Beau going to work his crossword puzzles, on his laptop? (Actually, yes, that is how he's doing it now.) As for what he's taking with him into the water closet? I'm not even going to go there!

The *P-I* was always my paper of choice. When the Seattle Times moved to mornings from afternoon editions, I worried that might be the end of the *P-I*. Unfortunately, this morning I'm proved right.

It's a sad day. And filled with memories.

For my brothers, my younger sister, and I, and for four of our five kids, newspaper delivery routes were "first jobs." In Bisbee 'the Buses' delivered the *Arizona Republic*, both by auto-route and by bicycles. In Bellevue the kids delivered the *Seattle Times*. It was a job that came with no small drama--like the time my two brothers each threw a paper onto the raised patio of a house in Bisbee, thus leaving us one paper short. The patio wall was a good ten feet above us, so one of my brothers stood on my shoulders long enough to scramble up and retrieve the extra one.

There was, of course, the occasional broken window. And then there was the case of marital infidelity. My daughter had been delivering to one house for months and each time she went to collect, a woman was there and paid the bill. One day when she went to collect, another woman answered the door. My daughter mentioned something about the person who usually paid the bill, and that was the wife's first hint that there was another woman

in her house a lot of the time. The FOR SALE sign went up a few weeks later.

In recent years, the bicycle paper route has gone the way of the buggy whip. Most of the “paper boys” these days are adults driving cars. I told my daughter this morning, that she’s probably part of the “last generation” of paperboys, and her son won’t have that avenue of employment for his first job.

And so I bid a sad goodbye to the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* this morning, for many reasons. The Doghouse is gone from Seattle, and so is the *P-I*.

Time passes. Things change. Get used to it.

My Blog

Muse Musings

Sunday, March 22, 2009

Years ago, after a book signing in Gig Harbor, Washington, the people from the bookstore gave me a copy of Agatha Christie’s autobiography as a thank you. Reading it, I found there were some interesting parallels in our separate lives.

Like Dame Agatha, I had an unfortunate first marriage and a much happier second one. One day, shortly after finishing writing a book, Agatha came into the library where her second husband was reading his newspaper. She threw herself down on

a nearby sofa and announced to him, “I shall never write another book. I have quite forgot how to do it.”

Her second husband, who had grown accustomed to living in a certain fashion, was quite distressed to hear this. Much later, however, Agatha said she heard a door close somewhere in the house and suddenly knew what she would write next--and did so.

This became something of a pattern. Agatha would finish a book and then, in the throes of despair, would tell her husband she would never be able to write another. Eventually, he heard these pronouncements with equanimity. With barely a rattle of the paper he would say “Yes, dear,” and go on reading with every confidence that eventually that door would close and she would figure it out.

So here I am in a similar state. Last Thursday, the rewritten manuscript went to my editor in New York on the wings of the Internet, and I’m now suffering from what I’ve come to recognize as a serious case of literary postpartum depression in which I find myself echoing Dame Agatha’s immortal words. “I shall never write another book. I have quite forgot how to do it.”

Is there another story to tell? Who would be in it? How would I start it? I have NO idea.

For right now, at least, I’m on V-A-C-A-T-I-O-N!!! I’m scheduled to do an appearance on Sanibel Island, Florida, later

on this week. Then, on Saturday, we'll meet up with the kids and grandkids for a spring break outing at Animal Kingdom Lodge in Walt Disney World in Orlando. It should be great fun, but I'm hoping that sometime, while we're in the Happiest Place on Earth, I'll hear a door close and will know what it is I'm supposed to write next.

My Blog

Grandma's Disney Adventure! Saturday, April 4, 2009

Somewhere in the course of this week long Walt Disney World extravaganza, it occurred to me that maybe in bringing a party of thirteen--two grandparental units, five parental units, and six grandkid units--to Animal Kingdom Lodge, that perhaps we had bitten off more than we could chew. For one thing, it convinced me that being a travel agent is no easy task.

Just reading the confirmation information can be fraught with peril. For instance, when I ordered the tickets for all four rooms at the same time in the same way, there was no way to tell--until too late--that one of the rooms had plain tickets as opposed to hoppers.

In the World of Disney, being a hopper allows you to go to more than one park on the same day. Unfortunately, the people without hopper privileges found that out when they were trying to make it to a dinner reservation on one of the properties and

were already running late. (The problem was solved later and to our complete satisfaction.)

And so today, the Birthday Boy and I are resting. The kids and grandkids caught a flight home to cold and unbelievably still snowy Seattle this morning. Early this morning! Bill and I are sitting on our balcony with our feet up, watching some buffalo with immense horns, a flock of very noisy pelicans, an occasional sauntering giraffe, and some zebra in the preserve off our shady balcony. Yesterday a pair of zebra was busy “doing what comes naturally” in plain view of these same balconies. As grandparents, we were able to dodge the inevitable questions.

It has been a wonderful week. Colt Stephen, age three, got his first ever haircut. His long curly red locks went away in a deal negotiated by his Uncle Jim who got his own buzz cut for his part of the bargain, and the process was photographed in living color by his Uncle Bill.

Audrey and Celeste kept up amazingly well and loved all the scary rides. Colt tended to conk out by dinner time after which he would reboot and be good to go until all hours. Not so G. and Grandpa. Rebooting at our age requires an actual night's sleep.

The older granddaughters, Lauren, Emmy, and Rachel, were great at helping look after the younger ones, and it was interesting to see them naturally pairing off by relative ages-- Lauren with Audrey, Emmy with Celeste, and Rachel with Colt.

Days like this, spent with cousins, are precious and few, and we should have plenty of photos to show for it.

For me the high point was going on a family safari at Animal Kingdom with our own biologist answering questions along the way. It was a coolish rainy morning, so the animals were still mostly up and about rather than hunkered down in the heat of the day.

Once we reached the park, it took no time at all for all concerned to unmask my inability to read maps, so Cindy took over that chore, leading us where we needed to go, and booking meals where necessary. It turns out that making seating arrangements for thirteen is no easy task.

I'm here to report that all members of the family are devoted users of sunscreen. Despite spending seven hours in the pool one day and hours and hours at the various parks, no one was sunburned. At all.

Later this afternoon, Grandpa and I will wander back over to the Magic Kingdom. I don't suppose I should admit it, but our favorite ride there is the train. Around and around we go. No lines. No scary falls from enormous heights. It's either that or the Riverboat. We had to go on those by ourselves. The grandkids weren't interested.

My Blog

Another “Page One”

Tuesday, April 7, 2009

The chorus of one of my favorite Sunday School songs goes like this:

This is the day that the Lord has made
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.
This is the day that the Lord has made.

This is the day that I open my computer to start a new book--a book that doesn't have a name and certainly doesn't have an outline, but it has been nearly forty years in the making.

If you've heard me speak somewhere along the line, you know that years ago I spent five years as a school librarian on an Indian Reservation, a place now known as the Tohono O'odham Nation. You may also know that in 1970, our family had a chance encounter with a serial killer.

My first hardback book, *Hour of the Hunter*, allowed me to take what I learned during those years and turn it into something else--a set of fictional characters that I have grown to love: Diana Ladd, a writer; her husband, Brandon Walker; Diana's son Davy; their adopted daughter, Lani; and their beloved Indian friend, a wise woman named Rita Antone.

These people do not exist in real life. They live and work in my imagination, but they're never far from my heart. And that's what I know about this book. That's ALL I know about this book. It's time to revisit those folks and find out what's been going on with them while my back has been turned--while I've been busy with J.P. and Joanna and now Ali.

So today I'll take the first step. I'll start by rereading those books--*Hour of the Hunter*, *Kiss of the Bees*, and *Day of the Dead*. In the process I'll find out which threads I'll be picking up and which threads will have run their course. In the last book, one of the beloved characters died. This time I'll need to see which character, if any, has stepped up to take Fat Crack's place.

Knowing I'm starting at page one can be pretty daunting, but it'll also be like revisiting old friends. Can I write this book and also blog occasionally? I'll have to. This unnamed baby has a deadline. It has to be finished before then. I also know if I let the blogging lag, I'll be hearing from people who say, "Hey, where are you? You haven't blogged in a long time."

So today you get a twofer--the vacation one and, as my son calls it, the one about "back to reality."

Now, with my nose to the grindstone and shoulder to the wheel, it's time for me to go to work. At the same time, however, I'm also going to rejoice and be glad in it.

My Blog

Thanks, But . . . No Thanks!

Thursday, April 16, 2009

I know there are plenty of people in out in the world who want to be writers when they grow up. I don't blame them. It's a great job, and twenty five years ago, that's what I wanted, too--to be a writer.

But just because I'm a writer now doesn't mean I can wave a magic wand that can help other people accomplish that same goal. This morning my e-mail selection included messages from four different people, all of them asking me to tell them how to go about writing books. One of them wants to send me her book. One sent along a short story for me to read.

Thank you for thinking of me, people, but I can't do this. I'm a writer. I'm not an editor. I'm not an agent. I'm not in the business of evaluating manuscripts and I'm not running a one-woman writing school, either. I can't explain in twenty-five words or less how to write a novel or develop a story or a believable character.

I do know I've spent the last two weeks rereading the three previous Walker books and taking detailed notes in preparation for writing another. But how will I go about putting the story itself together? I have no idea. And I won't know until I'm

knee-deep in the process of doing it, and I most certainly can't explain it.

My job entails writing books, meeting deadlines, answering e-mail, answering snail mail, going on tours, doing public speaking, and, in my spare time, blogging. Oh, wait. I don't have any "spare time."

When people hand me copies of their manuscripts when I'm touring, they clearly don't understand that when I'm wrestling luggage in and out of airplanes and on and off car rental shuttles, what I really don't need is something else to carry. They also don't understand that my opinion about what they've written along with five bucks will get them . . . well . . . maybe a Double Grande Latte at Starbucks.

What I can tell you is that writers write. How many hours they write per day or how many words they write per day really doesn't matter. What does matter is that they write. Some people use outlines. Others don't. I happen to be one of the latter, but that doesn't mean my way of doing it is right or someone else's way of doing it is wrong.

Some of you know that I wasn't allowed in the creative writing course at the University of Arizona in 1964. What I know about creating characters or telling stories or pacing or writing believable dialogue are things I've learned along the way, by doing it and by observing how other people do it. Or don't do it.

There are no short cuts. There are no easy buttons. You become a writer by writing. EVERY SINGLE DAY!

And the next time you see me at a signing, please don't hand me an envelope with your manuscript in it in hopes that I'll take a look at it, because I probably won't.

My Blog

Writer's Block Update Friday, April 24, 2009

It turns out fans aren't the only people who read this blog. So do any number of relatives.

One of my daughters called this morning and said, "I guess you were feeling pretty grumpy when you wrote that last entry, the one about people wanting to send you what they've written."

I guess I'm guilty as charged. I certainly sounded grumpy, but maybe overwhelmed is more like it.

Starting a book is hard work. It's always hard work. It never gets any easier. And people who think ideas are out there, fluttering around like a bunch of crazed butterflies just waiting for a chance to land in a book are absolutely nuts! Ideas are hard to come by. Characters are hard to come by. So are stories.

This week I was so deep in writer's block that I ended up watching Home and Garden TV. (This is a symptom of writer's block that is close to reading your alumni magazine, but not quite that bad!) And on this particular H>V issue a nice young woman was looking for a suitable place in Santa Fe where she could hunker down and become a writer. She was adamant that she wanted a house with a bath tub. (Give me a shower any day!) She also wanted a fireplace.

She seemed to be operating on the assumption that living with a crackling fire nearby would somehow spark her literary genius. And maybe she's right. Maybe that will work for her. I hope it does.

What I personally have learned about burning wood fires in fireplaces is that flues have to be opened and closed and that eventually someone will have to haul all those ashes out of doors. It also occurs to me that on the days when she might actually WANT a fire in her beehive fireplace, the local air quality control folks will most likely have instituted a clean air burn ban.

It's ironic that, as I write this, it's a very chilly April afternoon here in Seattle, and I'm sitting next to a burning gas log fireplace. (No crackle.) And instead of working on Chapter Two of *Queen of the Night*, I'm currently writing a blog entry. I'm even considering turning on the TV and searching through the guide to see what's listed for today's edition of *This Old House* or maybe see where Rick Steve's latest travel adventure may have taken him.

Oops. This sounds very much like writer's block to me, and maybe it is.

What do I tell beginning writers who ask me what they should do about writer's block? I tell them to write. So back to Chapter 2 I go.

Thus endeth the Writer's Block Blog Update.

My Blog

Golf/Write, Write/Golf Saturday, May 2, 2009

I know there are people who want to be writers who read this blog. And there are other people who read both my books and my blog.

So here's why not much is happening in the blog. I'm starting a book. Starting a book is hard. I wrote two chapters. I was impatient because I wanted to get to the END of the book. I was rushing things and "summarizing" as opposed to really writing. So back to the drawing boards. Start over. As my mother would say, "have another think coming." It turns out that changing my mind is the hardest change to make in writing a book, and now that I've done that, I have to go back and see if any of what I had already written can be rehabilitated and put into the "new" concept of the book.

The other thing I'm doing is golfing. Golfing badly. Golfing terribly. Now when some people read this, they may think we're talking about the basic country club experience. Not. We're golfing on the municipal course here in Bellevue. Early enough in the morning that the dew is still on the grass. Or the rain is. We're on the course by 6:15 or so, give or take. "Midnight Golf" as some folks call it.

When we come home, after walking eighteen holes, it's usually only ten o'clock in the morning and our shoes and socks are soaked. But we're walking. The pedometer says we're walking about six miles per round, three times a week. You tend to walk a lot farther if you hit the ball back and forth ACROSS the fairway as opposed to straight DOWN the fairway. So I'm doing more walking than Bill is.

In the world where people jog incredible distances on a daily basis, walking twenty miles a week may not sound like much, but it's a remarkable change of pace, as it were, for me. Prior to this, most of the exercise in my adult life came from jumping to conclusions. And I just wrote to a childhood friend--Pat McAdams Hall, my best friend from fourth grade, that I'm hoping to get a new putter for Mother's Day. A new putter? For me? Did I actually write that and mean it?!!!! I'm surprised my MacBook Air wasn't struck by lightning the moment those words appeared on the screen. But it's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

So that's what our life is at the moment--golfing and writing. There's not much funny stuff to say about that. Not much to say at all.

In the meantime, the publicity folks in New York are busily putting together this summer's book tour, the one for *Fire and Ice*. Which scares me to death because I know I need to do a whole lot of writing before that happens.

So if the blog suffers in the meantime, it does. I may be a woman, but I can only do so many things at the same time. And this week, maybe, I'll break 120.

My Blog

Worms have a right to be here, don't they? Sunday, May 10, 2009

Anyone who knew Judy Busk at Bisbee's Greenway Elementary School would know how unlikely it is that I would be writing a blog update about a sport, any sport.

Mrs. Spangler, my second grade teacher, introduced me to *The Wizard of Oz*. That introduction worked. I became a lifetime lover of reading. Mr. Leo Rosette, the grade school Phys. Ed. teacher, on the other hand, introduced me to baseball in a fashion that amounts of a lifetime's worth of aversion therapy.

Once a year for an interminable number of days, everyone from fourth grade up was forced to go to the auditorium where we had to sit and watch the World Series on what seemed like a very small television set that occupied the middle of the stage. The games were broadcast in black and white, but the television screen had a definite greenish tinge. We were supposed to watch the games. We were expected to keep score. We were not allowed to read books or do anything but watch. The announcer's voice saying, "No runs, no hits, no errors, and nobody left on base" provided music to my ears. It meant we were one inning closer to getting out.

Oh, and by the way, did I mention that even with glasses, I was very nearsighted and that screen was virtually indecipherable for me?

Vision, or lack there of, always left me at a loss in more ways than one when it was time for recess ball games or PE. For one thing, I had a very pronounced astigmatism. What that means is that you have limited depth perception and that is a big handicap when it comes to catching balls or hitting balls or even dodging balls.

Yes, I wore my glasses outside and a girl named Lucy Skoviak managed to break them three different times--once in kickball, once in dodge ball, and once in volley ball. It wasn't really Lucy's fault. I never knew where the balls were until it was much too late to either catch it or get out of the way.

So the fact that I have even a nodding acquaintance with a sport of any kind at my advanced age is nothing short of astonishing. But I'm playing golf several times a week at the municipal course here in Bellevue, Washington. We play early in the morning. Very early in the morning. Before it gets hot. Before the sun burns through the cloud cover.

This week I learned something about the golf course when it finally stopped raining. What happens then is all the worms surface. Earth worms. Lots of them. I should have known the worms were there since there are so many birds--ducks, geese, robins, etc, hopping about on the fairways, dining in style.

My understanding is that if a ball lands on a cart path, the golfer is allowed, without penalty, to move the ball two club lengths from the cart path as long as the move doesn't move the ball any closer to the pin.

I personally have a new rule. If I approach the ball and discover a fat, juicy worm parked in the very spot where I'm going to do my practice swing, I pick up my ball and move it a foot or so to the left. It's not that I'm being a greenie and saving the worm. No, I just don't want any bug guts on my Burner Driver. Or on my pant legs. Or on my shoes. If the guys in my foursome want to penalize me for that, so be it.

Worms have a right to be here, don't they?

My Blog

50%-- Make that 53.75% (But Who's Counting?)

Saturday, May 23, 2009

I had a big shock today at breakfast/lunch. I looked at the milk carton I'd just opened and it said, "Sell by July 5." My first thought was, "That can't be right or else this isn't FRESH milk!" Surely we can't be that close to July! And it turns out we're not. A check of the calendar tells me this is actually May 22. Which brings me back to my clearly erroneous idea about how fresh fresh milk is!

But it's still a shock to the system to see that July is, as it were, right around the corner. The book tour starts in July. The book I'm writing has to be DONE and in New York before the tour starts because it is physically and mentally impossible for me to be writing one book while touring with another. Maybe not impossible for some authors, but it's certainly impossible for me.

I used to be able to do it, but not any more. Writing and touring require two entirely different forms of energy, and I can't eat enough Wheaties to keep those two demanding balls in the air simultaneously. In other words, the start of the tour for *Fire and Ice* on July 21 is my drop dead deadline for finishing *Queen of the Night*.

Which brings me to the title of this post--the 53.75% part. How do I know that? When I'm writing, I count the words. Every day! When I was in the insurance business (for ten years--long enough to receive a pension) my Agency Manager, Gilbert F. Lawson used to stand up in agency meetings and announce. "Know the score; keep the score; report the score; the score will improve."

I suspect this comment comes from some famous football coach or other, and if I were really on my game, I would immediately Google those words to find out, but the truth is, as far as I'm concerned, they came from Gil Lawson and the buck stopped there. (Excuse me, President Truman. I just woke up from a nap, and those little pieces of age old wisdom are all bubbling to the surface.)

Back to knowing the score. As a writer in the process of creating a book, that's the ONLY way to keep score--to see if the number of words is growing. Or not. Am I getting closer to the goal or not? And what is THE GOAL? My publishers want me to write books that are around 100,000 words in length. If I deliver a manuscript of only 85,000 words, the book is going to look like it's double spaced. Readers would complain and deservedly so.

