

J.A. Jance 2011 Blogs

Speaking My Mind On Various Subjects

January 7, 2011

When my mother hit seventy-five she decided it was time to stop helping my father do roofing. When she hit age eighty, she turned off her self-editing program. From then on, she spoke her mind in what can only be described as "Damn the torpedoes; full speed ahead!!" format.

I'm quite a bit younger than she was at her end-of-roofing moment. Last week I heard on the news that all of those mysterious "auto acceleration incidents"--times when cars take off like shots and won't respond to brake pedals--have involved "people of a certain age." I hesitate to use the word "elderly," because, from where I'm sitting, "elderly" is getting younger every day.

This past week, a friend who is an official "baby boomer" did something so dumb you'd think she was a blonde. (She isn't.) She stepped out of her car, with the engine running and with the vehicle not only in gear but also parked on a hill. The car rolled back. She was knocked flat by the open car door. She rolled under the car and managed to avoid being run over by her SUV's very big wheels. She emerged from under the vehicle somewhat bruised and with her ego seriously battered. We're telling her she was a victim of a self-inflicted Hit and Roll, which is a log like a Hit and Run only slightly different.

So today I'm going to do a self-inflicted Walk the Plank, and I'm sure the blog police will be in full outrage mode. So be it! I have no doubt you'll be seeing their names below in the P.I. City Brights comment section.

Yesterday I was struck by several items in the same newscast. On the one hand, our governor was announcing how due to budget limitations, the losses suffered by the state ferry system can no longer be handled by the state. (I have a feeling that at some time in the long, long ago, someone in Olympia decided that privately owned ferries needed to go in favor of STATE-owned ferries. Oops, there goes competition and the rest you know!) So okay, according to her, the ferry system now has to be the responsibility of local governments. But local communities aren't responsible for state HIGHWAYS. And if HIGHWAYS aren't money-losing propositions, I don't know what is! (By the way, in case you're wondering Tolls are coming! to highways and bridges near you!)

Okay, I get it, but on the same day she's trying to shift responsibility for the ferries away from Olympia and her desk, someone else is busily signing a contract to dig a TUNNEL under Seattle for Highway 99. Okay, if we can't afford the ferry system we already have, why on earth are we digging a tunnel a lot of us actually DON'T WANT and all of

us CAN'T AFFORD? The figure that sticks in my head is 1.1 BILLION to dig that tunnel. Let's do what families do when things get tough--you don't do what you can't afford. That amount of money would do a lot to wipe away the deficit from the ferries. Oh, wait. What did you say? That's in a different budget category and it can't be changed? Who made up the categories? Did you say bureaucrats? Then, how about changing bureaucrats? How about stopping the shell game of cutting "essential" services while hiding and funding "inessential programs."

On the same day the grim-faced Madame Governor appeared on TV regretting the loss of jobs for teachers, she turned up in another spot announcing her plan to install a new "director" of education. If this were on a federal level, we would call this new position and department a Czar of Education and I'm expecting the announcement of a Tolls Czar at any moment. (Russia had it up to here with Czars in the early 20th century. Why we in the US are suddenly being plagued with them in the early 21st century is more than I can understand!)

So okay, a new director of education. But wait. Don't we already have a voter ELECTED!! and constitutionally mandated Superintendent of Public Instruction? That guy comes with a department and a budget and a whole set of bureaucrats. So would the new czar with another whole line in the budget, and not one dime of that expense would go to actually TEACH kids!! NOT ONE THIN DIME!! See my suggestion above about the ferry system versus the tunnel? If we can't afford what we already have, why start something new???

Before you decide I hate teachers, let me say straight out that I don't. I can name every teacher I ever had in Bisbee, Arizona. In elementary school, Mrs. Kelly taught me to read. (Go Dick and Jane!) In second grade Mrs. Spangler taught me to read FOR FUN--big difference. In third grade Mrs. Gilbert taught me to write in cursive. (Now they learn that in Kindergarten!) In fourth, Mrs. Dye taught me to do long division--and then she actually died. I have no idea what took her, but I've always suspected that our class as a whole was a killer.) In fifth grade Miss Stamer taught me to love Chicago and Studebakers. In sixth Mrs. Watkins taught me to do out-lining--and I have hated it ever since. Mr. Norton, Mr. Goodson, and Mr. Rosette--the three men who taught seventh and eighth grades--gave me a life-time's aversion to baseball by forcing us to sit in the auditorium every October to watch the ENTIRE World Series on a tiny, green-tinted black and white TV set. My favorite words in baseball were then and are still: No runs, no hits, no errors, and nobody left on base. That announcement meant we were one step closer to the end of the game. In eighth grade Mrs. Hennessey taught me to love the Arizona constitution--and then she died, too, that very summer. (See Mrs. Dye above. Our class really was bad news!)

In high school, Mrs. Riggins taught me how to write a lead sentence for a newspaper article. Mrs. Eva (Hell's Bells you Hounds!) Medigovich taught us the niceties of English grammar. Mr. Guerra taught Latin and was the first person who made me realize that I might be smart enough to go on to college. Miss Shreve taught us the simple elegance of diagramming sentences. In full Mississippi drawl, Miss Reavis made me understand

the beauty captured in The Ode to a Grecian Urn. Mr. Biba taught me to love American history. More important he taught me to TYPE!--a skill I have used more than anything else I learned in high school or college. In fact, I'm using it right this minute.