So I'm allowed 5000 words' worth of "slop." I aim for 95,000 words which means that, after editing, the story will clock in at about 100,000. If I aim for 100,000, it'll probably come in at 105,000 which would also be all right, but why would I want to

write 5,000 free words? That's a 5% down payment on the NEXT book!

And what would happen if I wrote a book that came in at 106,000? Then the print would have to get smaller--and readers would complain--or the shipping box would have to get larger--and the publisher wouldn't be happy. They like STANDARD sized shipping boxes.

Now, if you're one of those readers who believes books require a muse (They do!) and that writing is some kind of magic process (It is!), you may be offended by the businesslike word count requirement based on the SIZE OF THE BOX! I'm not.

That 100,000 words is the size of my canvas just as the Sistine Chapel was the size of Michelangelo's "canvas." If he had put some of his painting outside the walls of the chapel, it wouldn't have worked. Am I offended by having a word count requirement? No. In fact, I find it reassuring. Whatever's happening in the book must come to fruition inside the walls of my particular canvas/box.

So here I am at 53.75%. The good news about that is that it's verging on 60%. Over the years, I've learned that from 60% on it's usually much easier to write a book--usually but not always! And, at that percentage, the characters generally start keeping me awake at night telling me what's going on with them.

In the case of THIS book, they're already doing that. From a creative standpoint, that's great. From the point of view of

someone who is supposed to be up at 5 in order to be out on the golf course whacking balls and marching six or so miles starting at 6:15 AM, being kept up until all hours by some pesky character is NOT such a good idea. Golfing on three hours of sleep is NOT a good idea. Hence the nap I told you about in paragraph 3 above.

So now it's 4 PM. As soon as I finish writing the blog (Yes, I know some of you read this on Sunday mornings! I'm right there with your Sunday Comics!) I need to go back to the book and write the scene that I was thinking about last night. Because it's important to stay inside the story--even one or two percents' worth--on a daily basis. If I'm away from it too long, I lose track.

This is probably way more of the writer's "process" than you wanted to know, but, as my husband says, with me there are "no short stories; only long stories." (Which is why I don't believe I'll be Twittering any time soon. A mere 140 characters? Not even 140 words? I don't think so!)

Which brings me to my "social networking" situation. I appreciate being invited to join Facebook and Linked-In and MyLife, etc., but I'm probably not going to join those things. Thanks but no thanks. I'm already getting plenty of e-mail on a daily basis. I don't need any more.

Twitter that!

My Blog

Critics Are Always With Us

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Years ago I was invited to attend an on-going writers' group. They met at various people's homes once a week where they read aloud and picked apart whatever each of them had written between meetings.

At the time, I was a newlywed with a blended family of five kids and two golden retriever puppies, Nikki and Tess, who welcomed themselves to our house by gnawing on the corners of our unabridged dictionary. In other words, I was busy. When I went to that meeting, I had written three books--the first unsold and never sold one and the first two Beaumonts which had both been published while I was working on the third one.

At that event, one person, who had read the second Beaumont book, *Injustice for All*, took me to task by telling me that in that story one of the characters goes into the shower wearing one set of clothing and emerges wearing something else--a green dress--with no way for her to have access to that particular piece of clothing. My writing group critic not only was kind enough to point this out in a public forum, he also said, "If you brought your pages to us and let us read them, you wouldn't make those kinds of mistakes." Thank you so much. How kind of you to say so. Have you ever heard of Thumper's father?

I was crushed to think I had made such an egregious error. But the book was out there and I assumed, mistakenly it turns out, that once books are published they're a lot like the Ten Commandments which is to say, chiseled in granite. So I took the criticism to heart, but I left the book as it was. I also didn't go back to that writing group or to any other one, for that matter.

It turns out I don't do well with public humiliation. Besides, I was too busy with other things, including doing writing on deadline for professional editors--who still managed to let a few errors sneak through, most notable of which was that stray Joanna that ended up in one of the Ali Reynolds books.

About that same time, I served as a volunteer for the Pacific Northwest Writers Conference. My job was to pick up a visiting guest, an editor, at the airport and take her to the conference site, Pacific Lutheran University south of Tacoma. I do not remember her name, but I've never forgotten her words. "Original paperbacks are where anybody who wants to be published can get published."

Of course, there I was--Ms. Original Paperback, herself--driving the car. I have no idea how that particular editor got back to the airport. For all I know, she's still out there somewhere, wandering in the woods south of Tacoma, but I do know I was NOT her return ticket.

And speaking of original paperbacks. About that same time at another writer's event, some of my fellows were kind enough to tell me, "What you need to do, is get away from those two book

paperback contracts with Avon and go to someone who'll pay you some real advance monies." They also went on to add, "Original paperback mysteries have a shelf life of ninety days."

But I liked having two book contracts. I liked having the opportunity to grow an audience. I figured if I did that long enough, when I did go to hardback, the audience would be there. In addition, it seemed to me that staying with that original paperback house and adding books to that series would give the publisher a reason to keep the early books in print.

And so, time has passed. A lot of time. Two and a half decades. And what has happened in the meantime? *Until Proven Guilty*, originally published in 1985, is still in print--continuously in print which means we made the right decision. If I were a math major I'd be able to figure out exactly how many ninety day periods have passed since then, but it's several. Every six months, I receive more in royalties on that book than I received in my advance payment. Over time, that has turned into, what even my well-intentioned mentors would be obliged to call "real money."

And now, my publisher has sent me a list of the books they intend to reissue next year, including *Injustice for All*. A lot of things have changed since 1986, including the idea that computers are now very much with us. (Back then, I was still limping along on my dual floppy Eagle with 128k of memory.) And now I know that the content for all of my books is computerized because I asked for and received "as published" PDFs of each of them so I could go back and double check

things to make sure what's happening in newer books is consistent with what happened in older ones. Now, almost forty books later, I know that if something needs to be fixed in one of those early books, I can go back and do so.

With that in mind, it was time to revisit *Injustice For All* for the first time since I finished writing it and fix that pesky "green dress" problem. And guess what? My critic was wrong. Two pages before Ginger emerges from the shower in different duds, someone from the hotel brought her clothing from her room, clothing which J.P., in true gentlemanly fashion, passed into the bathroom for her to put on.

Which means I've worried about this for more than twenty years for nothing because my critic was wrong! I can't even let him know since he's no longer with us, but he did have one book published before he checked out. I didn't read it. If there were editorial mistakes in it, I didn't see them. See paragraph two above regarding public humiliation.

What's the lesson in all this? When people take me to task, I accept what they have to say with good humor. Well, maybe with equanimity and as much good grace as I can muster. A lot of times, they're taking me and my books apart because they know they're far better writers than I am and they can't understand how someone with my mediocre credentials (I wasn't good enough to apply for the Iowa Writers Program, let alone to be turned down!) can be sitting there signing published books when they're not.

Some of the people who write to me have a far greater depth of knowledge about particular things (Appaloosa horses, helicopters, and handguns come to mind.) and they need to prove to me that they're much smarter than I am. I have NO problem with that. If I were going to school in Lake Woebegone, I know full well I'd be just "above average." Barely.

But being a writer, criticism and all--deserved and undeserved--is still the best job in the world. Now, back to the book I'm supposed to be writing. It has a deadline. Someone is paying me to do it. It's the book people will be able to send me e-mails about next summer. Some readers will love it; some will hate it; some will be writing to tell me I'm WRONG, WRONG, WRONG!

But wait a minute. Nobody's paying me to write this blog, so why am I doing it, even though it's Sunday and supposedly my day off?

Because it's a labor of love. Because I have to.

Because writers write.

My Blog

Summer Time!

Tuesday, June 9, 2009

While I've been keeping my nose to the grindstone and shoulder to the wheel writing a book, time has gone zipping past. Another week. Another month. Here it's almost time for me to make like Sally Fields and take my once-a-month Boniva. How can that be? Well, for one thing, I'm a woman of a certain age. For another May made like the Kentucky Derby and disappeared in a blink.

Yes, it's now June in Seattle. It usually rains in Seattle in June, but last week we had an unseasonable heat wave that caused us to turn on the AC. Correction. Make that "which caused us to TRY to turn on the AC." Inevitably, it decided not to work.

I'm sure it works fine when we don't need it. Like today. When I'm sitting here wearing a sweater! But this week when it was ninety and above and we actually wanted AC, it was no dice. We called for an AC repairman. Needless to say, they were swamped with service calls. By the time someone got around to seeing us, it was cool again. I don't mean that it was slick that he came by to see us; I mean the weather was cool. Chilly, even. And overcast. He said our system was, and this is a direct quote, "Fine."

If you've been reading this blog for any length of time, you know that "fine" is a word fraught with peril in this household.

The truth of the matter is, I have no idea if our AC unit is fine or not. And we won't know for sure until it's hot again and we need it. I know what my father would have said about an AC system that doesn't work when it's hot. It's farmer talk. You can probably guess what he said, but I'm not going to print it here. Small eyes may be watching.

Which reminds me of a story from my best friend this past week. She teaches kindergarten. Has taught kindergarten for a LONG time. Notice I'm not saying how long, but if I'm taking Boniva, and if we met in fourth grade together, you can probably guess how long that is.

Kindergarten teachers are in a class all by themselves--my heroes. They spend nine months each year taming whatever little rascals happen to come meandering into their classrooms in September and August. Some are barely potty trained. Some of the children may have been exposed to pre-school or pre-K, but lots of them haven't. In other words, the one thing they almost all have in common is that they are illiterate. **THEY CANNOT READ.** In the course of those next critically important months their teachers, with astonishing purpose and a good deal of grim determination, try to teach them how to do that life enhancing skill--reading. Some of the kids, LUs (Little Urchins, as she calls them on their bad days) make the grade. Others don't and have to be retained for another run at kindergarten.

This, by the way, is NOT the end of the world. When I was told that my daughter (just under the wire age-wise for kindergarten) was being held back due to "small motor coordination" I fell

into an emotional tailspin. As in, “My child is flunking kindergarten? This is so NOT happening!” But then a friend who was an experienced high school teacher set me straight. “Kids who are pushed into kindergarten too young end up struggling all through school.” And so my daughter stayed an extra year in kindergarten with no long term ill effects for her or for me.

But this is back to TODAY’S kindergarten story. This week, one of my friend’s little ones asked her if one of her other students would be in someone else’s kindergarten class next year. My friend was shocked. The fact that the student in question was indeed being held back was confidential information or, at least, it was supposed to be confidential information. When she asked him who had told him that, it turned out he had READ IT BY HIMSELF in the paperwork on my friend’s desk.

So she did it. She taught that little kid how to read, better than she knew.

So to all you super-human kindergarten teachers out there. Well done. Take the summer off. Relax. Read a book, preferably a mystery, and enjoy yourselves. You’ve earned it.

And by the way, thank you.

My Blog

Power To The People

Thursday, June 18, 2009

We've had two difficult winters. I refer to them as our Winters of Discontent, 1 and 2. The first one was the Windstorm December 2007 when we were out of power for five days and without cable or Internet for nine. (Our daughter, her baby and her two dogs were also without power for nine days. Guess where they were? At Grandma's where we at least had gas log fireplaces and a gas stovetop.)

For my birthday present that next year, I asked for and got a generator--a whole house generator that turns on automatically within thirty seconds of a power outage. (Our daughter got the same thing for Christmas.) The upshot of that, of course, is that the next winter passed without a hint of a windstorm. We did have snow. Lots of snow. Couldn't get up and down our steep driveway for several days, but the power stayed on through it all.

Then last night, right in the middle of *Two and a Half Men* as opposed to *The Big Bang Theory* we heard A BIG BANG. We knew at once that a transformer had blown somewhere nearby. Charlie Harper immediately stopped doing whatever outrageous thing he had been doing because the screen went blank.

Thirty seconds later Charlie was back doing his thing. It took a long time for the cable company to get its guide back, but hey, we had POWER. That happened sometime around seven. The generator was still generating when we went to bed at ten.

So this morning I'm feeling very grateful. Glad we had it. Glad it worked. I'm not sure what we're going to do about that steep, snowy driveway come this December, but I expect some remedial action will be taken about that, but we've got the wind situation covered.

My Blog

Happy Anniversary

Sunday, June 21, 2009

Twenty four years ago, on the 21st of June, I was invited to do a poetry reading of *After the Fire* at a retreat for newly widowed folks. The retreat was sponsored by Widowed Information Consultation Services (WICS).

The retreat was being held at a YMCA campground south of Tacoma, and my kids were astonished that I would willingly go to a camp for any reason, but most especially to spend the night. Truth be known, I was astonished, too. That was at the very beginning of my book selling career--so close to the beginning, in fact, that the first J.P. Beaumont book was due to go on sale the very next week. In the meantime, however, if there was a place I could go with some potential of selling books--even the poetry book, I was going. And I did.

I don't know how many of my blog readers have ever read *After the Fire*. It's a tough go for some people because it's based on some tough times. In essays and poems it recounts the end of my first marriage and the eventual loss of my then ex-husband. He died of chronic alcoholism at age 42. Anyone who has lived

with or divorced or survived a spouse or a parent with addiction problems knows this wasn't a walk in the park for anyone.

But as I made my way to the WICS retreat, I grew more and more anxious. After all, all the other people there were STILL MARRIED when their spouses died. I wasn't. I was divorced. And it seemed to me as though I was going there under false pretenses, without having had my ticket properly punched. It didn't help that a year and a half earlier, when my former husband died, some of my associates in the insurance business couldn't figure out why I was so upset as in. . . "Well, you already divorced him, didn't you?"

Once I arrived at the campground, however, the people who greeted me couldn't have been more pleasant. When I told them about my concerns, they said, "If you've got grief work to do, this is the place to do it."

My response to that was, why not? As a single parent with two little kids, a full time job selling insurance and a part-time job writing, every moment was taken. I hadn't found the time to do much grief work. None is more like it.

At lunch, someone who was there introduced me to "someone they wanted me to meet." He seemed like a nice enough man, but I didn't pay a whole lot of attention. I was nervous. I was up and clearing the table before people had properly put down their forks or finished chewing.

I know myself well enough now to recognize that premature table clearing indicates I'm very close to having a complete meltdown. After lunch I went off and did my poetry reading. The "someone I was supposed to meet" didn't turn up and that was fine with me. He wasn't interested and neither was I.

But that evening, after dinner, when the choices were a: attending a grief workshop or b: running in an egg race. I took the a: option. We sat in a circle in a large room. One by one we were supposed to go around the room, introduce ourselves, and say a little about our spouses, including what they died of and when.

I said my name was Judy, my spouse's name was Jerry, he died of alcoholism on New Year's Eve of 1982. About a third of the way around the room sat the "someone I was supposed to meet." He said his name was Bill, his wife's name was Lynn, and she died of breast cancer on New Year's Eve of 1984.

That coincidence of them both dying on New Year's Eve really caught my attention. After that we were supposed to share. I went on to say that I sold life insurance, was raising my kids, writing my books, and making the best of a bad bargain. Then I waited for Bill to say something more. He said nothing. Not one word!

So after the workshop was over and people gathered around the bonfire outside to roast marshmallows, I went looking for him with a chip three inches deep on my shoulder. When I found him, roasting his own marshmallow and minding his own

business, I went stalking up to him and said, “So what are you, the strong silent type?”

His reply. “It still hurts too much to talk about it.”

In the world of right answers, that was the one. Within five minutes, I was literally crying on his shoulder and thinking, “How STUPID!” In the meantime, Bill, a man who had married the first girl he had ever dated and who was about to marry the second, was standing with one hand around my waist while he tried to figure out what to do with his OTHER hand.

It turns out that the only reason Bill came to the retreat was that he was keeping his word. He had promised some of the elderly ladies in his grief support group--women who didn't drive--that he would take them to the retreat. He had tried to back out, but they wouldn't let him.

This is something that puts the lie to that old saw about no good deed going unpunished, because the rest is history. Our first date turned out to be the grand opening party for *Until Proven Guilty* the following week. Bill had to talk his way past the gatekeeper (my daughter) because although I had invited him to come to the party, I had neglected to put his name on the official guest list. He arrived early and left late and, as that same daughter also says, “We've been stuck with him ever since.”

We met on the 21st of June and we married on the 21st of December. In the first few weeks we did a lot of talking and comparing notes. On the surface it may not appear that losing a

spouse to cancer and losing one to alcoholism would have a lot in common, but they do. Both are long term chronic conditions where things never seem to get better; only worse; where what you think of as normal for you is way beyond the pale of what passes for normal in most other people's lives.

Somewhere in the process of talking Bill and I started laughing and having fun. We got married sooner than our friends and relations thought seemingly primarily because we were greedy. Because, based on our experience, we didn't know how much time we had left, and we were determined not to waste any of it.

This is the first time that I remember Father's Day falling on our anniversary. When we're grilling hot dogs, eating watermelon, and watching kids and grandkids bounce in and out of the pool, I'll be saying a heartfelt silent thank you to the people of WICS.

Widowed Information Consultation Services still exists by the way. They still run grief support groups, and they just had their annual retreat.

If it hadn't been for those terrific people taking me in that day and telling me to "go ahead and grieve here," I'm afraid my life would have turned out to be far different than it is. It might have been a little less complicated, but I also suspect it would have been a lot less fun.

And as for that "someone I was supposed to meet?" Happy 24th Anniversary, Sweet Will. Many happy returns.

My Blog

Hey, Good Lookin'

Wednesday, June 24, 2009

My parents were great people--hardworking, nice people who were happily married for 68 years. One of the things that made their marriage a happy one was that they shared a zany sense of humor. Sadly enough, her once unfailing sense of humor was something my mother lost once my father was gone.

They loved to tell the story about how, as newlyweds living in Twin Brooks, South Dakota, their supertime conversation was often disrupted by a freight train roaring past and blowing its whistle a few hundred feet from their kitchen table--one my sister still has and still uses, by the way. One night my mother decided that when the train whistle blew that night, she was going to act like she was scared to death and scramble under the table. She did exactly that, only to find herself face to face and nose to nose with my father who had decided on his own to pull the same stunt.

When my mother was in her eighties, she developed a hammer toe situation in one of her little toes. She went to see the doctor. When he told her that the cost of the surgery to correct the problem would be around three thousand dollars, she asked how much it would cost to cut the toe off completely. The answer? Two hundred dollars. "Cut it off then," she told the doctor, and he did. She then asked for and received the missing appendage. She took it home and--seeing as how they lived in Arizona--spent the next several weeks cooking it in direct sunlight. Once

the toe was properly cured, she laid the jerked toe (yes as in jerky) in a bed of cotton, put the cotton in an Altoid box, and popped the box into her purse.

A few months later, she and my father came to Seattle for my son's wedding. My dad was in his element. "Would you like to see my diamond clip?" he would ask some hapless guest. If they agreed, he would immediately pull out a dime with a paper clip on it. Whereupon my mother would move in for the kill. "Would you like to see my hammer toe?" she would ask. Thinking this to be another joke of a similar kind, they would agree, only to be shown a REAL hammer toe.

In later years, my mother denied this ever happened, but I have a whole set of in-law and outlaw kids who go off in a whole series of totally toe joke mode periodically, including at a nephew's wedding in Las Vegas. The waitstaff at Treasure Island is probably still wondering how a whole wedding reception could have gone so bad on the few bottles of champagne that were served.

By now you're probably wondering, too. What's the point? There's going to be a point, I think, if you'll just bear with me.

One of the things my mother liked to say about my father was that he was "sure good looking but he was poor finding." It's only fair to mention that was true for her on occasion, too. At one point--again while they were in their eighties--my mother's VERY expensive hearing aids disappeared. Both of them. They could not be found, but my mother refused to go see the

audiologist to be fitted for a replacement pair. (See hammer toe incident above.) Then, one day, my mother got out some little Jimmy Dean sausages that she had cut up and frozen to put into scrambled eggs. My father came in while she was in the process of starting to cook.

My father who did NOT have macular degeneration said to my mother who DID, “Why are your hearing aids in the frying pan?”

In later years, my father had perfect vision but he couldn't remember where they lived. And my mother couldn't see well enough to drive, but she could remember the turns well enough to get them home. They were a matched pair!

Which brings me to today. Those of you who have been following this blog know that we've been playing golf three days a week for months now. (My golf score is a closely held secret between me and the Great Scorekeeper in the Sky.) But we've been going out at the crack of dawn--6:15 AM--and whacking golf balls around for eighteen holes, pulling our carts all the while. This is a miracle, of course, because a year ago this month, my husband had dual knee replacement surgery and he is fine.

Except for Monday of this week. Out on the long double dog leg--people who play the Bellevue Municipal Course will know whereof I speak--he stepped into an invisible pothole in the rough. He figured he could fight it and hurt his ankle, or he could fall on the soft (well, sodden really) grass and maybe hurt

his knee. He took the knee option. The first I knew about it was when I looked across the fairway at him from my particular patch of sodden rough and saw him lying under a tree. One of our foursome showed up and helped him back to his feet. I asked him if he was hurt. He said, not very. And we played on.

That dreaded double dog leg is early in the front nine. When we finished up, many holes later, he went looking for his prescription glasses, which had mysteriously disappeared. We looked in pockets. We looked in golf bags. We asked the marshals, and then we gave the glasses up for lost and came home. We figured they were off in the rough somewhere and, by the next day, would have been mowed into oblivion.

And that was how things stood until today. Wednesday. We were back on the course. We were back on the double dog leg when I remembered. “Hey,” I said to him. “You fell down here on Monday. Is it possible you lost your glasses under the tree?”

Bill is an interesting husband. When driving a car, he can actually make a U-turn if we miss something, and he immediately went back to the fateful tree where he looked but found nothing. Two holes later, though, one of our foursome, the same guy who pulled Bill up out of the grass on Monday, jogged back across the intervening fairway to the tree and **FOUND THE GLASSES! UNMOWED!!!! Hallelujah!**

And as we left that green and went to the next one, I was able to turn to my husband and quote my mother by saying, ever so

sweetly, “You’re sure good looking, but you're sure poor finding.”

My Blog

You’re Going the Wrong Way!

Monday, June 29, 2009

All the world’s a critic, and so am I.

If you’ve been around this blog for any length of time, you know that I sometimes take issue with the people who write to me about the egregious errors in my books. In other words, I know that there millions of critics waiting out there in the woods and hoping to find something wrong so they can write me a long letter and let me know how the cow at the cabbage--as my mother would have said.

So no, I'm not going to light into some other poor hapless author and tell him/her that s/he has no business having the streets in Phoenix running in the wrong direction. (Yes, another author did do such a thing, but if you somehow missed it, it’s not my job to tell you who it was or what in book, and I didn't write to him/her and rub his/her nose in it, either!)

But we are talking directions here, and not in a book--on a commercial. Now that I'm mentioning it to you, I’m guessing you’ll notice and it’s going to bug you every bit as much as it bugs me. (Sort of like humming a few bars of *It’s a Small, Small*

World in a crowded elevator. Everyone else gets to share your pain.)

It's a commercial that's on TV now--in fact, just a few minutes ago, it ran again on Home and Garden TV in the middle of the latest do-it-yourself faux drama about remodeling your aging house and turning it into a green machine or else putting a design band-aid on the place you've lived in for the last ten years (with no closet doors and holes in the walls) in order to get it sold. Do not get me started! How about fixing your house in order to live in it yourself instead of doing an instant fix-up in order to sell it to somebody else?

But back to the commercial. It's summer and it's a summertime commercial--all about the wonders of some new grilling product or another. There's a hunk on the screen, cheerfully barbecuing several pieces of beef for his family. (Wait, did I say *beef*???) Well, just because Home and Garden TV's programs are unrelentingly green doesn't mean their commercials have to be!)

And so, after extolling the virtues of this miraculous new grilling product, the guy turns one of the pieces of beef on his grill. The lines on the grill are vertical. The lines on the beef are horizontal.

Didn't anyone notice that? If you want people to actually buy your grilling product, shouldn't you at least pretend that the guy doing the barbecuing is really doing it?

Right about then, I believe my willing suspension of disbelief came unplugged. Or maybe it just blew the GFI. (If you don't know what a GFI is, you need Home and Garden TV more than I do!)

Now that I've got that commercial off my chest and onto yours, I'm going back to HGTV.

I want to see which house that nice middle-aged couple from New Jersey is going to buy as their "dream home" in Roatan. I've always wondered what's going to happen to them when they're a little older than they are now and need a few replacement parts--not for their new house but for them--something like new knees, perhaps or some other kind of state-of-the-art medical care. Maybe shoveling wintertime snow in New Jersey won't seem like such a bad idea about then. And wait, didn't I hear just this morning that there's a military coup going on in Honduras right now?

Maybe there's more drama on Home and Garden TV than I thought.

My Blog

I Got a Birdie!

Friday, July 3, 2009

If you think this is going to be another one of those boring golf blog entries, you would be WRONG!!!

Yes, we did play golf and there were no birdies for me out on the course. It was too hot. It must have been in the high seventies. (We have already established that I am a complete weather wimp in both directions. I will not be playing golf in Tucson in August, either.)

But when we came home, I sat down in my chair to read my e-mail--which wasn't working for the better part of an hour for no apparent reason. And sitting there I heard a strange little cheep which I initially assumed to be one of the alarms (smoke or CO2) telling us one of our Eveready batteries needed replacing. Note to the world: I am a girl. Replacing batteries is NOT my problem!)

But then the cheep came again, from directly behind my chair where there's a bar and no smoke detector. Sure enough, there was a sparrow who had let himself in through the patio door. He was chirping his little heart out from the top shelf of the bar shelves where we keep our priceless collection of Lotus pattern Rosenthal crystal stemware.

Bill brought the crystal back from Germany a very long time ago when he was married to his first wife. The first month we were married and after we completed our FIRST kitchen remodel, I washed one of the glasses by hand and set it out to dry, mouth down, on our newly installed formica countertop. Then I watched in horror from across the room while it proceeded to take a casual stroll across some water to the edge of the counter where it threw itself off and onto the floor. Crystal, when it shatters, does so in spectacular fashion.

By the way, Bill did not berate me for this. We were newlyweds after all, but he wouldn't berate me today if the same thing happened. That's not the way we work. (I didn't berate him when he backed one car out of the garage and into another car, either. Mentioning it here does not count!)

After the stemware shattered, however, I guiltily went searching for a replacement glass. I looked at the Bon. I looked at Frederick and Nelson (This was so long ago that Frederick and Nelson still existed.) But there was no Lotus stemware to be found.

We finally located some at a crystal shop in Seattle's Magnolia district. Talk about sticker shock. They had some of the Lotus pattern, hiding in the back room for \$50 a stem! We bought what they had. We replaced the broken one and added a few more while the getting was good.

Which is why having a sparrow roosting among the Lotus stemware was NOT a good thing. I managed to shoo it out of

there without anything getting broken. (WHEW!) But then it flew into the living room.

I am tall. One of the reasons I love this house is that it has very high ceilings. That's fine for living. It's not fine for catching birds.

We stalked the bird for the next forty-five minutes, tossing various things in its direction--my golf hat, one of Daphne's soft toys, the stuffed coyote that guards our front door. We chased it with a broom. We chased it with Noodles from the pool. And all the while it flew, cheeping its little heart out, back and forth, from one set of high living room windows to the clerestory windows in the entry. It turns out that birds fly up; they do not fly down, not until they are very tired and so are the people chasing them.

We finally wore the little guy out. He flew low enough to take shelter on the bronze owl statue at the end of the entryway hall. The owl is actually depicted chasing a bunny who is hiding under a stump. I do not believe the sparrow noticed that he was perched on the wing of an owl. What he did know was that he was too tired to fly any more. I caught him, carried him to the door, and let him go. (Does he have any idea that we weren't trying to hurt him?) I'm sure that by the time he returned to his nest he had a whale of a story to tell.

And so do we. After 18 holes of golf and chasing an elusive bird for forty-five minutes, I was done for. And I have only one more thing to say: NAP TIME!

My Blog

A Sparse Bundle Saved the Day (and the Book)

Sunday, July 12, 2009

This week a sparse bundle saved my life. Let's be clear. I've never MET a sparse bundle. I wouldn't know one if I ran into one on the street. Hearing the words makes me think that maybe it's a sheaf of wheat that isn't quite up to snuff or maybe a bale of hay that's a few straws short of . . . well . . . a bundle.

There may be people reading this, smart geeky computer folks, who are pointing at their screens right now, laughing their heads off, and saying, "Are you kidding? She doesn't know what a sparse bundle is?" As my mother would say, "Bully for them." I'm sure Mr. Mac himself, a fan computer whiz whose first name is Carl, also knows exactly what a sparse bundle is. As for the rest of us? The mystery remains, but I digress.

This spring, as I've been working on finishing next year's book, the blogs have tended to deal with two things--golf and writing. Warning: Sparse bundles have to do with the latter.

It's only been the last six months that I've worked on Macs. Before that for twenty years or so I worked on PC's--more specifically on Toshiba laptops. So it was a big plunge when I made the change. And I did it gradually, first using it for e-mail and finally switching over to Pages from WordPerfect for writing, but that's only been for the last two books--this winter's

Ali book and the one I'm working on now--next summer's Walker family.

One of the advantages to this computer is that when our legs get tangled in the cords--as Bill's did just now when he went to get me coffee--the power cord detaches. The computer stayed on the hassock.

Another advantage is that we have backups that run in the background all the time. Which is great, as long as they're . . . well . . . working. Which, it turned out, wasn't happening this week. And we didn't know it, of course, until AFTER we needed a backup.

I was sitting here with over 90% of the book done in the word processing file when I tried to send an e-mail to my editor. For some reason my e-mail program froze up. In the PC world, that's when that obnoxious little egg timer comes on. In the Mac world it's a little spinning pin-wheel. Cute but also obnoxious.

I tried force quit on my e-mail program. It didn't work. I tried force quit again. And nothing happened. So I said to my Blonde self, "All right. I'll shut the whole thing down." But then the computer wouldn't turn off. At all. And so, thinking something was definitely wrong, I pushed the on-off button quite firmly, then I restarted, sent the e-mail, and tried to go back to Chapter 14.

That's when the voice of the computer, the little man with the snide voice who lives inside there and tells me important things

like "Congratulations. Do you wish to play another game?" when I win a hand of solitaire. The time the voice said, "Alert. The file cannot be opened." And the words on the screen said the same thing. "The file is written in an unsupported format."

What? What? What? So I tried it again with the same result. In the PC world this would be like having the words FATAL ERROR flash across your screen as the background gradually fills up with skulls and cross bones. You say, "Funny, that's never happened to me!" All I can say is, you are VERY lucky.

Fighting panic, I opened the other Queen of the Night files. One to thirteen opened properly. Fourteen did not. So okay, it's four thousand words that I have to rewrite? Well I don't like it, but I can do it. I went into Bill's office and asked him to look at his back-ups. That's when we discovered all the other Macs in the house have been backing up properly on both iDisk and Time Machine. Mine hasn't been--not since June 17. Since Chapter 10.

And why isn't mine backing up? Who knows, but these things tend to happen to me, see FATAL ERROR comment above.

Years ago we bought two Toshiba Laptops that were exactly alike. We took them out of their respective multi-layered identical boxes, plugged them in, and turned them on. Bill's worked fine. Mine did not. For the next several exasperating days--very tense days--I would turn on my computer and it would quit.

Bill kept asking me, “What was the last thing you were doing just before when that happened?” I had no idea. We finally took my computer to the Toshiba whizzes at Northwest Computer Support where they diagnosed the problem. My computer needed a new mother board. I won’t even tell you what I think one of those looks like, but once I had a new one, the Toshiba worked great right up until the morning when, while trying to answer the phone, I put my thumb through the screen. At that point, having matching computers saved my life because I was going on tour and was leaving sooner than they could get the parts in. They dismantled Bill’s computer, put his screen on mine, and off I went.

By now you can see this is a pattern, and now I’m always fully prepared to answer the question about “what were you doing, etc., etc., etc.” But the back-up problem was something that was Bill’s part of the equation, so he went to work on it. A while later, as I was sitting here trying rewrite chapter 14, he came in and said, "I think if we do this, the I-disk backup will work". So we did what he said. He reached over my shoulder, punched a button or two, and said, “There you go.”

And it turns out he was right. There I went. A couple of minutes later, he came back into the room in as close to panic mode as he ever does. “I think I messed up,” he said. “Give it to me. Turn it off.”

Then he sat down next to me, punched a few more buttons in grim silence, and then said the heart stopping words. “It's gone.

The whole book.” And it was. All of it, including what I had just done on the Chapter 14 rewrite.

In order of magnitude, rewriting a whole book is a lot more serious than rewriting Chapter 14. I told him, “I think I need to go into the bedroom and cry for a while.” And I was going to do that, but then I realized there wasn't much point. I walked as far as the front door, and then I turned around and came back so we could sit here together in stunned silence.

We had a friend's birthday party to go that evening, so we put on our happy faces and we went. We were cheerful. We acted like nothing in the world was wrong. But when we came home, all I could do was go to bed. Bill stayed up. And that's when he found the critical Sparse Bundle lurking somewhere in my tiny MacBook Air. That's what it was doing when it wouldn't shut off. It was copying my work. Of course, it would have been nice if six or so hours of total panic earlier the little man's voice in the computer had told me, "Alert. Do not worry. I have your stuff." But he didn't. That time he kept his mouth shut.

When Bill found that sneaky sparse bundle, it turns out all the files in the Queen of the Night file opened--including that very mysterious Chapter 14 which I've now decided not to use after all.

So this blog is all about saying a big thank you. Thank you to Bill and thank you to Mac. And the next time I want to turn off my computer, I promise I will wait until it finishes doing what

it's doing. And I advise any other blonde Mac users out there to do the same thing.

Impatience is NOT a virtue.

My Blog

I Have Wrote a Novel Wednesday, July 15, 2009

A number of years ago I was introduced to a young man who, upon hearing I was a writer said, "Oh? I have wrote a novel."

I did not say "In what language?" but I was sorely tempted. Clearly English was not this guy's strong suit, but he still thought he could write. (I could also write "strong suite", but he still thought he could right." That would be wrong, of course, but my computer, smart as it is, can't sort that out.) In order to write, you need to be able to use the English language properly. You need to be able to spell. (There's an idea! works. Theirs an idea! does not.) So expecting your computer to know when you're (not your) making a spelling or usage error isn't going to cut it.

The same goes for punctuation. People send me notes saying they're looking for an agent for their recently completed Great American Novel. (Note: Just because I write books doesn't mean that I can evaluate other people's manuscripts. Not in my job description.) You would be surprised, however, at how many would-be authors ask me to do that and how their e-mails

requesting assistance are chock full of spelling and punctuation errors. It's criminal. (Not its criminal, by the way. See what I mean?)

There's an old story told about Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain claiming that he once sent his editor several pages that contained nothing but line after line of punctuation marks of all kinds. The accompanying note told the editor that he was including punctuation marks separately and that the editor should feel free to add some to his manuscript wherever he deemed it necessary.

So here's the thing. If you want to be a writer in English, then you'd best be exceptional in English--English grammar, English punctuation, English spelling.

I'm of the opinion that people who want to write books should actually read books, but maybe that's just plain prejudice on my part.

All that being said, I have wrote a novel. I've actually written 41 of them, not counting the first one, the one that never sold to anyone. And I've written them all by myself on various computers at approximately 100,000 words per book. (You can see why I wear the letters off my computer keyboards. I type a lot of words. Every single day.

A new one of my books, *Fire and Ice*, goes on sale on Tuesday of this week, July 21, 2009. That means a book tour will be starting as well, so blogging may be in short supply for a while.

Being on a book tour is not conducive to blogging. Lots of interesting stuff happens, but finding a connection that's fast enough to post written accounts of those things isn't easy.

So see you later, alligator. I'll post when I can.

My Blog

Publishers and Initials and J.K Rowling Saturday, July 18, 2009

This week I watched an ABC News special *A Year in the Life of J.K. Rowling*. Several times over the years I had books come out during the same week one of her Harry Potter books came out. It was a lot like being one of Cinderella's ugly stepsisters at the prince's ball. Which is to say, my books came out with little notice and a lot less fanfare. I saw people reading her books everywhere.

One instance in particular sticks in my mind. I was in a hotel dining room in Boston. There was a family there, a middle-aged couple with two girls who looked to be around ten. The parents were eating and talking. The girls were reading. They both had their own brand new copies of the then most recent Harry Potter.

I was glad to see kids reading, but I didn't get it; didn't understand what all the fuss was about. After all, these were kids' books, right?

Then 9-11 happened. In October of 2001, I was supposed to attend the Southern Book Festival in Nashville. Normally I would have been making flight arrangements several weeks before the event, but in the days right after 9-11 no one knew what was going to be happening in the airline industry by the first few days of October. Finally my husband said, "Okay, we'll drive." And drive we did--from Seattle to Nashville and back.

This is a long trip. It took time. Partway into it, we went into a bookstore and bought our first Harry Potter book--audio, unabridged. And we were enchanted. When we'd stop for meal, people in the restaurants were still discussing the Twin Towers. We were talking about Quiddich and Dementors.

Listening to the voice of Jim Dale read those books helped the miles roll away. We listened to four of the books on the trip, sitting outside our hotel in Boise on the way back, listening to the last CD of the last book that was available at the time. And that's how we "read" the rest of the books as they came out, too--by listening.

People who dismiss the Harry Potter books as "kids' books" or "encouraging witchcraft" are missing the essential point. These are books about the battle between Good and Evil--enjoyable books about the battle between Good and Evil.

With all this history in mind, I was interested to see what the ABC News special would have to say. I found out that J.K. and J.A. have a good deal in common--starting with our names. My

publisher didn't think male readers would accept police procedurals written by Judith Ann Jance, and her publisher didn't think boys would read books by someone named Joanne. I was fortunate in that I had a usable middle name. She gave herself one.

We both had less than successful first marriages, and we both started writing during the dark days of being divorced single parents. Did she expect to have the kind of success she's had? "Not in my wildest dreams," she said.

Ditto that for me. I knew I wanted to write, and I was determined to be a success at it. But success isn't something that comes all at once. I thought I was a success when I sold the first two books for a total advance of \$4000 back in 1983. That bar has gone up considerably since then, but being able to earn money, any amount of money, by doing what you've always wanted to do is a hallmark of success. Writing is what I've always wanted to do.