These were teachers. People. Back then they interacted with students without a lot of hand-wringing and without puppet-masters from elsewhere getting between them and what was being taught. Which included Huck Finn, by the way. Don't even get me started on that!! Mark Twain wrote about what was true at that time--when a poor white kid was automatically the "better" of a black man. He used the language of the time to point out that injustice, and in a way set us on the road to changing things. Drubbing the N-word out of the book is a whole lot like skipping the chapter on the Holocaust in World War II. We'll just say it didn't happen, and maybe it'll go away.

So let's hear it for Mark Twain. And let's hear it for my mother.

I want to be just like her when I grow up.

Tragedy in Tucson

January 12, 2011

Tragedy in Tucson for the Washington Post

For forty plus years, December 20, 1970, has stood as the day of infamy for Tucson, Arizona. Shortly after midnight that December night, the first emergency calls came in announcing there was a fire at the Pioneer Hotel, an internationally acclaimed hotel in downtown Tucson. When the fire was out, 28 people had lost their lives and another 29 were injured. A sixteen year old juvenile, thought to be a "firebug" was later convicted of setting the fire, even though all these years later, he's still in prison and still proclaims his innocence.

In the days that followed the fire, it seemed as though life in Tucson had ground to a halt. We were stunned; we were shocked; we were horrified. And in the years that followed, the fire that gutted the hotel also gutted Tucson's downtown mercantile base which, until then, had been a thriving area for upscale shoppers. The stores that had once been such a draw--Steinfeld's, Jacome's, and Levy's went away. In fact, Harold and Margaret Steinfeld died during the fire in the bedroom of their penthouse unit in the hotel that had been built by Harold's father. Forty years later, the city of Tucson still suffers from the loss of that vibrant downtown commercial core.

Last Saturday, the Pioneer Hotel fire was eclipsed by the shocking shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and the people who had come to see her at a Congress on Your Corner event outside a Safeway store in northwest Tucson. I have to salute those brave citizens who stepped up to save their loved ones and others, including Congresswoman Giffords, from the alleged shooter, a troubled young man named Jared Loughner.

I had to remind myself that he's "innocent until proven guilty," so I went back and put in that word "alleged" even though he was captured at the scene by several senior citizens who disarmed him and wrestled him to the ground.

I'm not going to go over all the details here. We've all heard them and seen them, playing in an endless loop on local and national TV. It was a day for unexpected heroism from people who got up that morning with no grasp that the day's events would change their lives forever.

At this point, it appears that the heroic emergency surgical measures taken by doctors and nurses at Tucson's University Medical Center have saved Congresswoman Giffords's life, but there's no knowing if or when she'll be able to resume her duties. Our hearts go out to her, to her family, and to all the other families of victims of this senseless act. But there's another potential victim here--the American way of life.

Before leaving Washington to come home to Tucson last weekend, Congresswoman Giffords participated in reading the Constitution aloud in United States House of Representatives. The passage she read aloud, the first amendment, reads as follows: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Within minutes of the shooting, people began opining that "right wing rhetoric" was the cause of the shooting and calling for some of those voices to be silenced. I'm sorry. I personally believe that there's far too much ugly rhetoric on both sides of the political spectrum, but a knee-jerk reaction that takes away our citizen's civil rights is not the solution. Some are saying the only solution to keeping guns out of the hands of potentially crazed killers is to keep guns out of everybody's hands. Doing that will mean one thing: The bad and the crazy guys will have guns; the good guys won't.

Today President and Mrs. Obama will fly to Tucson to speak at a memorial service for Saturday's victims. When the Pioneer Hotel burned down, with a far greater loss of life, the president did not come to town. The fire occurred long before the 24-hour news cycle which now makes all news local news.

As I've watched the coverage and the posturing in both directions, I've found myself wondering if part of what pushed this troubled young man over the edge could have been seeing the extensive coverage of the school board shooting in Florida about a month ago. The coverage is reminiscent of what the nation saw in the aftermath of the shooting of President Kennedy or the Oklahoma City Bombing, yet, no one seems to be suggesting that we turn off news coverage. In fact, at this very moment there may be other troubled people out there in TV-land who are watching the Tucson coverage and wondering, secretly, if maybe they could do one better.

So no, I'm not advocating shutting down right or left wing talking heads. And I'm not suggesting abridging freedom of the press, either. Our elected officials need to be protected, but setting up "gun free zones" isn't the solution.

Instead of yelling at the right or the left, I think it's high time the entire nation had an in-depth conversation about how we treat the mentally ill.

In the name of political correctness, we've mainstreamed them. We've "protected" their rights, but at what cost? We've put them on the streets without their meds or left them in isolation to be dealt with by their families, often with very little help from society at large.

Look at the statistics on deaths related to domestic violence. How many wives and children and parents have died at the hands of a crazed spouse or former spouse or a disaffected child when the dead victims had properly drawn court-ordered restraining orders well in hand? Most of those people died, knowing that they and their loved one had both needed help and that no one was willing to give it. Jered Loughner's parents knew he had problems, but they had no resources to deal with their troubled son.. Local law enforcement officials knew he was troubled, but they couldn't do anything, either, not until it was too late and the damage was done.

NAMI, the National Association for the Mentally Ill is out there, and they're doing good work, but they're doing it on their own. Let's invite some of them to join the talking heads on television. Let's try to figure out how do we can keep troubled people from gaining access to weapons without depriving citizens at large of their rights?

I do have some skin in this game. After all, I'm a public person. Who's to say that some nutcase somewhere won't read a passage in one of my books and decide that I've been listening in on the voices in his head. He might well determine that it's time to come to one of my public appearances to take me out.