Two parts of J.K.'s life have impacted her writing--her challenging relationship with her father and her mother's struggle with multiple sclerosis. Those things she said had somehow "seeped into" every story.

That's true for me as well. Relationships with other people--parents, spouses, children--are what constitute people's lives and authors' lives. It's hardly surprising that what authors learn along the way leaks into their work. Anyone who has read my books has seen reflections of my mother--and my relationship

with my mother--in my characters' mothers--Beau's, Joanna's, and Ali's. None of them are my mother exactly, but there's definitely a connection.

The interviewer asked J.K. if she was done with Harry Potter? Yes. She's done, and I don't blame her. By the time she finished writing the last book, she had lived and breathed those characters for seventeen years. From a creative standpoint, that's a long time. That's also why I have several different series. By the time I had written nine Beaumont books in a row, I was VERY tired of him. If I hadn't been able to write something else for a while, I would have knocked him off.

But being a writer is something you are willy-nilly. Even though J.K. Rowling probably doesn't NEED to write another book, she's writing something. Something else. Something that isn't Harry Potter. In other words, she has to write but she doesn't want to be stuck always writing the same thing.

The interviewer asked her husband a variation of a very familiar question, "What's it like to be married to her?" As in what's it like to be married to a "famous person." It's a lot like being . . . well . . . married to anybody. There are good days; there are bad days.

How are we different? I wouldn't be caught dead writing the last words of any book in a hotel room with someone filming the process. I write my books on a laptop, in my family room, with no makeup and most likely wearing my jammies and robe. On opening day for a new book, I probably won't have to sign

seventeen hundred books. I saw no evidence of her wearing a bandaid on her signing hand. I would have. When she signs books, she has Post-It notes. I don't.

I have no idea what J.K. Rowling is writing now. She said it's a "political fairy tale." When it comes out, I'll be there buying a copy, both the book and the audio. And I hope Jim Dale will be hired to read it.

My Blog

Hell's Bells you Hounds! **Tuesday, July 21, 2009**

Growing up in Bisbee, Arizona, I was both blessed and cursed with an amazing senior English teacher, the daunting Mrs. Medigovich. Anne Medigovich. We all heard rumors that somewhere in this world existed a Mr. Medigovich, but we never met him or saw him. Mrs. Medigovich lived as an apparent spinster in an apartment at the YWCA. She took her meals at the Copper Queen Hotel until a sister and brother-in-law came to town, at which point she moved in with them.

Mrs. Medigovich was a set of walking/talking contradictions. She had coal-black hair which she wore pulled back in a gigantic bun at the nape of her neck. She had an astonishing nose and a black mole on a very sharp chin. She was rail thin. She wore designer clothes--and wore them well. Her nails were always perfectly manicured. She was never seen in public

without heels and hose and a matching purse, but she also had a way of sauntering down a hallway with her hips out-thrust looking for all the world like a gunslinger hankering for a fight.

In other words, she looked scary, and she was scary. And demanding. She could take the Big Men On Campus and turn them into jelly-filled, cowering worms. Anyone who could walk out of her English classes with an A had a step in the door for Honors English classes in any university known to man. When Mrs. Medigovich wanted something from us and we didn't deliver just what she ordered, she would march up to the black board, rap her knuckles on the chalk board and announce, "Hells bells, you hounds. Don't go off on tangents!"

Since this post is probably going to make it into an Internet Newspaper, I'm going to have to count on an editor somewhere who will decide if I can say that in public. If not, I trust s/he will put in enough blank letters with a few consonant hints so readers will be able to get the picture.

But back to Mrs. Medigovich's advice about going off on tangents. It's good advice. Don't do it.

A few days ago, I posted a blog entry about J. K. Rowling and me. It was just that. Nothing very serious, and that's exactly what I intended--to be "not serious." (Mrs. Medigovich, "Medi" as we called her, was vehemently opposed to splitting infinitives which is why I didn't write "to not be serious." She also insisted that prepositions were not to end sentences with. That was something up with which she would not put!)

But that's what I'd like to say to some of my readers. Get off your tangents, folks. Lighten up. Have fun. Laugh at yourself or laugh at me. It's summer. We're alive. There are blue skies above us. The grass is beneath us--a situation that is far better than the reverse.

Oh, and by the way. In case you haven't figured it out, this is also a big THANK YOU to Anne Medigovich. Thank you, Medi. You helped make me what I am today.

My Blog

The More Things Change . . .

Friday, July 24, 2009

Today I went to Everett, Washington, and spoke to an auditorium of people who think I'm just the cat's meow. (If you don't know what that means, you are VERY YOUNG! Like the ten year-old who wrote to me this evening and told me he was there and thought I was "hillareos." I'm glad he enjoyed it. I'm glad he wrote to me. I answered him.)

But while I was speaking to the folks at the Everett Public Library, my life changed. For some reason--unknown to me at the moment--the event in Petoskey (Spelled correctly this time!), MI., has been changed to another venue. If you're planning on coming to the Petoskey event (tickets required) you should check the schedule on the schedule page to make sure you're going to the right place. There's nothing more frustrating than going to the wrong place to hear someone speak.

No, wait. I'm wrong. There *is* something worse than that. Going to the wrong place when you're the SPEAKER!! Hello! If you hire someone to come and speak to your group and then change your mind about where the event will be held, it might be a good idea to let the guest speaker know.

Does this sound like something that might have happened to me? Well, yes, it did. Several years ago now I was asked to speak to a group of teachers somewhere here in the Seattle area. Not just a group--three hundred teachers. They asked me months in advance. I put it on my calendar, and on the appointed day, Bill and I went.

At the time, Bill and I were newlyweds. With five kids. We left for the speaking engagement in West Seattle (read: *Terra Incognita!*) an hour early. We went where we had been told to go. THERE WAS NO ONE THERE. Someone allowed as how it had been scheduled for that location originally, but it had been moved to some other, unknown place. And no one had told ME!! The guest speaker.

I called home. This was a long time ago. We did have a cell phone with us--one of those old, gray Motorola bricks that my husband actually designed back in 1968 when he worked for Motorola. But I digress. We had a phone. We called the kids and got them to look at my computer to find the number of the person who had called me all those months ago. They gave me the number. It was a school number. It was five thirty in the evening by then. No one answered!!!

We finally (at 7 PM) found a school where the principal was still there. He said, "I think there's something on the bulletin board about that." And there was. Which is how, nearly an hour after the event started, we finally found our way to the church basement which was now the venue. When I walked in--as dessert was being served--my hostess said accusingly, "Where have you been?"

When I told her where, she was embarrassed. "That's where it was scheduled originally, but we moved it."

Well, yes. It would have been nice if they had told me!

By the time we finally found the spot, my husband was too upset to come in. He went off to Burger King by himself, while I went inside to speak. And speak I did.

It was the week before Easter. There were three hundred people in the room--people who had eaten their dinner and their dessert---who were waiting to hear what I had to say. I stepped up to the microphone. I started to speak. Just then, the Hallelujah Chorus came bursting over the PA system.

It turned out that choir practice was in session upstairs. The microphone in front of me was hooked into the system upstairs. In other words, if I was going to speak--and speak I did--it would have to be without benefit of a microphone.

This afternoon, when I heard about the Petoskey change of venue, I have to admit I had a little bit of *deja vu* all over again. I hope it won't be as bad as what went on in that church basement.

As far as I'm concerned, that's an all time low!

My Blog

Tales From The Trail Wednesday, July 29, 2009

It's one week to the day since *Fire and Ice* went on sale. Being on tour generally means doing interviews and appearances and travel pretty much simultaneously. It's a lot like being a mother when you have to keep all the balls in the air--working, looking after kids, and running a household as well.

Sometime later this week, we'll hear whether *F & I* made the *NYTimes* top ten. Making the list is always a big boost. In the world of publishing, it's pretty much the top of the heap. Believe me, however, it doesn't happen in a vacuum. When one of my books makes it, I'm always grateful to the people who made that possible--the people in the publishing houses, the people in the bookstores, and the people who are my readers who go to stores and cough up their hard-earned cash.

Regardless of making the list, however, there are things that are far more important. People who have read my blogs in the past

know that our family has had its share of health challenges. When dealing with a health crisis--as a patient or as a loved one of a patient or as a caregiver of a patient--that's a time when reading a good book can give some necessary respite.

Over and over in the past week, people have told me about reading my books during bouts of chemo or during joint replacement surgery and recovery. One woman, whose husband is an Alzheimer's patient, said that she reads my books in the evenings after he goes to sleep. Believe me, those comments are always gratefully received. The ancient sacred charge of the storyteller is to beguile the time, and that means I'm doing my job.

Just a few moments ago, I finished up with this morning's phone interview with a newspaper in Nashville. The reporter asked me if I had ever seen *Murder She Wrote* since that was his all-time favorite television series. I've seen some episodes in reruns, of course, but at the time the series was being filmed, I was a single parent with two kids, no child support, and a full time job selling life insurance. I wanted to be a writer, however, and the only time available to do that was early in the mornings, from 4 to 7 AM before I got the kids up to go to school.

In the early eighties, the Seattle condo where I lived was used as a faux hotel setting for one of the *Murder She Wrote* episodes. I went home for an early lunch. After lunch, I headed out. I got in the elevator on floor seven. The elevator stopped on the next floor down and the car filled up with television people who were taking their own lunch break.

As we rode down to the lobby, I said aloud, “You know, there’s a real person who writes mysteries in this building and that’s me.” A woman in the corner of the elevator, one wearing a trendy black suit and who spoke with a distinct New York accent, looked up at me and asked, “Oh, yeah? Who's your publisher?” I replied, “Avon.” To which she responded, “Oh, really? I didn't know they did books.”

At the lobby, everyone exited the elevator ahead of me and left me standing there pretty much astonished.

So there you have it. The interviewer reminded me of that story and now I've told it to you. It really is a Tale from the Trail.

Breaking News...This just in!!! Fire and Ice will debut at #8 on the NYT list this week. Thanks again to all who made this happen.

My Blog

Your Call Is Important To Us Wednesday, August 5, 2009

I’m on tour but ‘m also on hold--with Customer Relations at a MAJOR car rental agency where they have utterly tuneless music and a cheerful computerized woman’s voice that comes on periodically and thanks me for my patience.

Believe me, I am not patient. I am annoyed. I spent ten minutes on hold before I reached an agent. She then sent me to Customer Relations, but not to anyone in particular. Instead she shipped me off into another level of voice mail hell where that cheery dame started out by warning me that I might have a twenty minute wait. She also keeps telling me that I could do what I want to do on-line twenty-four hours a day, but that is NOT true.

I've checked the on-line options and NONE of them do what I want to do which is speak to someone, as in A HUMAN BEING.

According to her, they "care about my opinion." They also hope that at the end of my call that I will stay on the line and give them feedback about their service today. Believe me, they will not want to hear THAT opinion which may entail my having to use a good many very ungrandmotherly words, particularly since the purpose of the call was to tell them about bad service to begin with.

Now, however, this has turned into a grudge match. They figure that if they leave me here stewing long enough, I will give up and go away, but I have news for them. I am NOT hanging up. I am burning up my cell phone minutes with wild abandon. And by the end of this call, I'll be able to tell EXACTLY how many minutes I spent on hold and I will list that number in this BLOG! (The final VMH [voice mail hell] score ended up being one hour, four minutes and fifty-three seconds to be absolutely exact!)

Fortunately, however, I'm a woman and can do more than one thing at a time which is why I'm writing this blog while I sit on hold. As my mother would have said, "Strike while the iron is hot."

I know she said that a lot of the time, but now that I've written it down, I'm not at all sure of its linguistic origins. My mother grew up on a farm. When she said that to me, I always imagined it had something to do with shoeing horses. I know I could google it and find out for sure, but sometimes I prefer to cling to what I think is true. What if I find out the real source and it's not nearly as colorful as I've always pictured? (Some of you are probably googling that phrase before going on to the next sentence. Like it or not, I have no doubt I'll have my "trite phrase" explanations landing in my mailbox from multiple correspondents.)

The point is, even if I don't know where the phrase came from, I do know what it means and what my mother meant when she said it: Don't wait wait around. If you need to do something, do it now. If you're upset with someone, then talk to them about it while you're still "hot under the collar" which is also something my mother used to say.

And so, I am calling the car rental company TODAY and I'm doing it while I'm still . . .well, "mad as a wet hen." Oh, my! I really am channeling my mother today. Obviously, all those times when she thought I wasn't listening, I really was paying attention!

So back to the car rental company. We're on tour. With two book tours a year, we rent a lot of cars from this same company which supposedly makes us members of one of their "elite" levels of service. (I was going to put the car company's name in this blog, but my husband doesn't want their corporate attorneys descending on us *en masse*, especially when we have no voice-mail hell of our own in which to put them.)

We are on tour. And it's going very well. Most of the events are booked to capacity. Some of them are Standing Room Only. That's all very, very gratifying, but it turns out getting there isn't half the fun. So far we've rented two cars. (Three actually, but more on that later.) In both cases we stepped off the plane to find that the car we ordered, the one in our "profile," wasn't there.

On tour I do speeches. And book signings. In both cases, I need to be able to talk to people. I don't smoke. I'm allergic to smoke. Our "profile" says non-smoking vehicles only. In both cases the vehicles we were given reeked of smoke. (One actually had a cloud of little gray ashes swirling around in the front seat.)

But, in both cases, we were on a SCHEDULE which meant that we had to take the car we were given and go, sneezing and coughing all the way. I'm a little over six feet tall, and a lot of that six feet is leg. I do not fit in little SUVs. The one they gave us in Scottsdale left my knees stuck against the dash board. And climbing in and out of one of those isn't my idea of a good time, either. As for the stiff ride? Bumpy. And having a warning

posted on the mirror that says “This vehicle is prone to roll-overs” wasn't very impressive, either. Believe me, there's a good reason that men and women of a certain age tend to love “geezer cars.”

But at the time it looked as though we were stuck with the one we'd been given. Then we showed up at our hotel, where the Concierge went on the offensive for us. She made multiple calls to the main airport's car rental agency at Sky Harbor and didn't give up until she reached a human named Lawrence. Who was happy to find us a proper geezer car. (Did you know that's when it's 110° you can get burned if you touch the outside of a black Lincoln Town Car? Who knew?)

Not only did Lawrence find the car, he had it waiting for us the next morning. And the people there could not have been more helpful. They washed it again. They took us to the place we needed to go for the airport book signing and parked it for us in a FREE PARKING SPACE. You see, that's the bad news about not wanting to attract all the corporate lawyers. By keeping the name anonymous, the people on the ground--the ones who deserve praise and thanks--don't get what's coming to them right along with the thoughtless people doing the careless dispatching who need a good swift kick in the rear. (Thanks again to my mother.)

So we're in Tucson now. In a little while I'll go out to do today's three major events. Tomorrow it's even worse. Tomorrow the score is FOUR!! I'm making myself tired just thinking about it. But right now, we're sitting in our Tucson

home in air-conditioned splendor. (It did take a day to get the AC up to speed.) And why am I using my cell phone minutes for these phone calls? Because our “high speed communication package” wasn't working when we got here. No phone. No cable TV. No high speed Internet. (The VMH [voice mail hell] score to summon help from them was a mere 24 minutes. And that was on a Sunday afternoon.) Compared to the car rental guys, the communication folks are stars when it comes to supplying prompt service.

And actually, the repair guys are great. Evidently, in our absence, some little critter decided to chew a hole in the cable. So we're fixed now. My phone is cooling off and getting recharged. Time to wash and iron my hair, put on my face, and go sign some books.

I'll send more tales from the book tour trail later, but I need to send this one NOW. I just got word that our High Speed Internet is up and running, and we need to post this while the posting is good. I'm sure that's something my mother would have said if she'd ever had the opportunity.

My Blog

Tales From The Trail, Part 2
Friday, August 7, 2009

Years ago, when I was a brand new author, I had the honor of doing what authors sometimes refer to as a “group grope” signing where I was seated at a table next to Ann Rule.

I was new; she was not new. She had a long line. I didn’t have any line at all, although I did manage to sell a couple of books to people who were patiently waiting to speak to her. During my “down” time, when I wasn’t autographing my own books, I watched Ann do her consummate job of signing.

Here’s what I saw: When someone comes up to have Ann Rule sign a book, he or she has Ann’s undivided attention. In that moment, that person is the most important person in Ann’s world. She signs that person’s book. She listens to his or her story. I watched her do that over and over for SEVERAL HOURS! Her attention and concentration and kindness never varied and never slackened. She was there. She was fully present. She didn't phone it in, and I was impressed. I decided right then that I wanted to be like Ann Rule when I grow up, and I hope I’ve done justice to her very inspiring model.

Being on tour is a chance to hear my readers’ stories. One of the most impressive ones this time out was the young Hispanic woman who is reading my books aloud to her mother, a cancer patient. Talk about tough times. I definitely wanted to know that, and I'm so grateful she told me that story. Being on the *NYTimes* list is important, but the people who read the books are far more important. No, they are VITAL. Without them, nothing happens.

So I listen when I'm on tour. I also listen, using the term loosely, when people write to me through my website. By the way, if you have a question or a comment, please send it to me through my website, www.jajance.com. There's an icon there that you can click on to send me an e-mail.

Pardon that off-the-subject aside, but people have been asking me questions through the blog site on the Seattle P.I. City Brights Blog site, and it's not convenient to reply directly to that when I have hundreds of emails every day.

Back to the tour. You see, this is how tours work. You have to be able to do lots of different things at the same time. We're currently still in Tucson. We're staying at our home here for several days. We have beds. We have AC. We have high speed Internet. We have no food, so we've been eating out. There's no sense in getting in food and then taking off and leaving it to rot in the fridge.

For breakfast we've been going to Chaffin's a family diner on Broadway near downtown. It's an old-fashioned kind of place where the father often runs the cash register and his son, Alex, runs the kitchen. We've had no bad food there. It may be August in Tucson, but their business is up because it's the kind of place where people feel welcome.

In the lobby they have a shelf of books where people can take a book or leave a book. I took some of my own books over, expecting to drop them off for the exchange shelf. That didn't happen. Alex, the son, grabbed them and had me autograph them to him personally. In the process of that we struck up a

conversation. I ended up telling him about the Sugarloaf Cafe, the fictional Sedona diner run by the fictional Ali Reynolds's parents, Bob and Edie.

Not long after the first Ali Reynolds book came out, people started sending me e-mails asking if the Sugarloaf was real and where could they get some of those sweet rolls? Believe me, lots of people sent me that same whiny missive, and they weren't at all happy when I told them that those sweet rolls were a figment of my imagination. Finally, my son Tom, a talented cook, took the situation in hand and created his own recipe for sweet rolls. If you go to my website, www.jajance.com, click on the Sugarloaf Cafe icon, and scroll down, you'll find his recipe right there.

Yesterday, that's exactly what Alex Chaffin did--he downloaded the Sugarloaf Cafe Sweet Roll recipe and had his baker make a batch. I had the first one out of the oven. It looked wonderful, but I didn't eat it. I passed it along to John C. Scott, an old friend of mine, who was doing a radio interview that will air this afternoon. The Sugarloaf Cafe sweet rolls were on sale in Chaffin's today and will be tomorrow. I'm expecting to have one then.

If you happen to be in Tucson and go to Chaffin's tomorrow morning, you'll be able to have one, too. If it's breakfast time, I may be there, too.

After that it's onward to Bisbee!

(That last, by the way, is an in-crowd joke. The Bisbee High School Puma fight song is “Onward Bisbee.” Let’s hear it for the Red and Gray.)

My Blog

Home Again, Home Again, Jiggety Jog
Sunday, August 16, 2009

We’re on the plane on our way home to Seattle. I can tell I’m tired because, initially, I spelled “home” by typing “hoem” and “update” with “updaete.”

I guess that means even my fingers are tired. It reminds me (not moe) of that old country song, “I’ve been everywhere, man,” because that’s exactly how it feels.

It’s been exhilarating; it’s been exhausting. It’s been energizing and demanding. My default Time Zone setting is Pacific. Plain Pacific, not Pacific Daylight. Pacific standard works fine in Arizona in the summer because then Washington and Arizona are on the same time zone. But once we headed east, bouncing back and forth between Central and Eastern, my default settings get tumbled.

In the course of the tour I’ve met lots of people who are fans. That’s fun. Yesterday I spent the day with the better part of two hundred people all of whom would like my job. I was at the Killer Nashville Writer’s Conference. And there’s a lesson there. If I drop the ball and stop writing books, there are

literally thousands of people ready to take my place in line.
LESSON TO SELF: KEEP WORKING!

The tour started July 21. Most days have been stocked with multiple events, many of which, like interviews and private breakfasts don't make it onto the website schedule.

We arrived in Nashville on Friday afternoon. That evening, someone asked us if we had seen downtown Franklin yet? The answer was no, but here's what happened on Saturday:

At 8 AM we were scheduled for a private two hour breakfast. At 10 AM my brother and sister-in-law arrived from Huntsville for a two hour visit. At noon I went upstairs hoping to rest my voice before the 1 PM event, but someone called me from downstairs.

My signing information had been posted incorrectly on the Internet. A woman who had driven over from Bowling Green, Kentucky, to have her book signed was going to have to go home without seeing me or getting an autograph. What did I do? I went down and spent half an hour with her and her husband.

The 1 PM interview with me lasted until some time after two. The two-thirty solo performance lasted until ten to four. I had an hour and a half off before the 5:30 book signing and then the end of conference dinner from 7 PM to 10:30. No wonder I'm tired. It makes me weary just writing it all down, but the truth is, just because we're on tour doesn't make us tourists. There's

no time to take in the sights. We do what we're supposed to do and that's it.

I remember doing something "touristy" on tour once years ago. I visited the Vietnam Memorial while I was in Washington, DC, but that's it.

But then last night, something terrific happened. As my prize for being Killer Nashville's Guest of Honor, they gave me a gorgeous guitar. With my name engraved on it. I'm so glad we're not flying home commercial because I've seen that U-tube video, "United Breaks Guitars" which is funny but also decidedly not funny. So my new guitar (acoustic) is riding here in the cabin with us.

It comes with a daunting responsibility, however. I guess I'll have to learn to play it. We'll have to see how that works. Maybe this old dog can learn another new trick.

After all, if I can learn to play golf at this age, maybe I can learn to play guitar, too.

I hope so.

My Blog

August Memories
Sunday, August 23, 2009

It's the last week in August, and once again I'm thinking about my parents--thinking about them and missing them.

My father, Norman, dated and married an older woman. My mother, Evelyn, was almost two years older than he was. Since she didn't want to be thought of as a cradle robber, she refused to marry him as long as he was still a "teenager." On August 21, 1936 my father turned twenty. Their wedding was on August 24th of that year, and my mother turned twenty-two on August 30th. They were married for 68 years.

One of the things that sustained them that whole time was a mutual sense of humor. Once my father was gone, my mother lost her ability to laugh. Why wouldn't she? She had lost her husband as well as her sidekick/straight man, sort of like Gracie Allen without George Burns and vice versa.

Sometime in my late twenties, I brought a visitor, a fellow teacher from the reservation, to Bisbee for a visit. We had lunch at my parents' home in Bisbee Junction. As usual, the meal was filled with laughter and long term jokes. When we left, my friend turned to me and said, "Are they always like that?" "Like what?" I asked in return. "Laughing and joking." And the answer to that question was yes. They were like that--always.

My mother never met a GPS; she WAS one. My father drove. My mother was his co-pilot. She was by his side, reading the map one Sunday afternoon when we went on an ill-fated picnic in Skeleton Canyon and decided to drive back by way of New Mexico. When it came to U-turns, my mother was pretty much

opposed to them. She never wanted to go home “the same way” we had come.

We had driven to the Peloncillo Mountains in a relatively new but second-hand DeSoto. My parents and my baby sister rode in the front seat (No car seats or seat belts in those days--lap babies only!) My three brothers and I were stuck in the back, duking it out in a perpetual battle over who got to sit by a window.

Coming down from the pass, we noticed that the stream on the far side of the Peloncillos was running faster and wider every time we crossed it. Somewhere close to the bottom I heard my father mutter to my mother, “With the wash running like this, I don't think we can get back up.”

When we emerged from the mountains we discovered that the usually dry lake bed of the Animas Playa wasn't dry at all. Water covered the road from where we were to the little village of Animas a long way ahead. We could tell where the road lay only by taking a heading from the tops of fence posts that stuck up out of the water on either side of the right of way. So that's what we did. My dad drove in the middle between them, slowly and carefully but keeping moving. Once the water started coming in under the door, we kids in the back seat stopped fighting about the window seats because the possibility of drowning was far more exciting.

We finally made it into the tiny burg of Animas to find the entire population of the town waiting for us on the railroad tracks which were above the water line. They had all come out to

congratulate us because we were the first car that had made it through in days. The DeSoto was never quite the same after that, and it was, of course, all my mother's fault for wanting to come home "some other way." When it came to adventure, she was for it.

New Mexico was the site of another Evie GPS adventure. Driving to South Dakota one year, we were traveling on one of the new interstate highways when my mother noticed that we had to go a long way east before we turned north and then angled back west. She looked down at her much used roadmap and told my father, "There's a road right here that should cut off a bunch of miles."

So off the interstate we went onto what quickly became a dirt road. A narrow dirt road. With fences. And gates. I don't remember the exact number of gates because my brothers were the ones who had to hop out and open and close them, but I think it was right around an even dozen. At one point the road passed BETWEEN a farmhouse and a barn. Finally, we could see the highway we wanted, but we had to drive along it for miles in the wrong direction because we were on the WRONG side of the railroad tracks that ran beside the highway.

A few weeks later the Sunday comics showed a cartoon of a man driving a little red coupe with a woman reading the map beside him. They're stopped between a farmhouse and a barn. I don't remember what the caption on the cartoon said, exactly, and it doesn't matter. We'd all been there and done that. My mother cut out the cartoon, put it in a little plastic frame, and kept it on

the refrigerator for years, alongside the sign that said, “If at first you don't succeed, do it the way your wife told you.”

Sometime in the nineties, when the folks were in their eighties, an uncle of mine died in South Dakota. My parents were going to fly home for the funeral, but they decided that the flight arrangements in and out of Minneapolis weren't exactly convenient, so they set out by car in the usual fashion with my father behind the wheel and with my mother running the road atlas. Bill and I came home from a trip to Europe. I tried calling the folks, but they didn't answer. After a couple of days, I called my sister. “Oh,” Janie said, “they're in South Dakota. Didn't you hear? Uncle Glenn died.”

I knew that when my parents went to South Dakota, they always stayed at the Mill Stone Inn in Milbank, so I called there, only to be told they had checked out that very morning. I waited the three days. (That's how long it took them to make that long trip in later years. When we were kids they did it in two.) At the end of three days, I started calling their house in Bisbee. No answer; no answer; no answer. Finally a good week after they should have been home my mother picked up the telephone. “Where have you been?” I demanded.

“Well,” my mother said. “As we were leaving Milbank, I said to your father, ‘Norman, you know there's one national park we've never visited.’ So they drove home from South Dakota to Arizona by way of Yosemite! My mother told me later, that when they drove into Arizona and saw those rugged mountains

east of Yuma she started crying because she knew they wouldn't be doing that again. And they didn't. Couldn't.

In later years, my father became forgetful and my mother developed macular degeneration. Even when Gramps could no longer find his way home, he could still drive because, although my mother couldn't exactly see, she could still tell him how to get where they needed to go.

Yes, Norman and Evie were quite a pair--a happily matched pair. So Happy Birthday and Happy Anniversary to both of you wherever you are.

No one could have asked for better parents.

My Blog

Camp Grandma Friday, August 28, 2009

This has been Grandparents Week at our house. When we floated the idea of having all six of them here for the week, it did strike me as a bit daunting. Then I thought about my parents.

They raised seven kids--for years!! My mother cooked three meals a day for nine people without benefit of a microwave or a mechanical dishwasher. She had biological entities--the kids--who did dishes. She didn't have a separate freezer. The food

came fresh from Pay-and-Tote or NuWay Grocery. (No Costco in those days, either.) She cooked chicken for nine in a griddle on top of the stove. She cooked potatoes in a pressure cooker. (I was always terrified that the thing would blow up.) And did I say there were no carry-out foods in Bisbee back then? Not so much as a single purveyor of pizza!

Every school morning started with a vat of hot cereal--oat meal, Malt-o-Meal, Cream of Wheat, Chocolate-Malt-o-Meal, and various combinations of the above. On those rare occasions when we had eggs and bacon, the bacon was always rationed to one piece apiece. When I read books based in England and heard about “rashers” of bacon, I always imagined that meant mounds of bacon stacked on a platter. It was only much later that I learned a rasher was actually a single piece of bacon.

Mealtimes were just that--time for meals. All nine of us ate together around the kitchen table. The rules, as laid down by my father at the head of the table, were these: “We eat a little bit of everything and everything on our plate.” Of course, we kids did notice that the “rule” did not apply to our father who wouldn’t eat tomatoes in any guise except for salsa. DNA being what it is, that’s something our grandson Colt shares with his great grandfather--no tomatoes except for salsa, and as it turns out, spaghetti--as we saw last night--but more of that later.

For entertainment on Yuma Trail in Bisbee we had a sandbox made of a huge truck tire discarded from the open-pit mine. We had a swing set with a teeter-totter that didn’t exactly amputate one of my younger brother’s fingers, but it came close. We had

the wilderness area “up across the road” where we could hike--barefoot, of course--and play cowboys and Indians; look for fossils, dig for gold, etc. We had a mulberry tree. Squashing berries with those same bare feet was good not-so-clean fun. By the time school started, the bottoms of our feet would be stained deep purple.

We had apricot and nectarine trees that were good for climbing and for filching fresh fruit. The road out front was a steep hill that was probably close to three quarters of a mile long from top to bottom. That was good for wagon rides (three and four kids to a wagon) or bicycle races--without a knee pad or a helmet in the bunch. And we all survived. That’s not to say we didn't get scraped up on occasion, but nobody died. Our mother bandaged whatever needed bandaging, and off we went for another death-defying ride.

In our living room there was a single TV set that carried FOUR whole channels. In the afternoons we could watch a: *Howdy Doody*, b: *The Little Rascals*, or c: *The Three Stooges*. And one night a week EVERYONE watched *I Love Lucy*!

And so, once again, looking at this week--five days, really--I remembered my mother's example and said it wouldn't be a problem. We'd be “fine.” Oops, did I say fine? Well, actually it's been more than fine. It's been fun. And tiring. But also not nearly as bad as expected.

For one thing, our son was here with his daughters--the “older” cousins, three girls, one of whom celebrated her sixteenth

birthday with us last night. And the “older” cousins were wonderful about looking after the younger ones. For entertainment, we had a: a swimming pool. b: several television sets, with hundreds of channels, and a DVD player. c: a swing set with a slide--no teeter-totter. and d: scooters--with knee pads and helmets.

As for food? How do you say carry-out? YES!! We had pizza. Delivered pizza. We've had fresh fruit and vegetables. We've had bagels and cream cheese. (No bagels in Bisbee in the old days.) We've had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. As near as I can tell, kids eat all day, every day, sort of like hummingbirds. At mealtimes, not so much. Except for last night when the starvelings, Colt included, mowed through mounds of take-out spaghetti and birthday cake.

We went to the Woodland Park Zoo where Colt's whole head got pushed through a hole that was supposed to be for faces only. Our son extricated him before full panic ensued.

We went back-to-school shopping. The long-drink-of water older cousins, one of whom is taller than my own considerable six feet, were happy to go shopping at a place where they could get pants that were long enough for them. And a personal shopper at Nordstroms was able to find slick outfits (several of them) for the older girls while my daughter and I found shoes for the younger ones. Unlike my mother, I didn't have to worry about every penny. It was fun, except for Colty who escaped onto a down escalator and then tried to turn around and come back up same when it became apparent that he was the only one

going down. His mother eventually joined him and taught him what she called “a life lesson.”

The sixteen year-old wants to be a forensic scientist. So yesterday, Ray Kusumi at the Washington State Patrol Crime Lab gave her--and me--a personally guided tour. It's one thing to have your grandmother saying, take those Advanced Placement Chemistry classes. Having a non-relative say the same thing carries a lot more weight.

So it's Friday morning. The older cousins and their father are packing and getting ready to go back to Spokane today. The Silverdale cousins will be picked up by their parents this evening. Next week Audrey and Celeste will be back in first grade and pre-kindergarten. Colt will be back at his daycare. And Grandpa and I will be retrieving lost DVDs and toys from wherever they may be hiding. We'll be doing laundry--lots and lots of beach towels and bedding. Daphne, our aging Golden retriever, will be happy to return to a bit of peace and quiet. And so will we.

When my father retired from his career in the insurance business, my mother turned to him and said, “You're retiring? I'm retiring. The kitchen is closed.”

When she said the words, she made them stick, and I'm with her. Our kitchen is now closed, too, unless Bill decides to cook.

My Blog

My Dedication Pages

Thursday, September 3, 2009

When I'm on tour, I do events. The bookstore folks like to call these "readings," but it turns out I don't do readings at readings; I do talkings.

I always hated "reading" classes in school where we were separated into small groups and had to "read aloud." I never knew the place because I was always reading pages ahead of where the rest of the class was reading. So despite the fact that I was probably one of the best readers in the group, I always got bad grades in reading. Go figure!

But that's why I don't do readings at readings. Boring! Besides, it seems to me that people who come to events at libraries or bookstores are capable of reading on their own, so why should I read aloud to them? Instead, I try to tell them things about the current book that they can't discover from reading the words on the page. And often, I talk about the dedication page. That's mine. Sometimes it's a completely private transaction and I don't discuss it at all. At other times, the dedication has to do with events and people in the book.

For example, the *Damage Control* dedication says: "For Jim." Jim was one of my younger brothers. He served in Vietnam and then came home to be a fire fighter with the Bisbee Fire Department. At age fifty he succumbed to a massive heart attack. His "fallen officer" services were the first ones I ever attended. (Those were back in the idyllic days prior to 9-11 before we as a nation attended countless fallen officer

memorials.) But I used what I learned in those tough days in Bisbee to craft the events in *Damage Control*.

There are three people named on the dedication page for this year's Beaumont/Brady book, *Fire and Ice*: Hal Witter, Larry Dever, and Ken Wallentine.

Hal Witter started out as a fan and became a friend. He's retired military, a guy who served in the armed forces during Vietnam and for a lot of years after that as well. When I first met him, turning up at book signing events all over Arizona, I worried that he was some kind of stalker. But it turns out, he was a fan, a really devoted fan. When I was writing *Devil's Claw*, he ponied up a sizable donation to helicopter pad fund at Bisbee's Copper Queen Hospital that made it possible for the Volksmarchers to make an appearance in that book. (check out www.ava.org) In the years since then, he's attended countless events in Phoenix whenever his health has permitted. This year he's had some serious health issues to deal with, and it seemed to me that it made sense to dedicate a book to him now while he can enjoy it rather than later when he might not be able to. That's how Hal ended up on *Fire and Ice* dedication page.

Larry Dever is the REAL sheriff of Cochise County which, as many of you have pointed out is eighty miles square as opposed to eighty square miles. (I also got bad grades in Arithmetic!) Larry has been a big help to me over the years whenever I've called with law enforcement questions. He's also someone who does a tough job with a good deal of grace and a sense of humor.

That's a good thing since people often ask him whether he “wore his pantyhose to work” that day.

Ken Wallentine is the Chief Law Enforcement Officer in the state of Utah. His unit is a lot like J.P. Beaumont's Special Homicide Investigation Team. In view of the fact that this item will appear in a family newspaper, I will not be printing the accompanying acronym. Readers will have to figure that out on their own. And, although that's the same function Ken Wallentine's group performs, investigating special homicides, they don't have that exact name for the same reason.

Ken has also been someone who has helped me with law enforcement issues over the years. Putting his name along with Larry Dever's on the dedication page of *Fire and Ice* is my way of saying thank you to two law enforcement professionals.

Last week Ken sent me a copy of a note he sent out to his staff, his Friday update to folks in his office. Some of what he wrote about is something readers know about because it was big news all over the country last week, but it's been part of his group's unfinished business for a long very time. With Ken's permission, I am printing his note in its entirety here because there may be someone reading this who will be able to supply one critical bit of information that will solve some other piece of unfinished business.

You'll find Ken's note posted below, but in case you didn't already figure it out, this piece, like the dedication pages in my books gives me one more opportunity to say thank you to three,

make that four, American heroes: Jim, Hal, Larry, and Ken. Thanks, you guys. You've made this world a better place.

Weekly Update from the Chief.

Hope. President Obama says that it is an audacious attitude. Perhaps. I think that hope is a power to accomplish and a path to victory. There is nothing too audacious in believing that the good guys will win. Emerson wrote that we should judge a man's wisdom by his hope. My friend of many years, Terry Fleck, served nearly 3 decades as a deputy sheriff in El Dorado County, California. For much of his career, Terry was a canine handler. On June 10, 1991, then-Deputy Fleck and a great police dog named Tracker spent hours in search of Jaycee Dugard. She disappeared in his jurisdiction while she walked to the bus stop. Deputy Fleck and others did their best to find Jaycee. But she remained missing for 18 years.

This past Tuesday, a dedicated campus cop stopped a suspicious man. The cop could have just chased the man from the UC Berkeley campus. She did that, but she also checked the man's history, found that he was on parole, and contacted the parole officer. The parole officer started digging. Now the world knows who snatched Jaycee Dugard and Jaycee has been reunited with her family. All because one campus cop dug deeper, hoping to do the best that she could in protecting and serving. There is no "extra" mile on the road to success.

We invited Colleen Nick to visit us earlier this year. Most of you heard her speak about her daughter, Morgan. Maybe you've

noted that some folks in the Investigation Division have Morgan Nick's photo next to our computers, pinned to the wall, or on desks. The reason is hope. Visit www.morgannick.com and you will read at the top of the page, "Love always hopes." Good cops always hope, too. We hope that today will be the day that we'll see someone who looks like one of the kids on our cold case site, www.coldcase.utah.gov, or from the NCMEC site. We hope that we can place the call to a parent, that we can be the conductor from a world of confinement and darkness back to a family still hoping.