If that should ever happen, I can only hope there will be a few members of this country's Greatest Generation available in the audience to render assistance.

Confessions of an Artifact

January 21, 2011

Years ago, a friend of ours, a daunting woman well into her eighties, went to Kentucky to visit the museum that had once been her ancestral home. She told us the people there treated her as the "chief artifact." In recent months I've enjoyed the television series, Warehouse 13, where artifacts, when left to their own devices, can manage to get themselves and others into a lot of trouble. So, today, I'll be dealing with life from the perspective of an artifact.

A few weeks ago, at a family dinner, my grandson brought me a picture he had drawn of his mother, yellow hair and all. (Blonde isn't quite inside the parameters of his five-year-old vocabulary, and I can promise you that as the five-year old gets older, his mother's "yellow hair" is going to change!) But I asked him that night, "Do I have yellow hair like your Mommy?" He put his little thinking finger next to his eye, squinted up at me, and said. "No, G. Your hair is mostly white." Bummer!

Then last week I heard that the State Department had decided to remove the words Father and Mother from passport applications in favor of the words, Parent # 1 and Parent # 2. Okay. I get it. All families aren't alike. In second grade, after his father's death, my son had a meltdown at school during a class project when the kids were supposed to be making gifts for their fathers in honor of Father's Day. I think it's likely that my son was the only kid in his second grade classroom whose father had permanently "left the premises." The same was true for my daughter who was in fourth grade at the time. And it's most certainly true for my grandson in his kindergarten class where this past year's Day of the Dead celebration brought on a similar little boy meltdown. But just because our family is different from the norm doesn't mean that all mention of Father's Day needs to be scrubbed from our lives or everybody else's lives, especially in this day and age when fathers can be absent from family life for any number of complicated reasons.

I am well aware that there are some non-traditional families out there, loving families with "two mothers" or "two fathers," for whom those old terms don't exactly apply. For them, having the option of Parent # 1 or Parent # 2 might be helpful. But what about the rest of us? How do you decide which one of your parents is Parent # 1? I can think of any number of people, my mother in particular, who might not take kindly to being arbitrarily stuffed into the slot of second banana since she was the Commander in Chief on the home front, ordering us to do what needed to be done--dishwashing, housecleaning, rug shaking, blind dusting--while, at the same time, maintaining order and discipline by means of a deftly wielded flyswatter. What happens if the state department wants to know Parent # 2's maiden name when the person you've put in that slot happens to be a man who didn't have a maiden name because he wasn't ever . . . well . . . a maiden? Or what happens if the parents who are on the job turn out to be grandparents of children whose real parents bailed on the job?

So I was relieved this morning to read in the paper that the State Department has now reconsidered that idea. The words Father and Mother will remain, and use of Parent # 1 and Parent # 2 will be optional. Okay I can live with that.

But now we come to my most recent artifact difficulty. If you are reading this, it's most likely printed the way I typed it--with two spaces at the end of every sentence. Period!! Two spaces. This week I read a piece by a possibly age-challenged young man who turned a holiday family dinner on end by declaring that all sensible people put only one space at the end of each sentence not two.

His claim is that the two space tradition is a holdover from the old days, prior to the hot type Linotype printing process, when each letter or character was a separate piece of metal. The Linotype machine--basically a "line of type" was invented in the the 1880s by a man named Morganthaler. It allowed for hot metal to be poured into molds and then shot out into a slug, one line at a time. That also allowed for the process of kerning--of putting the letters closer together in a more pleasing and less jumpy fashion. And since the letters in the words went together more smoothly, the Linotype machine was the beginning of the end of the two-space end of sentence rule. The man was surprised by how vocal and determined the two-space people were in clinging to their, to hear what he considered to be out-moded beliefs and practices.

I remember that Miss Franklin, the typing teacher at Bisbee High School, was getting up there in age. I hate to think she was so old that she predated Linotype machines, but I can tell you, she was a tigress when it came to two spaces at the end of each sentence. Come to think of it, the typewriters in that class also predated the IBM Selectrics which were, to my knowledge, the commonly available typewriter capable of kerning.

I have it on good authority that most Linotype machines along with IBM Selectrics went the way of the buggy whip in the Seventies and Eighties. I remember how, back in the early sixties when my good friend Pat McAdams Hall and I were serving as co-editors of our high school newspaper, *The Copper Chronicle*, we would take our copy to the *Brewery Gulch Gazette* and watch in utter fascination as the words on the pages came out as steaming pieces of metal, cooling on a tray.

None of that happens any more, probably not even at the *Brewery Gulch Gazette*. The digital era has changed everything.

As for me? I'm still putting two spaces at the end of EVERY sentence. What the printers in New York do with my manuscripts after I finish with them is entirely up to them. They probably grumble about that nutty lady from out on the West Coast who is always throwing too many spaces around.

So go ahead. Call me an artifact if you want to. I am one, white hair and all. (And, you'll notice, there are two spaces at the end of that sentence as well!)

PS: My next book, Fatal Attraction, Ali # 6, goes on sale on February 1. For details on the book tour schedule, please visit my website, www.jajance.com. E-books are convenient, but they aren't easy to sign. If you're interested in obtaining an autographed Fatal Attraction book mark, please send a request for a signature and any personalization along with an SASE to J. A. Jance, P.O. Box 766, Bellevue, WA 98009.

Please be patient. Due to my travel schedule it may take a little while for those requests to catch up with me.

Separation Anxiety

January 28, 2011

Years ago--and I mean lots of years ago, when I was in high school--I read a short story called "A Period of Adjustment." (Note, this is NOT the Tennessee Williams play of the same name.) In the story, a woman wakes up, sneaks out of bed, trying to not awaken her husband in the process. For the next half hour or so, she tries to escape the wrath of her homicidal husband long enough to get to the kitchen and make coffee. It turns out, once the guy has that first cuppa Joe in the morning, that awful Mr. Hyde turns right back into that nice Dr. Jekyll.

And why am I thinking about "A Period of Adjustment?" Because that's what we're in right now--a period of adjustment. The book tour starts on Tuesday. We have to leave on Monday in order to make a 6 AM Tuesday live (relatively live anyway) appearance in Phoenix on the local NBC affiliate. (Question to self: Does anyone actually WATCH TV at six AM?)

Pre-trip blues usually fall under the heading of "separation anxiety." Years ago when Boney, my half German Shepherd/half Irish Wolfhound pound puppy, came down with a full blown case of separation anxiety, he ate in the following order: a: a rubber plant down to the roots; b: my daughter's Ray-Ban sunglasses; and c: my checkbook. (Guess which one upset me the most?)

So we're having a case of separation anxiety in our house--two cases, actually, my husband's and mine. We do not go into full homicidal rage mode here, but things do get a little tense, especially since Bill and I have two different ways of coping with the same malady. For one, he starts packing days in advance. I pack the morning we leave. Bella, our purse dog, doesn't have to worry about separation anxiety because she won't know we're leaving until we put her in the car. Daphne, our aging golden retriever who DOESN'T go on book tours, will be mad at us the moment she sees the first suitcase come out of the closet, but I have a feeling she'll be more than happy once Bella is out of the way and not stealing food out of the Big Dog Dish.

When the suitcases are packed, Bill will be the one putting them in the trunk of the car. I never have and never will load a trunk in a fashion that meets with his special trunk-packing specifications.

In a way, it's a lot like that woman trying to live long enough to make her husband's first cup of coffee. Once we hit the road, however, and once we have our first road-trip BurgerKing Whopper Junior, we'll be in full book touring mode and all will be forgiven.

If you're interested in where we're going, check the schedule listings on www.jajance.com. And you can look forward to having a new edition of Tales and Tails from the Road.

Stay tuned.

Tales of Tails from the Trail

February 4, 2011

Bella, our little rescue long-haired dachshund, has definitely been earning her kibble this week. She's been off on the book tour with us, and believe me, she's the star. Usually at events one or two people will ask to take a photo. With Bella front and center, it's been more like the paparazzi on the trail with a dozen or so cameras going off at once. Bella is happy to pose for the cameras and regards this as little more than her just due.

I've been using her and her rags-to-riches story as the "warm-up" act on my tour. (If you've been following the weather reports, you know it's been freakishly cold in Phoenix this week. And, as of last night, we even had a broken water pipe in Tucson. This is NOTHING compared to what other parts of the country are enduring, but for notorious weather wimps, pardon me if I whine.)

While in Phoenix, we've been staying at the Ritz on Camelback. On the 8th floor of the Ritz on Camelback. When we found Bella in mid-October, lost on a street in Bellevue with no tag and no chip, there was no way to tell what her history was. This week in Phoenix has unearthed part of her story. We suspected she was an apartment dog because when she first landed with us, the concept of "pet doors" was beyond her pay-grade. She had to be let out. She had to be on a leash. (She's better now. If we're in a fenced yard, all we have to do is CARRY the leash. It doesn't actually have to be connected to the dog. All of which means that old humans can also learn new tricks.)

But now we know for sure that Bella was an apartment dog in a multi-story building. I've been with dogs, more specifically with two golden retrievers and a half German shepherd/half Irish wolfhound, the first time THEY met an elevator (at the Holiday Inn in Sacramento.) They went NUTS. It was a very memorable ride. Bella, looking as if she owned the place, marched across the lobby of the Ritz on her leash, stopped in front of what looked like a wall, waited until it opened, got on, turned around, waited for the wall to open again, and got off. As our grandson would say, "Easy Peasy.") No drama.

Oh, and by the way, yesterday the concierge from the hotel showed up at our door with some tiny Milk-Bones and a pink and gray doggy coat for guess who!!

I suspect that somewhere in the Seattle area there is some "little old lady" who is still grieving the loss of this little red ball of fluff. I'm sure whoever dumped the dog we call Bella on 116th in Bellevue that chilly and rainy October day, claimed that the dog had "run away." That is an outright lie. She was dumped, and she was chasing after the car that put her out as fast as her tiny brown legs could carry her! The dumper also may have told Bella's former owner that he "found her a good home." That is undeniably true!!

So if you know that grieving lady, please let her know that her "little brown dog" is fine. And that she's with people who love her.

And now for a change of pace. For years people wrote to me complaining that, because the Sugarloaf Cafe was fictional, they were sorry they couldn't ever have a taste of a Sugarloaf Cafe Sweet Roll. Finally when enough requests rolled in, my son Tom created a recipe which is posted on the website. All you have to do is click on the page called Sugarloaf Cafe. By the way, Chaffin's, an old-style family diner in Tucson, now makes Sugarloaf Cafe Sweet Rolls, too.

Then people started requesting Butch Dixon's Green Chili Casserole. Here's a secret about Butch's Green Chili. It was actually my mother's recipe. For years she cooked three meals a day for NINE people without benefit of a microwave or a freezer or anything other than a biological dishwasher. For her a one dish meal was the answer to a mother's prayer. So we were big on casseroles in our family, and those dishes have somehow made their way into my books. You'll find the recipe for Butch's Green Chili Casserole on the same web page as the Sugar Loaf Cafe Sweet Rolls. (Yes, I know it's the wrong series, but if you have recipes on more than one page on a website, it's too confusing.)