Investigative leads may grow cold, but the fire of our commitment to missing kids and murdered victims burns hot. Today may be the day that one of us sees the face of Morgan or one of these other kids who are counting on us to find them. Maybe today is the day that we call Elaine Runyan with the answer of who kidnapped and killed Rachel Runyan in 1982. After 27 years, this Division still works to answer that question. Two of you carry the Runyan kidnapping/murder as an active priority case. Many in the Division are working on the single matter of the confidential priority case assigned to the ICAC Task Force to locate a single young child being exploited. As I get reports on this case, I hear Special Agents and Section Chiefs use the word "hope." That is what is right with our work. This week, thousands of letters went out to regional ecclesiastical leaders with pictures of the boy and the perpetrator, thanks to one Special Agent's creative idea to reach out to area clergy. We hope and we work. And we will find this boy. And the perp.

Nurture great hope; speak words of courage, belief, faith, hope, and victory. Someone is counting on the nation's finest investigators to fulfill hopes. The lamp of hope needs regular replenishment with the oil of courageous work. Others may forget, but the Special Agents of the Attorney General continue to look for Morgan Nick, every other missing child, and for each killer not yet brought to justice. I have accepted the finite disappointments of today; we can never accept abandonment of infinite hope.

My Blog

Vacation! and Other Fun Stuff Thursday, September 10, 2009

I don't know if the world can hear my happy song from here, but the sun is shining in Seattle and the Editorial Letter work on next summer's book, *Queen of the Night*, is finished and on its way to New York. Since it's going over the Internet rather than via FedEx, it's probably already in my editor's in basket.

For those of you who have followed this blog for a while, you know that doing the Editorial Letter work is the second stage in finishing a book. The completed manuscript has already been to New York and come back with line editing from my editor as well as with her Editorial Letter of suggested changes. I've done that work, either making the changes or ignoring them. The final call on that is always up to me.

In other words, the book is now officially “in the can.” I believe in the old days in Hollywood, that meant in the film canister, but who knows? Am I going to look it up? Nope. I know from past experience that many of my readers will immediately check their sources to let me know if I’m right or wrong. In the meantime, I’ll go on my way in blissful ignorance, with my long-held opinions untrammelled by reality.

This is an advance warning. *Queen of the Night* is not Beaumont; it’s not Brady; and it’s definitely not Ali Reynolds. (Her next book, *Trial by Fire*, goes on sale December 1.) *Queen of the Night* is the fourth book in my reservation series, or as my publisher general refers to them as my "Walker Family Stand-Alones. Since there are now four of them, all told, I believe they should more properly be referred to as “standing together,” but let's not quibble.

Yes, I'm aware that *Day of the Dead*, the third book, in that series is a tough read. There are evil people involved who do evil things. (Some of my readers simply skip those thornier parts and go on to read the rest of the book.)

So why would I write a book like that and why would I write another one? Because characters are strange. Sometimes they show up in one book and are perfectly happy to go away and not return when that story ends. Other characters--Butch Dixon, for example--will not take no for an answer. They come back time and again, whining, because they want to be in another book.

The characters from *Hour of the Hunter* have been exceptionally annoying in that regard. Or perhaps I should say persistent. They've been hanging around in the background, moping and complaining. The only way I could see to get them off my back was to sit down, shut up, and write another book.

And so *Queen of the Night* features all of those familiar people from *Hour of the Hunter*, *Kiss of the Bees*, and *Day of the Dead*: Diana Ladd and her husband, Brandon Walker. Their kids are there--Lani and Davy--and so are their grandkids. Many of their friends turn up as well--Fat Crack Ortiz and his family from the Tohono O'odham Nation and Brian and Kath Fellows from Tucson.

Yes, these are all people I've made up over the years, but they seem real enough to me, and I've been glad to have another opportunity to look in on their lives to see what they've been up to while my back has been turned.

Now it's officially time to turn my attention to the unnamed entity that will be Ali Reynolds #6. But not until after I spend a week of vacation in Ashland, Oregon, watching plays and playing golf!

Here are some upcoming fun events in my Schedule Page. [Click Here.](#)

Working hard is good. Playing hard is better.

My Blog

Software and Hardware

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

Vacation is over. OVER!! I enjoyed the plays in Ashland. I enjoyed the golf--as long as we don't talk about the scores which were regrettable. One of our Ashland traditions is our Spa Day at the Blue Giraffe. We all go and spend the day--massages, haircuts, mani-pedis, facials all around, for ladies and gentlemen both. One of the first times we did that, Bill was the darling of the grandkids when he came home with a set of chrome-plated toenails.

While my masseur was working me over, he said, "I suppose your wrists are sore from typing at a desk." In actual fact, my wrists and fingers, not to mention my shoulders, were sore from playing golf FIVE DAYS IN A ROW! But the truth is, I don't work at a desk.

I used to--years ago when I had a desktop computer. My first computer, the Eagle, was a PC clone--the FIRST IBM clone. It was a dual floppy with 128 K of memory that had to be booted twice each morning or the cursor would freeze up twenty or so minutes into the day's work. (David Graham, my then computer guru, told me that was, and I quote, "very unlikely." David Graham passed away a few years ago. The computer now resides with my papers in Special Collections at the University of Arizona Library. It still works. Somewhere along the line,

my husband and second computer guru, added a hard drive and lots more memory, but it STILL has to be booted twice if you turn it on and want it to stay on.

Years ago, when I was finishing Beaumont number five, *Improbable Cause*, Bill read the completed manuscript and said of the last scene, "This is a Post-Intelligencer article. There's no life in it." So I did the artistic thing. I fell into a despairing silence.

Bill put me in his car, stowed my computer in the trunk, and took us both along on a business trip to Vancouver, B.C. As the bellman helped us carry the computer, the CRT, and the keyboard into the hotel along with our luggage, Bill allowed as how the Eagle was "transportable as opposed to portable."

But after the three hour solid silence of the car ride, I turned on the computer, opened it to the last few chapters--the Woodland Park Zoo passages--and discovered that a miracle had occurred. Sometime, while we were driving, Big Al Lindstrom's feet began to hurt. Bill spent a restless night trying to sleep in a room with me typing madly on my computer as the story turned back into a story.

The Eagle desktop was eventually replaced by an Epson desktop--again with more memory. In the Eagle I worked in a word processing program which was gimpy as could be, but it had a wonderful name for a mystery writer--Spellbinder! When I moved to the Epson, I began my love affair with WordPerfect,

and I remained true to Word Perfect until my switch to Pages in my MacBook Air last year.

But I abandoned desktops early on. In the fall of 1990, I was thinking about replacing my desktop computer with a laptop. My writing career was still a long way from earning a living wage. With two kids in college, going out and dropping money on a new computer just wasn't in the cards. I was checking the newspaper want ads and saw that someone in Centralia was interested in selling a Toshiba Laptop. (Another dual floppy, but the 3.5 inch floppies rather than the larger ones.)

Bill and I made arrangements to meet the guy at a restaurant in Olympia. He did rural property evaluations for real estate companies. He thought that having a computer he could set on the hood of his car would be wonderfully convenient. And it was, but it turned out the guys who were interested in selling their rural properties--guys in boots who wore flannel shirts and suspenders--didn't trust that new fangled contraption. They wanted a guy with a pickup truck and a yellow-pad. So we bought the laptop--and I'm sure he bought a pickup--and that was the beginning of my love-affair with Toshiba.

The first book I wrote on a Toshiba was *Hour of the Hunter*. On the desktop down in the basement, I was a long way from the laundry room. With the Toshiba, I was able to work close to the running washer and dryer. I was doing that one day, working on a book at the same time I was using some kind of unauthorized database, a freeware database. I can't remember the name of it, for some reason I think the name had something to do with Gene

Autry or Roy Rogers. At any rate, somewhere along the line two bits of program came together in a most unfortunate fashion. I sat there, utterly helpless, and watched while the words FATAL ERROR flashed across a screen that rapidly filled with skulls and crossbones. Not good.

That was the end of using that database, but it was the beginning of my love affair with laptops which, to this day, I use on my lap. I don't have an official "desk." I have chairs. Comfortable chairs. I was blessed with an extra six or so inches in my thighs. (That's up and down inches. We will not discuss circumference inches. That number, like my golf score, is a closely guarded secret!) But those extra six vertical inches come in very handy for holding laptops.

I use my computer a lot--for writing books, answering e-mail, writing blog updates, and playing solitaire. Despite the fact that I spend hours on the computer almost every day, I've been fortunate in that I've never had an issue with carpal tunnel syndrome. I firmly believe that's mostly due to the fact that my wrists are always supported by forearms that are always resting on my lap. My wrists aren't dangling out there in space somewhere, reaching for a desktop keyboard.

In terms of hardware, I've come a long way from my old "transportable" Eagle. But the real software, the software in my head, is busy trying to come to terms with the start of the next Ali book. In fact, she kept me awake until all hours last night.

So I'd better stop writing this and start writing that!

My Blog

How my birthday might save Christmas Friday, September 25, 2009

In Seattle we generally celebrate our holidays with weather-related events. There was the infamous Columbus Day Storm. I wasn't here for that one, but if memory serves, that one damaged the Hood Canal Bridge.

In 1983 there was the Thanksgiving Day storm. In downtown condos, we watched the stop lights swinging wildly, but the power lines in the Denny Regrade are underground. So while folks in the 'burbs cooked their turkeys on charcoal grills, we gathered any number of suburban refugees and had a loaves and fishes Thanksgiving feast in one of the condo party rooms.

Sometime in the early nineties, Thanksgiving again, someone left access doors open in the pontoons of the I-90 floating bridge. There wasn't a huge amount of wind, but there were enough waves smacking into those open access doors, and guess what? When you fill the pontoons of a "floating bridge" with water, the bridge doesn't . . . well . . . you know . . .float. Our daughter came dashing downstairs and announced that the I-90 bridge just sank. We responded, "Did not!" Which just goes to show how wrong parents can be.

Then there was the Inaugural Day Windstorm, and the Easter Dinner Snowstorm. That one was memorable in that when the power went off, I was up to my eyeballs in trying to cook Easter

dinner for a dozen guests. My husband was fully occupied with repairing a boat, an aging Chris-Craft, with the incredibly appropriate name--The Silver Lining. That one was damaged in the 1994 snowstorm which delivered 30 some inches of snow the day after Christmas. The snow was immediately followed by seven or so inches of freezing rain which filled up the snow with so much weight that flat-roofed boat houses came to grief all over the area. Bill and his pal, Captain Al, had picked up the damaged remains of the Silver Lining at an auction and hauled them to Captain Al's back yard in Kirkland where they were working to repair the damage.

Which brings us to Easter. When the power went off, the landline phone kept on working. I called Captain Al's wife and asked her to tell Bill that the power had gone off. Stuck prone somewhere in the bowels of The Silver Lining, he uttered the immortal words, "Tell her I don't have any electricity in my pocket."

I'm surprised he wasn't struck by lightning on the spot! I had such a head of steam after that that I cooked the dinner, including some very overcooked asparagus, on a dying and almost totally rusted out propane-fired outdoor grill. I also managed to heat enough water to wash the dishes afterwards. But the grill ran on pure outrage on my part. After that fateful dinner, it never cooked another meal.

Which brings us to the Hanukkah Storm three years ago. The power went out in mid-December and didn't come back on at our house for five days. Our daughter was a young widow with

a barely year old son and two dogs. The power was off at her house for nine days. That year, for my birthday, I asked for and got a GENERATOR!!! And for Christmas that year, our daughter got a generator, too. And what's the upshot of all that? Except for a three hour period earlier this spring when a neighborhood transformer blew, the power hasn't gone off since then.

Which brings us to LAST Christmas. This time there was no wind, just snow. It came and it stayed. For a VERY LONG TIME. Christmas parties got canceled. Christmas shopping got canceled. The powers that be in the city of Seattle determined that plowing the streets was unnecessary, so commerce pretty much ground to a halt. (Including book sales.) We were here at our house in Bellevue at the top of a VERY long and VERY steep driveway which ends in a twenty foot cliff. The party that was supposed to happen at our house on the 21st of December finally happened on the 29th. The lefse I had ordered in from Montana grew little blue mold spots by the time it got out of the UPS warehouse in Redmond. And the several gallons of de-icer I ordered, never made it up the hill until AFTER THE ICE MELTED!

I was only four when we left South Dakota, so I don't know all the gory details, but I understand that as some point my father bought a Ford tractor for my mother for her birthday. DNA is spooky stuff and I am my mother's daughter, so all summer long, as we've watched the grounds-keepers at the Bellevue Municipal Golf Course wheeling around in their Gators, I've

been afflicted with a serious case of Gator Envy, and that has NOTHING to do with Florida football!

And so, when Bill asked me what I wanted for my birthday this year, I said, without having to think too hard, “A snowplow!” And today we bought it. City of Seattle take note: It turns out you need to buy snow plows before you actually need them.

What we bought isn't really a tractor *per se*. It's a Kubota RTV 500 that will be fitted with a snowplow blade. Before the middle of November.

If our very expensive “automatic power-shedding generator” is any indication, I've done the Pacific Northwest a HUGE favor. Now that I have a snow plow, it probably won't snow again. Ever. And that's going to be good for retailers this coming Christmas and perhaps for many Christmases to come.

By the way, this isn't a solo effort. Other people are evidently making the same sacrifice. According to the guy at the Kubota dealership, they've had their best September ever. More than thirty snow-plows sold this month and counting.

In other words, Christmas 2009 is going to be GREAT!

My Blog

The Snowbird Migration Take 1 Friday, October 2, 2009

Eagle has landed. In Tucson. After four days of mostly driving south--away from the rain, as it turns out, and into the sun. As in ninety degrees.

The trip itself was a mixed bag. As we were leaving Seattle, driving south on I-5, just past I-90, a rock thrown up by a northbound truck nailed our windshield, and we spent the remainder of the week watching the initial pock mark grow inexorably into a foot-long crack. This afternoon, Friday, the windshield has been repaired.

The sun came out just as we left Ashland, and it's been shining ever since. Once inside the California border, we saw a pair of cowboys on horseback working a herd of cattle. Farther down the road, in America's breadbasket, we saw massive machines--most likely guided by GPS systems--harvesting fields. The old agriculture and the new agriculture at work in the same state on the same day.

We stopped off in LA for one day for a book cover photo shoot for next summer's book. The code word here is long lead time. I'm not a big fan of having my photo taken. The one that accompanies this blog is from ten years ago, so it was time for a

change. The photos from this week will be on the books that come from HarperCollins.

On Thursday we had lunch in Palm Springs with Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, the UMC bishop for Southern California. She and her husband, Jeff, were incredibly kind to me during a very rough time in my life back in the mid-seventies. People who have read my books may recognize those two as the real life models for my fictional characters, Pastor Marianne Maculyea and her husband Jeff Daniels who are good friends of my Arizona sleuth, Joanna Brady.

It's amazing to realize that our friendship dates back more than thirty years now. Mary Ann, the real one, came to Tucson and performed the ceremony for my daughter and son-in-law's renewal of vows. She also came to the hospital and to hospice to visit with Jon and Jeanne T. and spoke movingly at his memorial service. When people say the words that a friendship is a blessing, I know it's true. That's how I feel about Jeff and Mary Ann.

So now we're in Tucson. I came down ready to hit the golf courses. No dice. It's October. They're all being over-seeded. Who knew? I've never tried to play golf in Tucson in October before.

There's no food in the house, but there's plenty of coffee. (We're from Seattle, after all.) We have the AC cranked up and working, and I'm ensconced in my favorite Tucson-based writing chair. So I guess I'd better get busy. It's time to start

working on the next Ali book. Not THIS year's Ali book. Next year's Ali book.

Time flies when you're having fun.

My Blog

The Rubber Hits The Road Day Wednesday, October 7, 2009

Yesterday was the day the rubber hit the road. That's the toughest day of any book writing experience--day one; page one--when I find myself staring at an empty screen. But I've started now, twenty six hundred words' worth. No way to tell if they're good words or bad words or how many of them will end up being thrown away. But it's a start; a beginning.

In one of my last posts, I talked about the database program that had caused the FATAL ERROR in my first Toshiba laptop. I knew it had something to do with cowboys, maybe Gene Autry or Roy Rogers, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember the name. Last night it came to me out of the blue. It was called Sidekick. See there? It does too have something to do with Roy and Gene and even with the Cisco Kid's Poncho.

That's why brains are better than computers. They can connect the dots with far less data and can come at things in perfectly round-about fashions.

Last week I watched a television program that, in the past, has been dependably entertaining. It was not entertaining. I did not finish watching. I also didn't write to the writers in question and tell them that I thought they were reprehensible and that I would NEVER watch another of their programs. I exercised my fundamental remote control power and stopped watching that particular program. I know something about writing. The writers delivered the best script they knew how to, and the actors did the best they could do with the material at hand. (Suddenly turning a long time good guy into a bad guy has to be tough on the actor's psyche.)

In other words, we're back to the critics again. There were a number of people who wrote to me after *Exit Wounds* to say they would NEVER read another one of my books. They were terminally offended by all the dogs that died in that book, and yes, dogs did die. (Should I mention they were reading a murder mystery where people were bound to die?)

The animals in question, seventeen to be exact, were in the care of an animal hoarder who was incapable of taking care of herself to say nothing of eighteen dogs. The people who threw that book across the room and refused to read another word after that first chapter didn't get to meet Lucky, the deaf dog that didn't die with the others. And if those same readers had gone on reading, they also might have learned something. Many animal hoarders have a history of childhood sexual abuse.

So last night I received another blast from someone who, based upon something said in one of my books, has decided that I am a

gun-hating member of the cosseted elite who is so clueless and so well protected that I think all hand guns are evil. (He's not going to read another of my books, either, and that's certainly his prerogative.)

In actual fact, I do think handguns in homes with small children are dangerous. But before I had little kids in my life, I did have a handgun. In fact, I shot all nine shots from that .22 at a rapidly retreating rattlesnake who was still laughing when he went over the wall and disappeared. But three years ago, after an intruder showed up in our bedroom while we were sleeping, I began carrying a Taser, and I'm fully prepared to use it!

One more comment and then I'll be done. Everyone knows Mickey Mantle hit a lot of home runs, but he also struck out a lot. Once again, I'm sure some of my readers will give me his exact strikeout stats. I'm not going to go away from Chapter 1 long enough to track those down.

Here's the deal. I write a lot of books. Just like the writers on that TV program, I do the best I can with each and every one of them. Some are home runs. Some aren't. Writers have baggage and so do readers, and occasionally those two sets of baggage collide in an unfortunate fashion.

Once any given book is written, writing to tell me how much you hated it is a waste of time--your time in writing it and my time in reading it. I can't go back and change it to suit some readers, and if you decide to quit reading my stories as a result of that particular book, so be it. So long. It's been swell.

It might be nice if we all remembered what Thumper's daddy used to say. "If you can't say somethin' nice, don't say nothin' at all."

Now that I think about it, those are pretty good words to live by. Are any of the politicians listening?

My Blog

Please Help

Tuesday, October 13, 2009

Sometime in the last couple of weeks I received an e-mail from someone who was unhappy with the blog. The gist of the message was that he wanted to hear less about me and my jetting around and more about what I'm doing to help other people. He concluded by saying that although my books were okay, he wasn't so sure about me. Fair enough. There are times I'm not so sure about me, either.