Now people have started asking for Edie Larson's favorite comfort food, the one she brings to the ill and the grieving. Yup. It turns out that her Tuna Casserole is a lot like my mother's Tuna Casserole, the real recipe of which has been lost in the passage of time. As a consequence, Chef Thomas, has once again stepped up to the plate and created a recipe of which both my mother Evelyn and the fictional Edie Larson could be proud. If this part of the blog is posted, that means the recipe is also now on the website.

For those of you who may still be snowbound somewhere in the US of A, maybe a batch Edie Larson's Tuna Casserole will make passable if not perfect Superbowl Fare if you can't get out to a store. Since it's made with stuff that was usually available in my mother's pantry, those same items are probably lurking somewhere in your cupboards, too.

So Bon Appetit, and before I forget it, GO GREEN BAY!!!

More Tales from the Trail

February 11, 2011

After spending the first five days of the Fatal Error tour as "Doggie Artist in Residence" at the Ritz-Carlton at Camelback and Broadway in Phoenix, we were scheduled to fly from Tucson to Seattle on Tuesday afternoon. For us flying is always a challenge, especially since we travel with a stack of electronic equipment, a husband with two bionic knees, and a dog. When Bella flies, she travels in a style in a roll-aboard soft dog crate that fits under the seat in front of us. And because she's such a low-profile dog,

we have a bell on her collar so we know when she's behind us. At airports, TSA requires that the dog has to be carried through security, and the collar with the bell has to come off, too.

To go through security, we have a little slip-on leash. While Bill and I were busy loading our gear onto the X-ray belt, Bella somehow slipped out of her slip-on leash, leaped out of her roll-aboard, and took off! Through security. Beside security, actually. She ran right past the security guy's ankles. That meant she was on one side of security, and I was on the other. I knew that if I went racing through security after her, that would most likely create a "security breach" and the whole airport would be shut down. Meanwhile, she was headed down the B-Concourse at the approximate speed of light.

All I could do was stand there yelling, "Bella! Bella! Bella." And then a miracle happened. She turned around and came racing back. Came racing right up to me, through the proper security exit by the way.

Considering we've only had her for three months, I think it's pretty amazing that she has bonded with us enough to come back when I called.

Right now she's asleep in her bed--a FurCedes--that was a Christmas present. Listen, being on tour is hard work for people and for puppies, but it's working. We heard last night that Fatal Error will debut at # 6 on the NYTimes List. Hooray!!!

Thank you to all the early bird fans out there who made that possible. I thank you, and Bella thanks you.

Welcome Home

February 18, 2011

If you're expecting this blog update to be witty, good luck!! We're back home from the tour, and I'm way too tired to be witty. Bella, the book tour wonder dog, is tired, too, but she has the good sense to be sound asleep. Obviously I don't.

Tomorrow I'm scheduled to go back to Topawa on the reservation. I haven't been back there since 1973 when I ended my career as a school librarian. A few months ago, I heard from someone who remembered me from those days who said that my introducing him to the Beverly Cleary books in third grade had made a lifetime reader of him. I'm hoping Titus Nez will be there.

Of course, the weather people are saying it's supposed to rain on the Tohono O'odham Nation tomorrow. And maybe it will. The skies in Tucson are already overcast, but desert dwellers generally greet the rain with a good deal of enthusiasm. In fact, I remember one grade school principal, a man who hailed from Iowa, complaining that the kids on the reservation went nuts when it rained.

I'm expecting to see some people I know, but I also know that a lot of the people from back then, people my age and younger, are no longer with us. The scourge of diabetes continues to take a terrible toll among the Tohono O'odham as well as among many other native peoples.

A few weeks back, someone wrote to me asking if the Tohono O'odham people minded that I was "profiteering" from their culture. First off, let me assure you that I'm a full-blooded Big Toe Indian. What that means in reservation parlance is that I have so little Indian blood that only my big toe is actually Indian. In my case, the amount of Indian blood would be zero. Nevertheless, I believe that in my Walker Family books, I've treated the Indian characters with respect and genuine affection without sneering at their belief systems which, despite hundreds of years of Anglo interference, continue to be an important part of the fabric of reservation life.

Maybe that's just me. Maybe when I go back to Topawa tomorrow, I'll find that I'm treated as an unwelcome interloper, but I doubt it. I have it on good authority that there will be plenty of popovers and red chili. Sounds like a party to me.

Stay tuned.

Topawa

February 20, 2011

Yesterday, after an absence of forty years, I went home to the reservation. There were some visible changes I didn't expect. Income from casinos means that roads that weren't paved back then are paved now. What used to be a small building called "Law and Order" is now the Tohono O'odham Corrections Center. It's a large complex, complete with razor wire on top of the fence. Right next to it is the construction site of what is evidently a new playground. The Tohono O'odham Cultural Museum didn't exist back then, but it does now, and it's a wonderful facility. The elementary school at Topawa is now shuttered. I doubt there are any nuns still living in the convent there, and it looked as though the mission itself has been abandoned.

The schools where I was once the librarian are different. What was a K-12 facility in 1968, is now K-6 only. Middle school students now attend Baboquivari Middle School which was once Baboquivari High School, and a new high school has been constructed near Topawa. To my surprise, the buildings that were always called "portables" evidently were portable. They have been moved and are now being utilized as a temporary campus for the Tohono O'odham Community College. Yesterday's celebration was actually a fundraiser to build a permanent campus for the community college.

Casino money aside, however, it's clear that many of the people still exist in an atmosphere of grinding poverty. Some things never change.

I was nervous about going back. When I taught there with my first husband, we lived in a rented house on a ranch near Three Points and commuted sixty miles a day. We thought that was an outrageous commute. In the five years we were there, it snowed exactly once, enough to close school for one day, and for us a "heavy traffic" day was getting caught behind the school bus at Little Tucson. Oh, and when there were cattle crossing the road.

There are some little hills just to the east of Sells. Every morning as my first husband and I drove over that little pass and into Sells proper, I felt this sense that I was an interloper--as though I didn't really belong there. Yesterday, when Bill, Bella, and I drove into town, I no longer felt that way. And when we got to the cultural center south of Topawa and I smelled the cook fires, I felt as though I was home again after a long absence.

When I was on the reservation, working as a librarian, I told 26 stories a week in K-6 classrooms. On storytelling days, I often wore a bright green dress. Book covers don't reveal how tall I am--close to six foot one--and when I came to tell stories, I was there for one reason--to have fun. It's hardly surprising that the kids called me "the Jolly Green Giant." They still do, and I guess I still am.

One of the things I always appreciated was the essential humor of the Tohono O'odham people, where joking and easy laughter are a way of life. Upon our arrival I told a woman I met in the parking lot that I had to wait for my husband because he was a "milghan and didn't know what he was doing." We both laughed about that, and the sense that I really was "back home" slipped onto my shoulders like a warm down coat.

When we arrived, Bella and I went around greeting the various people who were already there and waiting. Using a ramp to step down into the area where people were sitting, I realized that we were stepping into a concrete maze, and we used the proper maze path to reach the center--the place where the people were seated. When I introduced Bill, he was my "new" husband as far as the reservation was concerned, even though we've been together more than twenty-five years.

The official festivities started with a smoke ceremony, with a medicine man using feathers to wave the smoke in the four different directions. One of my friends with Lakotah Sioux connections had asked me to add two names to the "smoke highway to heaven." The blessing was given in Tohono O'odham. The only word I recognized was "librarian." I knew they were blessing me, and I felt free to add those two names on my own.

The blessing ceremony was followed by a group of native singers and dancers. The leader asked that no photos be taken during the first dances, the cultural part of the dancing, but that photos would be fine during the "social dancing" part of the program. And when we were invited to join in, I did--I went back down to the maze and joined the circle.

One of my purposes in writing the Walker Books was the hope of making that reservation experience understandable to Anglos who might never set foot on the reservation--to let them know that the ancient beliefs and culture are still there, alive and well, despite centuries of Anglo interference. A good number of my Anglo fans made the trek from Tucson to Topawa yesterday, and some of them stepped into the circle dance with me. That made my heart sing. My knee is another matter. Once you step into the circle, you STAY in the circle until the dance is over. My knee is still mad at me this morning, but it was worth it.

Then I spoke to the people gathered there. In the audience was one of the women who once worked with me as my library aide. The daughter of migrant workers, Melissa Juan had to get her GED in order to get a job in the school. Because she wanted to set a different example for her kids, she wanted to try taking university classes. I helped her enroll and make her way through freshman English. Yesterday Melissa was there with her daughter--a college graduate herself--who was once the tribal chairwoman and who is once again running for that office. I helped Melissa set a different example for her kids and yesterday she returned the favor with the gift of a friendship pot--a pot that depicts people, hands joined, dancing in a circle.

After passing her freshman English course, Melissa enrolled in a special teaching training program that required her to become a classroom aide as opposed to working in the library. For the next three years, Pauline Hendricks served as my library aide. When I left the reservation, Pauline presented me with an owl basket, made of bear grass and yucca, that I have treasured over the years. She told me at the time, "If you can't make it with your own tribe, you can always come back here." I took the owl with me to Topawa yesterday as part of show-and-tell.

Pauline is gone now, a victim of diabetes, but her daughter, Viann, was in the audience and brought me another bear grass and yucca basket to add to my collection.

The man I mentioned in Friday's blog, Titus Nez, the third-grader from back then who learned to love reading by coming to my library was there as well. For a librarian, there is no higher praise than to know you have helped create a life-long love of reading.

After the talk, I signed books. For over an hour. As fast as I could sign. It turns out that, by the time the signing was done, they had run out of popover dough, so I had to settle for a red chili burrito. (Not a hardship, believe me.)

So today is Sunday. We're in recovery mode. Tomorrow it's back to the book and back to the writing part of writing.

Sounds of Silence

February 25, 2011

This feels like being in a decompression chamber. But it's also another kind of pressure.

For right now, we've stepped away from all the meeting and greeting, and it's time to do the other part of the writer's job which is . . . well . . . writing.

There are no shortcuts. The butt has to be in the chair; the fingers have to be on the keyboard; the mind has to be fully engaged.

On the road, people often ask me if writing gets easier over time. The answer to that is as follows: NOT REALLY!!!

Characters are sometimes slippery. They can behave like recalcitrant teenagers on occasion, in that they don't always do and/or say what is expected of them. And plots can be equally elusive. What if the person you expect to be the guilty party just doesn't have enough get-up-and-go to be the bad guy you need when you need it to happen?

In other words, not only is the author not always right, s/he is sometimes hopelessly wrong.

So forgive me for giving short shrift to blogging today. Right now I'm lost in Ali Reynolds's world, even though this morning I had a long conversation with a publicist in New York where we did initial planning for this summer's Beaumont # 20 book tour.