Once, years ago, an editor I had for a very short time told me, "The problem with you is that all your characters do what they do because of the way they were raised." To be perfectly honest, I couldn't see how that could possibly be a problem. After all, for good or ill, isn't that what we all do? We do things the way we were raised or we do them AGAINST the way we were raised.

I once saw a purple-haired, much-tattooed and much-pierced young woman carrying a baby down Capitol Hill, and the first thought that went through my mind was, “That poor young woman doesn't realize it, but she’s probably raising a Republican.” How else could her baby rebel?

A man I know, a former carpet cleaner, was raised by hippie parents in California. As a child he used to play hide and seek with his adopted Uncle Charlie, as in Uncle CHARLES MANSON. It should come as no surprise when I tell you that the little kid grew up to be a very strait-laced and loving man who left his booming carpet cleaning business to become a Christian missionary.

If you’ve been reading this blog for any length of time, you’ve encountered my mother--her strictures and her by-words--several times. She was a strong-willed woman with a seventh grade education and a college-worthy grasp of grammar and geography. She was an excellent mother who made sure we listened to her, sometimes with the use of an appropriately applied fly swatter.

Over the years we variously rebelled against her parental authority or else we went along to get along, but by the time she died, we’d mostly buried all those hatchets and figured out she had been right far more than she was wrong.

I can still hear her saying, “Don’t go around tooting your own horn.” Or, “Don’t break your arm patting yourself on the back.” In other words, do good but shut up about it.

A couple of years ago when a pushy young woman, a writer wannabe, wrote to me. She wanted to know who, if anyone, I had mentored in the world of writing.

The truth is, I've mentored several writers over the years, but that 'mentoring' is a private transaction, between me and them. I don't go around bragging about it. I'm also glad to participate in writers conferences whenever I can because there are a lot of people out there who, like me, had the front door to becoming a writer slammed in their faces. Writers conferences offer a back door, non-academic entrance into the world of writing.

I've worked with the YWCA and the Humane Society and the American Cancer Society. I've done countless auction events, including auctioning off characters to raise funds for a helicopter pad at the Copper Queen Hospital in my home town of Bisbee, Arizona. And I didn't do any of these things as publicity stunts. I did them to be a good citizen--to lend a hand.

Yes, I grew up in Bisbee. There was a country club there at the time. My family didn't belong, but we did know that one of the rules there was that women weren't allowed to play on the weekends. It turns out times have changed.

A few months ago I was contacted by the Copper Queen Hospital Foundation from Bisbee. They wanted to know if I would participate as one of the celebrities in a Celebrity Golf Tournament at the end of this month. It's being held to raise money for new digital mammography equipment to replace their

old antiquated system so that women in Bisbee who need mammograms can have them done there without having to drive two hundred miles round trip to Tucson.

So I'm going to the tournament on October 31. I'm playing, even though I'm a very bad golfer. I'm sponsoring a hole, and the night before I'll be doing a separate fundraiser that will also benefit the foundation.

By now, you're probably puzzled and trying to sort all this out and wondering why I'm telling you any of this. After all, didn't I just explain that my mother didn't approve of people blowing their own horns?

For the record, I'm not. I'm asking for help. I know from my mail that there are lots of people out there who are fighting or have fought the breast cancer battle. If you're so obliged, you can help, too. Feel free to send your own checks made out to the Copper Queen Hospital Foundation in care of J. A. Jance, P.O. Box 766, Bellevue, WA. 98006.

As for that guy I first mentioned, we won't be taking the jet. We'll be driving to Bisbee in our six year old Chrysler minivan.

My Blog

Going Back to Bisbee

Wednesday, October 21, 2009

I don't know how many of you have read Richard Shelton's book, *Going Back to Bisbee*, but I trust he'll forgive me for echoing his title in this blog. He was a former soldier from Fort Huachuca who went to Bisbee as a beginning teacher in the late fifties and early sixties. He was at a different school, so I never encountered him there, but I did later when I worked as a clerk in the English Department at the University of Arizona where he went on to become a well-loved professor. He's also done a lot of outreach to inmates, encouraging them to turn their lives and school of hard-knock experiences into the written word.

I picked up his book at the time I was beginning the second Joanna Brady book, *Tombstone Courage*. I was having a bad case of writer's block, and one of the ways I could fool myself into thinking I was working was to do research. Initially that's how I regarded reading that book--I was doing research, but it turned out to be far more than that. Seeing Bisbee and all its small town prejudices and hierarchies through his eyes helped me understand the dynamics and trajectories of my own life as a child growing up in that place and time. And it was interesting for me to see that unknowingly I had already set those same experiences at work to form Joanna Brady's character and history.

There was no official segregation in Bisbee in the fifties, not a codified one, but it was there nonetheless. There was very little cross-over between Anglo kids and Hispanic kids. There was also very little crossover between the children of the people who were the doctors and lawyers and company bigwigs in town and

the children of the men who worked in the mines. To our way of thinking it was all those people in the South who had a problem with segregation. We were totally blind to our own shortcomings.

During that period, another piece of discrimination was at work at the Country Club where, although we weren't members, we knew that women weren't allowed to play on weekends. That's one of the reasons being invited to play at the Copper Queen Hospital Benefit Golf Tournament next weekend tickled my funny bone so, and it's one of the reasons I said yes. It may be a long time after the fact, but playing there next Saturday will be striking a women's lib blow for all those women who WEREN'T allowed to play there back in the old days.

Having read that comment, some of you may decide to send me an e-mal (That's not a misprint, by the way. An e-mal is a more or less mean-spirited e-mail.) letting me know that I have finally dropped the mask and publicly announced that I'm one of those "women's libbers." I was once a genuine-bra burning member of that tribe when I was married to my troubled first husband, a relationship that brought with it many attendant difficulties. At that time in my life it was easier to blame my troubles on men in general rather than the specific man with whom I was involved. And I did actually burn a bra. (It was a nursing bra. I tossed it on the barbecue grill AFTER I cooked dinner. If that isn't a mixed message and metaphor, I don't know what is!) And the big difference between me and the current crop of feminists is that I managed to regain my sense of humor, something I'll also be taking back to Bisbee this coming weekend.

Yes, I'll be playing in the golf tournament, but that's on Saturday. On Friday evening, at 7:00 PM, I'll be speaking at the Warren Community Church--the church where I used to have perfect attendance certificates from Sunday School. It's also where I went to Bible School and to Brownie and Girl Scout meetings.

I'm sure my old Sunday School and Girl Scout leader, Laverne Williams will be in attendance. (Incidentally, I use the term old as in former rather than aged because Laverne is definitely a very youthful eighty-something.) And if you don't like the stories I tell that evening, feel free to search out Laverne later on, because I have no doubt she'll be more than willing to set you straight and give you the REAL scoop.

I don't expect this will be the usual "book tour" kind of talk. It had better be better than that because they're actually charging \$10.00 for tickets, with all proceeds going to the Copper Queen Hospital Foundation to purchase digital mammography equipment. I'll post places where tickets can be purchased at the bottom of this article. I'm hoping we'll fill the church the way it used to be full on Easter morning, when they had to open all the Sunday School rooms along the side of the sanctuary and bring in folding chairs to seat the overflow crowd.

Books will be available for sale by Joan Werner from Bisbee's Atalanta Books. She'll also be able to take orders for signed copies of the new Ali book, *Trial by Fire*, that's due out

December 1. I'll be available after the event to sign books (no charge for that) and to take photos (no charge for those, either.)

I know from my e-mail that many of you have made it a point to come through Bisbee on your travels, just to scope out the place. So I'm sending this out in hopes that some of you will consider stopping by again or even for the first time. It should be fun. I have only one regret. My parents won't be there to see it.

By the way, I PROMISE not to burn another bra.

My Blog

You Can Go Home Again Sunday, November 1, 2009

This was the weekend of going back to Bisbee.

On Friday night I spoke to a hundred or so people who gathered at the Warren Community Church, the church I attended in my youth and again as an adult. Because of donations made by my fans as well as the people who came to the event, that part of the weekend raised more than \$2,000. Not a huge amount when you consider that the digital mammography equipment will cost the better part of \$250,000. But still, a journey of a thousand miles begins with that first step.

It was interesting to go back to that building that had seemed so immense when I was small. The stairways, where I once stood

in my Junior Choir robe or in Christmas pageant costume, waiting to walk into the sanctuary, had always seemed huge and steep. The stairs are still steep. They are not huge.

From the front of the church, I could see all those familiar pews--the one where my parents sat; the one where Mrs. McKinney sat and the one that was the private domain of Mrs. Brinson. Mrs. Endicott, who couldn't sing, always sat in one of the front pews while her husband, Mr. Endicott who could sing, sat with the choir.

On Friday night Laverne Williams--the lady who was my Sunday School teacher as well as my Girl Scout leader, from Brownies right through Senior Scouts--was right there in the front row.

Sometime in the sixties or seventies, a determination was made to move the church choir from the front of the church to a choir loft at the back of the church. A vote was taken at a church pot luck. My mother was for the move; my father was against it. After a very public vote, the yeas had it--and my folks didn't go back to church for about the next ten to fifteen years. Did I mention that people in my family know how to carry a grudge?

I spoke about Bisbee as a community and my parents' participation in same. For years they gathered aluminum cans--their garage smelled like a brewery--and they used the aluminum can money to jump restart Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops in Bisbee; to repair the lights in the Warren Ball Park; and

to add to the pot of money raised to build a heli-pad at the Copper Queen Hospital.

In the mid-seventies, one of the church members, Helen Pollock, suffered a severe stroke. Because the church has a set of steps leading up to the front door, I knew that Helen wouldn't be able to come back to church. When I asked the minister why there wasn't a wheelchair ramp, he said the board had looked into it and had decided that, at an estimated cost of \$15,000, the congregation couldn't afford it.

I asked my father, who had been in the construction business, how much he thought it would cost. He paced it off and said he thought it could be done for about \$5,000. In the end, we designed and built a floating sidewalk that rests on fill that is held in place by railroad ties. It's a simple ramp, and probably not as wide as the ADA would prefer, but it works, and plenty of people who came on Friday night did so by walking up Helen Pollock's ramp. I'm happy to report that there are no cracks or rough spots or buckles, and in the end, building it cost \$300 and three weekends of hard physical labor.

That's the kind of place Bisbee was when I was growing up. And it's the kind of place it is now. I suspect we would have had a larger crowd at the church on Friday, but the refurbished lights were on in the Warren Ballpark two blocks away where the Bisbee Puma football team was playing Tombstone. The streets around the ballpark were parked full, and I was glad to see all the cars.

On Saturday we played golf. Our team included Tucson KVOA weatherman and part-time Bisbee resident, Jimmy Stewart. He's a far more capable golfer than the other three members of our team, and he kept us from going down in dire defeat. It was fun. And it was amazing to play on the Turquoise Valley Country Club's par 6 hole. I'll tell you plain and simple, that one seemed to go on forever.

For years, the golf course was a nine hole affair. A few years ago, a new owner carved another nine holes out of the desert. The problem is, the previous residents--primarily rodents and rattlesnakes--have been reluctant to move on. A few weeks ago, a groundskeeper went to pick up a snake to move him off a cart path and out of the way. (PETA would approve, by the way.) The only problem was that he grabbed the snake a little too far back, and it turned around and bit him. In an effort to shake the snake off his hand, the groundskeeper flung the rattler into the work cart where it managed to bite a SECOND groundskeeper. Fortunately, on Saturday, it was chilly enough that no snakes were in evidence. They were around I'm sure, but we didn't see any.

One lady behind us hit a hole in one--her third--and won a golf trip to Atlantic City. At one point, our golf cart went nuts. Bill tried putting on the brakes, and the thing didn't stop. As we headed for a sand-trap, he switched off the key. That stopped it, but it wouldn't go again, so we had to send for a reserve cart.

In other words, the trip was fun. The golf was fun. And I did enjoy it.

At this point, I have no idea how much money was raised by the whole weekend. It'll take some time for the totals to come in. When I have them, I'll let you know how we did, so stay tuned.

In the meantime, let me say thank you again to all of you who pitched in and made a contribution. I know some of you who did so have never even BEEN to Bisbee, but if you go, I'm sure you'll feel right at home. You see, you're already part of that community, and you can go home again.

My Blog

Keeping the Balls in the Air Monday, November 9, 2009

A certain segment of the population appears to be under the impression that writing is easy and being a writer is easier still. I beg to differ.

Writing is work. Being a writer is work. It happens to be work that I love, but it is still work.

Last Saturday and Sunday found me involved in a fund-raiser in my hometown of Bisbee, Arizona. On Wednesday we flew to Charleston so I could take part in the Post-Courier Fall Authors Luncheon. On Friday we drove to Aiken, SC, to visit relatives. I was glad to do these events--honored to do them--but they take time and energy.

On Saturday we flew back home to Tucson. On Thursday of this week, we'll be driving back to Seattle where I have two weeks to a: Celebrate Thanksgiving; b: Get ready for Christmas; c: Get ready for and go on a pre-Christmas book tour; and d: Work on a book. Note I didn't say finish a book. I said work on it--as in doing research for it on our way home from Tucson and writing on it every time I have a chance.

In other words, it's going to be your typical holiday season. But when I'm not working, I'll probably be reading. That's another thing that writers do--we read. I'm a late-comer to Lee Child's Jack Reacher books. I'm in the process of reading them--in order. Yes, I'm one of those pesky chronological readers I sometimes make gentle fun of along the way. Lee Child's books are written with a sense of urgency and a clear depiction of the landscape surrounding the action. I love that. There are expressions Lee Child uses that I wouldn't use, but you'll notice I'm not sending him a note saying "Why don't you write books the way I think you should write books?" He gets to write his books his way, and I get to write my books my way.

Which brings me to several e-mails that have come in over the past several weeks. I've responded to those individually, but since they appear to be questions that come up again and again, it's possible that some readers of this blog are asking the same things.

Last week someone told me they had written to me at my Facebook page and they were disappointed that I hadn't

answered. Excuse me? I have a Facebook page? Who knew? My husband and I have enough of a challenge keeping the website running and the blog updates coming and doing the things laid out in paragraph 2 above--a; b; c; and d--to keep track of a Facebook page to say nothing of Twittering. (I will NEVER master the art of saying ANYTHING in 140 characters or less!) If you want to communicate with me directly, please send a note to my direct e-mail, jajance@jajance.com. Those communications are read and answered promptly or, if something requires snail-mail attention, kept as new until I get around to them. When I'm writing a book or on tour, be advised, snail mail is a very long way down the list of priorities.

Several people have written to express the concern that now that Joanna Brady is happily married and has a baby, am I going to drop her as a character? WHAT??? Since when is being happily married a reason to stop being a: Interesting or b: Involved in doing what you love to do? Does that mean that I should have stopped writing my books as soon as I married my second husband twenty-four years ago? So the answer to that question is a resounding "NO." I'm not dropping Joanna. I'm not dropping Beaumont. I'm not dropping Ali Reynolds. I'm not dropping any of the Walker Family characters. (Well, wait a minute, I did drop Fat Crack, but that's because he died. And if you don't know who Fat Crack Ortiz is, then I have another whole set of books for you to read!)

But the truth is, characters are difficult to come by. I've had to learn their histories and their peculiar quirks. It's sort of like a marriage in that writers take their characters for better or for

worse. In terms of history, I've lived with J.P. Beaumont in my head longer than I've been (happily) married to my second husband. So, no. Characters are a valuable commodity, and I'm not letting loose of any of them.

Then there's the perennial question about "when you retire." Me? Retire???? I have no intention of retiring! Some of you may remember my mammogram blog when a new mammographer (make that a youthful mammographer) asked me if I was still "writing books" as if, at my advanced age, I was so old and feeble that it was no longer possible for me to get my decrepit fingers to work the keyboard. He also wanted to know if it was "like a hobby."

The answers to his questions in tight-lipped order (channeling my mother as I spoke) were Yes! and No! As in, "Yes I am still writing books!" and "No, it is DEFINITELY not a hobby!" My goal continues to be to age gracefully like P. D. James and have a new book out when I'm 88! So no, do not ask about when I plan to retire because I don't plan to retire anytime soon. When you see my obituary in the newspapers, then you'll know when I'm done.

Now, given all that, I believe I'll turn back to Chapter 5 of Ali # 6. I just found out last night as I was on my way to bed that someone is going to die in this next chapter, and it's my job to figure out how to do it and how the bad guy/girl plans or at least hopes to get away with it. That's what I did overnight--I lay awake plotting murder and mayhem. And that's why I'm up writing early this morning. Blog first; book second. Not

necessarily in order of importance, but a deadline is a deadline, and I told the [PI.com](#) that I'd do one update a week.

My week is up.

My Blog

My Mother's Purse

Thursday, November 19, 2009

For the last several days we've been doing our reverse Snowbird trip, driving home from sunny Arizona to the Pacific Northwest. We're coming home for the holidays and for the start of a book tour, but if the weather man is to be believed, we should also arrive home in time for a windstorm that is predicted to rival the Windstorm of 06, the one that prompted us to install a generator.

Driving from Tucson to Seattle takes a minimum of 26 hours. In the car. Moving. Years ago, when I mentioned that fact to a New York based editor she said, "Really. I had no idea we had such a tall country!" Well, yes, it is that tall, at least on this side of the Mississippi.

So we've been driving, and long driving trips make me think of my parents who loved going on driving trips, the longer the better. Before my mother was forced to drop out of school between seventh and eighth grade, her favorite subject was Geography. Having grown up on a farm in northeastern South

Dakota, she longed to see the rest of the world. And so, when she and my father went on trips, he drove and she functioned as co-pilot. (She actually had a laminated Back Seat Driver's License in her purse, but we'll get to the purse in a moment.)

Yes, she was co-pilot with a map on her lap when she wasn't holding a baby on her lap. This was back in the dark ages before child seats and seat belts became mandatory. But she also functioned as chief-enforcer.

When the kids in the back seat went to war with one another, she settled it by means of a couple swift whacks from a fly-swatter she kept close at hand. I can tell you that her fly-swatter could reach the very back seat of the nine passenger Mercury station wagon. And nothing gets a recalcitrant kid's attention faster than a stinging slap on a bare shorts-clad thigh. She also kept my father on track by pouring steaming coffee for him out of their red and brown plaid Scotsman thermos.

On those trips, her purse was the essential tool. It was like a bottomless pit of all things necessary. When it was time to stop at a Dairy Queen, her purse held the money to pay for the treats while she also kept track of whose turn it was to choose the flavor of the milkshake that had to be split with one of the other siblings. Her wallet had a place for bills--and the back seat driver's license--but it also had a change section with a little plastic holder that held quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies.

Functioning as the family's treasury department was only one small part of the purse's usefulness. If somebody got hurt, my

mother had a supply of bandaids in there. If my dad got a headache from driving, she had a tiny Bayer Aspirin case that contained twelve aspirin. She always had paper and pens in her purse and lipstick and powder and toothpicks. She also carried an unending supply of kleenex.

(As a historical note for my younger readers, Baby Wipes which now go in every new mommy's package of essential equipment, did not exist back then. They started being available when I was a new mommy, but back then they came in a quart-jar sized plastic container that didn't fit in anybody's purse!) If they'd had hand purifier back then, I'm sure my mother's purse would have carried that as well.