Now I'd better get back to work. All kinds of deadlines are looming.

In Celebration of Charlie Sheen Week

February 28, 2011

It's Charlie Sheen Week because Charlie Sheen has declared it to be Charlie Sheen Week. He seems to be everywhere in the media this week, except working on the set of his hit TV show, the producers of which have now been officially declared the enemy.

First an admission. I've enjoyed the show *Two and a Half Men*. We were latecomers to the party, watching most of the episodes in two at a time rerun fashion in the early evening. That was a bit disconcerting since, Jake, played endearingly by Angus T. Jones, would be little kid in the seven PM show and would have morphed into a gawky teenager in the episodes that aired half an hour later, at seven-thirty. And it's not news to anybody, that the kid was being raised in a pretty dysfunctional family where almost all of the adults in question, from Grandma on down, behaved like bunch of spoiled brat kids.

Let's be clear here. We weren't just watching Charlie Sheen. We were also watching the very funny characters created by Jones, Conchata Ferrill and John Cryer, along with an ever changing cast of bimbos to say nothing of the St. John's wearing mother from hell, Holland Taylor

Considering my own personal history, including eighteen years with a man who died of chronic alcoholism at age forty-two, one would think I would have written the series off without ever watching a single episode. But *Two and a Half Men* has been my guilty pleasure. Yes, Charlie, the character, was a bad boy, but often, when the chips were down, he'd come through in a surprisingly realistic way. That's the problem with bad boys, by the way. They can be ever so charming. Until the charm runs out.

For me, the charm started going away when my first husband attempted to go off booze cold turkey in January of 1973. We were living out in the country. For days he played chess games with invisible opponents. He insisted there were federal agents hiding out at a waterhole near our home, listening to everything we said. We couldn't sleep with the lights off because invisible bugs crawled on him in the dark.

I know now that those were and are classic symptoms of DTs and that going through DTs without being under a doctor's care is very dangerous. It's a miracle that first bout with them didn't kill the man outright. In fact, it took another ten years. In 1982 another case of DTs, caused by his trying to sober up for his mother's Thanksgiving visit, finally killed him.

This season, with Charlie Sheen's real life troubles so much in the news, I've had a tougher time watching the series. And the scripts haven't seemed as good, either. Perhaps the writers saw that what they were writing was too close to the bone of what was really going on, and they lost heart, too. The fact that Charlie Sheen is now declaring that he's worth twice what he's been receiving at a paltry two million an episode must be pretty galling to the two hundred or so people who are now out of work because of his drugging, grandstanding, and general debauchery.

So far I've managed to dodge watching the interviews. I don't have the heart to listen to him blaming everybody but Charlie Sheen for Charlie Sheen's problems. It's too much like watching a car wreck. And for me it's all far too familiar.

I'd like for him to pull through and put his demons to rest, but I'm not holding out a lot of hope for a happy ending here--not for his family, not for the series, and not for Charlie Sheen, either.

Too bad.

Snowbird Crowing

March 4, 2011

This has been a challenging time to be a snowbird in Arizona. In February we had the coldest cold snap since they began keeping records in the 1880s. The plants around here were NOT happy. Prickly pear, especially, took a huge hit. The pads had enough water in them that, when it froze, the pads simply broke off.

Our fountain in Tucson froze. Pipes froze. Plumbing supply houses have been doing land office business. And a week ago, when the Match Play golf tournament hit the Dove Mountain Resort north of town, golfers and spectators alike had to be dressed to survive cold, wet weather. I'm sure people across the country looked at that and thought, "Wait a minute. That's what winter looks like in Arizona? I thought it was supposed to be warm in the winter."

But that's what LAST week's version of winter looked like in Arizona. Today, one week later, the people doing land office business are the plant nurseries. Today we planted our patio pots with geraniums, petunias, poppies, snap dragons, and whatever else looked good. In March in Arizona we put in all the plants that won't be available in Seattle until sometime in late April or even May.

So yes, sometimes it really does pay to be a snowbird. I think I'll go out on the patio for my cup of afternoon coffee.

Some of you may have suspected for a long time that I have a mean streak.

Now you know it for sure.

Tucson Festival of the Book

March 11, 2011

The third Tucson Festival of the Book is scheduled for this weekend. The view from here says it's going to be a perfect weekend. Maybe verging on hot. It's possible that bringing your own portable shade in the form of an umbrella wouldn't be a bad idea.

The visionary folks who took it upon themselves to make this happen need to be applauded. They found the venue (the University of Arizona mall during Spring Break); they located tons of volunteers and they brought in plenty of authors. They also brought in plenty of booksellers and food purveyors, to say nothing an army of folks who make sure trash cans NEVER overflow.

I've been to some book events where the booksellers were treated like a necessary evil. Not at this event. And I've been to events where the garbage proliferated.

Most of the weekend, I'll be doing back to back events. There are four scheduled speaking events in the course of the weekend as well as as many signings in the various book seller venues that time will allow.

So come and have fun. Bring your sunscreen, because you're most likely going to need it. If you bring your dog--this seems to be a very dog friendly event--bring your leash, your poop bags, and your own water dishes. And if you plan to buy lots of books, a roll-aboard piece of luggage wouldn't be a bad idea.

As Ed Sullivan would have said, let's have a really great show.

PS: Once the Festival here in Tucson is over, we'll be heading out again. There are events in Georgia and in Florida this coming week and in Southern California at the end of this week. Some of these have been added since the schedule was posted originally.

There will be additional California and Oregon events in the latter part of April, so if you checked the schedule before, you may want to check again.