On the drive these day, I sit in the co-pilot's seat while my husband drives. I've gladly surrendered the duties of co-pilot to the cheerful lady who speaks for our dashboard GPS. I'm in charge of keeping our traveling coffee cups full of water and ice.

On this trip, my purse has functioned in much the same way my mother's did--as a source of money and credit cards--and correct change when necessary. (That comes from the linty bottom of my purse, not from a well organized change purse.) Toothpicks? Check. Bandaids? Check? Aleve rather than aspirin? Check. Tums and Acid Reducer. Check. Hand purifier. Check. Extra car keys--very important last night when Bill locked his in the car. Check. And, oh, yes, something my mother never even thought about having in her purse--my C2 Taser.

But just because I'm not functioning as co-pilot doesn't mean I'm not working. Now I'm our traveling Telecommunications Officer. I'm actually writing this on a computer as we drive up foggy I-5 between Ashland and Roseburg. With our power supply, a twelve-volt DC to 120 volt AC converter, plugged into the lighter, I have power for the computer. I spent the better part of four days working on the database so we can send out the new book announcements sometime in the next week or so. (Since I'm not Sarah Palin, no one is going to be announcing the publication of my book on every news station in the country, so I guess I'll have to make like the Little Red Hen and do it myself!)

By now you get the picture. I've traveled north with the computer open on my lap. When we've needed hotel reservations, I've called them in on my cell phone. Or on Bill's cellphone. And when I've needed to send an e-mail, I've hooked up our little network air card and e-mailed away to my heart's content. When our Serius sound system stopped working, I got on the horn and fixed it. From the middle of nowhere in the middle of California.

You may be asking yourself, how can she manage all that telecommunications equipment to say nothing of credit cards. Clearly, with all that other stuff, there's no room in her purse, so where does she put it all? Answer: I put my telecom equipment in the most readily accessible of pockets of all. I keep the cell phone with the extra long battery--the fat one--in one bra cup. And the network card and Bill's very skinny cell phone in the OTHER bra cup. It's important to maintain a little telecommunications balance! (By the way, that's the same place

both my daughters keep THEIR cell phones. Our grandson tried the same stunt and put his toy cell phone down his shirt. Unfortunately, he's missing a few pieces of essential equipment.)

And so, since ladies' clothing is usually made without usable pockets, I'm making a suggestion to the manufacturers of ladies undergarments. In addition to A, B, C, D, E, cups, etc., I believe it's time for a real live T-cup (a telecommunications bra cup) that will bring ladies' underwear into the 21st Century.

Oops. Gotta go. One of the cell phones in my bra is ringing.

My Blog

OOPS! Rant Warning!!!! Not FunnySaturday,
November 21, 2009

I know that people read this blog because it's usually . . . well . . . fun. Or at the very least light hearted. Maybe it's because it's so gray and rainy outside that the weather has gotten to my funny bone and disabled it. The point is, I'm not feeling funny. Or light hearted. In fact, I'm mad as hell!

The experts--a group of presumed experts--have now decided that mammograms aren't necessary for women under age forty if they're not considered to be at risk. And, if they're not considered "necessary" that most likely means that in the future they won't be covered under insurance plans because they'll be considered "optional"--sort of like cosmetic surgery.

Maybe I'm wrong here--I have occasionally been wrong--but I remember a time when birth control pills weren't covered by insurance plans. How do I know this? Because I had to pay \$21.00 a month to buy them. My daughter-in-law told me today that they're covered now. Really? When did that happen? My guess would be about the time Viagra started being covered.

But back to mammograms. Readers of this column know that I have a checkered past with mammograms. I don't like mammograms, but I get mine every year, and I get them for a reason. That reason is a woman named Lynnette Schilb, someone I never met. Lynn was my second husband's first wife who died of breast cancer at age 45. She was 37 when it was found and it had already metastasized. She wouldn't have been considered "at risk" under these new guidelines because none of her female relatives had a history of breast cancer. That means her tumor wouldn't have been found until much later, and by the time she hit forty and was actually encouraged to have a mammogram, she would have been dead!

Surgery and chemo didn't bring Lynn a lot of quality of life, but they did buy her a few more precious years with her husband and children. She lived long enough to see her daughter engaged but not long enough to see her married. Not long enough to see ANY of her beautiful granddaughters who are now MY granddaughters.

At Bill's insistence, I started having mammograms every year in my early forties. And, you can believe it that, at my insistence,

Lynn's daughter Cindy--MY daughter Cindy--started having mammograms when she was in her mid-thirties. And you can bet that my daughter Jeanne T. started having mammograms prior to age 40 as well. It's something we do for our families more than we do it for ourselves.

Having your boob mashed flat between two pieces of plastic and getting an EARLY diagnosis beats the hell out of getting a LATE diagnosis! And what if they find something that turns out to be a false positive? All I can say to that is Hallelujah! I had one of those, and the rejoicing we did when it turned out to be a benign cyst was a wonder to behold!

So this morning I see in the paper that another group of experts or maybe even the same group of experts have now decided early pap smears aren't very necessary, either. Wait a minute, don't I remember something about routine vaccination of young girls to prevent their getting cervical cancer, but now we're not going to have actual pap smears to find out for sure it's working? Pap smears aren't my idea of a fun time, either, but It was a ROUTINE ANNUAL pap smear--covered by my insurance plan--that raised red-flags, discovered my uterine cancer, and got me into see a surgeon while it was still stage 1b, while it was contained and easily treatable.

So I'm reading the newspaper and asking myself, "Are these people NUTS?" Had our son-in-law's melanoma been found before it was stage three, would Jon still be here to celebrate his darling son's birthday when Colty turns four at the end of the month?

As far as I'm concerned, early detection counts! False positives? NO PROBLEM!

My concerns is that these are small first steps in a coming storm of rationed health care in this country, and maybe it's just a "coincidence" that women are the ones who are the most effected by these new "recommendations."

Coincidence or not, I'm sure the Taliban would approve. Let's throw ALL those uppity women under the bus!

My Blog

Thanksgiving

Thursday, November 26, 2009

Thanksgiving is a time to give thanks, but the problem with me is there are no short stories, only long ones. So here goes.

In 1983 I signed a contract to sell my first two books to Avon Books as original paperbacks. Shortly after signing I received a call from a gentleman named Dick Sawyer who told me he was currently president of a writer's group called Seattle Free Lances. One of the founding members of that group was Betty McDonald of *Egg and I* fame. By the early eighties she was gone, but when I first encountered Seattle Free Lances, her sister was the dowager princess of the place and was free with her advice, most memorable of which was "Never throw anything away."

That unexpected call from Dick was actually an invitation for me to come speak at one of their dinner meetings. As a “pre-published” author, I was flattered, puzzled, and nervous. In that order. Well, maybe not. Maybe nervous should have come first, but the bottom line is, I went. Dick and his then wife, Carol, greeted me and made me feel welcome. They took me around the room and introduced me to the luminaries there, including a woman named Willo Davis Roberts and her husband, Dave.

In terms of luminaries, Willo was it with a capital L. I don’t know what her literary output had already been at that point in her writing career, but I know she was working on her one hundredth book when she died in 2004. Despite being a three-time Edgar winner and a Mark Twain Award winner numerous times, she was unfailingly kind to this newbie who showed up at meetings still feeling like the singer of that memorable song, “Please, Mr. Custer, I Don't Want to Go.” In other words, I kept asking myself, “What am I doing here?”

After that first speaking event, I went to meetings where I listened and learned. I was dazzled and more than a little envious when Willo and Dave bought a motorhome so they could go on the road together when it was time for a book tour. That’s an example Bill and I have deliberately copied. When it’s book tour time, he goes, too, just not in a motorhome.

I spent several years in Seattle Free Lances, including my own stint as president. Dick Sawyer’s wife, Carol, lost her battle with cancer. When I took up with Bill, whose first wife had also

died of cancer, Bill and I spent a lot of time and became good friends with Dick and his new main-squeeze, Cynthia. We eventually shared a common wedding day and let them come freeload on our reception.

But the demands of writing books and being a mother and grandmother were finally too much for me to keep up with Free Lances, and I dropped out of that. I'm not sure how long Willo stayed, but she went on to help found the Pacific Northwest Chapter of Mystery Writers of America. I'm sure she played the same pivotal role there that she did in Seattle Freelances, offering advice and encouragement to the next generation of writers.

This summer, the Pacific Northwest Chapter decided to establish the Willo Award, a lifetime achievement award for someone in the world of mystery writing, and they chose me to be the first Willo recipient.

I have to tell you I was astonished and honored. I was nominated for an Edgar once long ago, but I lost. I think that's actually one of the years Willo won one of hers. I won the American Mystery Award once, long ago, too. I was also awarded a Scottie. That is a literary award given by the City of Scottsdale. Mine included a wooden bust of Winfield Scott, carved from one of the olive trees on the ranch that once belonged to him and which gave Scottsdale its name. (From the wooden carving I have to say I doubt Mr. Scott was much of a hunk, and that bit of rustic statuary remains on a fireplace mantel in our Tucson house.)

So back to the Willo. I was honored and grateful. I have some doubts that I'll ever measure up to Willo's award-winning example, but last week I went to the Deca Hotel on 45th in Seattle for the presentation ceremony.

The guy who introduced me was G.M. Ford. Mystery readers in Seattle will immediately recognize the name. G.M. Ford came to my attention with his first book, "Who the Hell is Wanda Fuca?" I loved that book. Like me, he's been writing ever since. He was one of those new writers who not only asked for my advice, he also took it. I told him, "If they ask you to do book signings, do them." That's how he ended up doing one of his first book signings at a Nordstrom's perfume counter somewhere near Olympia.

If you walk around with a handle like "G.M. Ford," you'd better have a sense of humor, and Gerry Ford does. In spades. When I learned he would be introducing me at the presentation ceremony, I expected that what he would have had to say would be funny, and it was. But it was also kind. It made me realize that in helping a new generation of writers, I have been following in Willo Davis Roberts's footsteps all along.

Willo's family came to the event--Dave, her widower, along with a collection of children and grandchildren. Other than Dave, I had never met the rest of her family, and I was glad they were there.

So as we mark Thanksgiving, I'm thankful to be the first-ever Willo Award winner. But just because somebody gave me a lifetime achievement award doesn't mean I'm ready to call it quits.

After all, I figure I'm good for another twenty-five or thirty years--maybe even long enough to earn another lifetime achievement award.

PS. We just sent out notices for *Trial by Fire*, Ali # 5, which goes on sale next Tuesday. If you expected to receive a notice and didn't, something may have gone awry with your e-mail address or maybe your company's spam blocker sent the note into the great beyond.

If you would like to be added to my notification list, please go to my website, www.jajance.com. Click on the envelope that says my name, city, and state, give me that information, and then send it to me.

Oh, and Happy Thanksgiving to all.

My Blog

**Where Oh Where Have I been? - - on the *Trial By Fire* Book Tour
Tuesday, December 8, 2009**

First off, I'm not sick, and I'm not dead. When my blog didn't show up on time, people were concerned. And they let me know. What I really am is on tour. And on no known time zone. None of the hotel Internet connections have been high speed enough to make updating the website possible, and updating the website is what it takes to update the blog.

This week we've managed to get in and out of Chicago without being stuck in their first major snowstorm of the year. We left early (make that VERY early) yesterday morning. When we left it was clear and cold. This morning it's snowy and icy. (It's evidently also VERY cold in Seattle with a threat of snow in the forecast for Friday when we're supposed to come back home. We'll see how that works out for us.)

This tour has been done on commercial aircraft where I discovered that I'm allowed a quart sized baggy to carry liquids. Who came up with that idea? Probably the same kind of faceless entity who decided we need to cut down on the number of mammograms being passed out in this country.

I have news for Homeland Security: Women of a certain age who are on tour require certain liquids to keep us from looking . . . well . . . our age. When I was busted for having a gallon sized baggy of liquids, I had to stand there and toss out stuff under the supervision of a not-so-nice TSA guy. I absolutely adore being treated with contempt by young men with crewcuts who never had to use hair spray or gel or moisturizer in their lives. Oh, well, I'll be writing another book

soon, and I have a pretty clear idea of who my next bad guy will resemble!

This week I've also heard from people who have read the new book. One woman, who's history is much like that of the fictional Sister Anslem, in *Trial By Fire* wrote to let me know that she appreciated my mention of Germans being sent to relocation centers during World War II. On the West Coast we hear about the Japanese War Relocation centers but very little about the fact that other nationalities were also involved in that historical reality.

Someone else wrote to say I had my Homeland Security wires crossed. What a surprise. I'm a liberal arts major, after all. I may not know which alphabet soup government agency works in conjunction with which other alphabet soup agency, but I DO know that gallon-sized baggies are verboten!

With any kind of luck, today I'll meet a fan, a retired police officer whose back was broken while he attempted to arrest a resisting child molester. During treatment for that incident--which also resulted in his being forcibly retired--the doctors discovered that he has a rare form of cancer. He's enjoying reading my books, and I'm looking forward to meeting him. Photos will definitely be in order. I have a feeling the child molester is back out on the streets. The former cop is still confined to a wheelchair. That's the difference between fiction and real life. In fiction the good guys win and the bad guys lose.

But that's what being on tour is all about--meeting people, hearing their stories, and learning about how my stories impact my readers. We've been in and out of airports and in and out of hotels. We've been waking up in strange beds without knowing for sure which direction to go looking for a bathroom. But we're into the last week now. We'll be home for Christmas, and I hope you are, too.

My Blog

PJ's Media??

Monday, December 14, 2009

This morning I'm a true, card-carrying member of the pajamas media. Bill woke me out of a sound sleep and handed me a cell phone for a live radio interview. (If being half-asleep can be called live.) He brought me coffee, too, but by the time I was ready for my first sip the interview was over.

Today is the last day of official tour events on the of the *Trial by Fire* tour. After two plus weeks of non stop events and travel, I'm one tired cookie, and it's nice to be here in my comfy robe in my comfy family room with my own coffee machine made coffee in a mug at my elbow. Hotel coffee doesn't measure up, and hotel robes don't measure up, either.

Actually, that's not true. The comfy robe I'm wearing is actually one of the robes I purchased from Riverplace, a hotel in Portland. Terry cloth on the inside. Light smooth material on the outside, but most hotel robes aren't a match for this one, and

since tours are done with carry-on luggage as much as possible, I don't get to bring this one with me on the road.

Unlike last winter's tour--and the one before that--this year's tour seems to have dodged snow. The first snow storm hit Chicago after we left town. There may be snow on the way to Bellingham this afternoon, but from where I'm sitting, it looks more like rain. It's Washington State after all.

When I'm on tour, people often ask questions or make comments about the research that goes into books. In *Trial by Fire*, for example, one of the characters, Sister Anslem, is based on information from a woman I met years ago. She was an American citizen of German descent whose father was interned during World War II on suspicion of being a German spy. I knew about the Japanese war relocation centers, but until I heard that woman's story, I had no idea that people of German and Italian descent were also locked up. I used that previously unknown nugget of history to create Sister Anselm's character.

At one event, a reader of *Trial by Fire* objected to my saying that there were saguaro cacti along the Hassyampa River north of Wickenburg--that "they only grow in the Sonora Desert." Before I wrote that part of the story, I e-mailed one of my fans who lives in Congress (also north of Wickenburg) and asked her to check and let me know at which mile-post marker on Yarnell Hill the first saguaro appears. I wanted to check for certain since it's been close to forty years since I last went hiking in the Hassyampa. (Call it youthful stupidity. I was in my early twenties. We were out there in June without enough water. It's

a miracle I didn't die that day. Bearing all that in mind, it's no wonder I wasn't paying close attention to the surrounding flora.)

At any rate, my fan hopped on her Harley and rode out Yarnell Hill--which is even farther north than Congress. She wrote back with the mileage marker, and that's why I was relatively confident that the cactus rustler scene was plausibly accurate. Telling her she was wrong in public would have served no purpose, but after the event, however, and purely for my own benefit, I contacted a fan who had just finished reading the book and who is also a nationally recognized expert in desert ecology. He told me he once mapped saguaros and found one growing naturally some seventy miles north of Wickenburg.

Out on the road I've met two remarkable women who are both battling serious health issues. I put them in touch and the two of them have become friends. One of them can come to appearances and the other can't. The one who can, came to a signing in Tucson and had me autograph a book for her homebound friend. The homebound friend is a computer maven. The other one isn't, so the homebound friend prints out copies of the blog and snail-mails them to the other one. In other words--"Hello Marilyn and Patty.")

So tours are like anything else--there are good things and not so good things. I'm glad to have been out on tour, but I'm VERY glad to be back home.

I don't want to count how many days I have to get ready for Christmas. I know that however many there are, there aren't enough.

But right now I'd better go wash and iron my hair and get ready to head for Bellingham.

Bye-bye PJs.

My Blog

Call Center Blues

Tuesday, December 22, 2009

The East Coast is having the kind of pre-Christmas snow event that we had last year. So far, in Seattle anyway, our owning a personal snow plow seems to be having a very salutary effect as in No SNOW! But I know lots of people's holiday is going to be blown to pieces by having guests who don't make it on time or at all and gifts--especially gift baskets--that also misfire due to weather related issues. So now a word about call centers and the people who work there, including a daughter who works in one.

She thinks of the days leading up to and following Christmas as a particular kind of hell.

Let's begin by saying I have my own challenges with call centers. I'm aggravated beyond words by the cheerful voice

lady who demands a dozen different pieces of information so she can send me to the “right” attendant, but then, after I’ve repeated the information over and over at ever increasing volume, she sends me along to the “right attendant” without sending along any of the information I already gave her. So it’s easy to be mad as hell before you’re even put in the queue to wait on interminable hold along with probably hundreds of other people listening to toneless, clangy music that doesn’t blend well with the Mozart sonata I’m trying to hear on my end of the queue.

Let’s be clear. The person who actually answers the phone isn’t in charge of the pre-recorded announcement. She didn’t create the answering system that takes my information and then sends it into the ethers without a trace. She didn’t establish the hiring and staffing policies that determine how many people are on the job at any given time, and she most CERTAINLY isn’t in charge of the weather!

She’s not stupid--as she’s been called, and she’s not doing her best to destroy every irate customer’s holiday season, either. Her job at the call center is the right one for her at the moment, because she can leave it behind when she turns off her phone and walks away. As a widowed mother with a four year old, she needs that--a job that stays on the job when she goes home to be a mommy.

Christmas comes along on the same day of the year EVERY SINGLE YEAR! Those of us who dither around and don’t do our ordering in a timely fashion are . . . well . . . late! And even when we order on time, there are still unforeseen circumstances

that cause difficulties. The people who answer the phones-- finally--really are there to help us. Yes, I find myself yelling at the babe with the unfailingly cheerful voice because she doesn't usually pay any attention. But when I finally reach the human at the far end of the queue, I take a few deep breaths and put on my own unfailingly cheerful voice.

After all, it might be a good idea to remember why you're ordering all those presents in the first place. Put a little holiday cheer in your voice to say nothing of the milk of human kindness. And if your presents don't arrive until the 26th or even the 29th--as ours did last year--I can assure you, it isn't the end of the world. After all, I'm still here, aren't I?