Watch Out For What You Wish For

March 18, 2011

You have to watch out what you wish for.

Years ago, when I first moved to Washington, it seemed to me that I was always taking people to airports or picking people up from airports without ever going to airports myself. I longed for the time when I, too, would get on a plane and jet off to somewhere far away.

Guess what? I got my wish. And it's not always as nice as you might think it would be. This week I've stayed at a certified "green" hotel. That means, there are placards on the wall that advise me to reuse my towel if at all possible. No. I'm staying in a hotel. I will not reuse my hotel.

When I went to Germany and stayed in a youth hostel in 1965, I was astonished that what was supposed to pass for toilet paper felt more like . . . well . . . waxed paper. And the TP in that "green" hotel, took me right back to those bad old days.

In the movies, room service dining is always wonderful. At the green hotel, they saved money on napkins and silverware, by sending only one set of utensils for our two person breakfast order. And what supposedly passed for breakfast 'potatoes' might have been ground up newspaper. And we won't even TALK about what passed for coffee.

I'm in a better place now, the Hotel Indigo in Fort Myers, Florida where the weather is lovely, the food is better, and the service is great. But where I really want to be right this minute, is back home. With my own TV clicker and my dog, to say nothing of my Costco 12-roll package of Charmin.

Yes, you definitely have to watch out what you wish for.

Second One of the Second Batch

March 25, 2011

My parents had seven kids--three daughters born in South Dakota, followed by three sons and another daughter, all born in Bisbee, Arizona. My mother divided us into batches. I was the third one of the first batch. This week I'm thinking about my brother, Jim, the second one of the second batch.

He was the apple of my mother's eye. He was smart. He was mischievous. He was a rebel. Of all of us, he was the one capable of throwing the most amazing temper tantrums which my mother often ended by putting his head under the running water faucet in the bathtub. (Face down. Not REAL water-boarding, and not child abuse, either.)

As I said, Jim was smart. In terms of measurable IQ, he was probably off the charts, but he was also arrogant enough to point out to his teachers that he was smarter than they were which, although possibly true, was no way to play the game and get through college. So he didn't. Instead, he was drafted into the army, went to Vietnam, and spent most of his time overseas serving as an MP.

After years of working in the woods in Oregon, selling car parts in Globe, and insurance in Phoenix, he returned to Bisbee, taking a job as a firefighter in our home town so he could be close to his children who lived there with his first wife. Being back in Bisbee was a real blessing to my aging parents. He looked in on them often. If they had a flat tire in their carport, he came over and changed it. It was primarily due to his efforts that our parents were able to remain independent and in their own home for as long as they did.

Then disaster struck. In 2000, months after his fiftieth birthday and while on vacation in California with his new wife and step children, he went swimming in the ocean where he suffered a heart attack from an undiagnosed heart ailment. He was pulled from the water by a life guard, but despite all their life-saving efforts, Jim died.

For my aging parents his death came as a terrible blow. We went to Bisbee where the whole town opened their hearts to our family. The school administration allowed the use of the high school auditorium for the funeral, and 800 people showed up. What I learned in the course of Jim's "fallen officer memorial" provided the background that I used to create the fallen officer scenes in my Joanna Brady book, Damage Control.

And because those scenes were so real to me, they are real to my readers as well. They write and tell me about it.

So why am I thinking about Jim this week? It isn't his birthday. It isn't the anniversary of his death. It's something else, something someone sent me over the Internet.

People send lots of unsolicited things over the Internet. From the number of people who send me Maxine cartoons, I could easily develop a complex. Do those jokes about a woman of a certain age come a little too close for comfort? And then there are the people who send out endless political screeds. Pushing the delete button for those is almost second nature. And then there are the chain letters. (If you don't send this along to ten people in ten minutes, something bad will happen to you!) Buy Viagra--cheap, etc., etc., etc. Delete. Delete. Delete.

But this time someone sent me a real gift. It's a video of a quartet of tenors singing one of my favorite hymns, Amazing Grace, with the arches of the Roman Coliseum glowing in the background. Between the third and fourth verses of the beautifully rendered song, a solitary bagpiper plays a solo on a promontory in the spotlight background.

There was a bagpiper who played Amazing Grace at Jim's funeral. As I said, that was in 2000, the year before we as a nation attended countless fallen officer memorials. Since then I haven't been able to hear a bagpiper playing that melody without being transported back.

And so, this week, I'm honoring my brother by posting the address of that YouTube version of the song below. If you don't like hymns or if you don't happen to like bagpipers, you don't have to listen. The delete key is always available. But if you do listen, take a moment to remember how much of a comfort that song has been to grieving families over the years.

It was a comfort to me and to our whole family at Jim's funeral, and it still is for me. I'm grateful to the person who sent it to me earlier this week who helped me remember my "little brother."

Enjoy.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYMLMj-SibU>

Spring Break

April 1, 2011

It's Spring Break at Grandma's house. The pool is heated. The Noodles and pool toys have been liberated. We have a lifetime supply of sun block. We're keeping track of a whole list of arrivals and departures, some of which were changed to an earlier arrival due to last week's computer glitch at Alaska Airlines in Seattle.

We have all kinds of outings planned. So far we've done art work on the patio and played croquet and ping pong at the Arizona Inn. One trip will be to Hayhook Ranch, a race horse rescue ranch west of Tucson. We'll be blowing glass at the Sonora Glass Academy, and we'll be shopping for a prom dress. It should be fun. But this week is also touched by more than a little sadness.

Last week I wrote that my brother Jim died of an undiagnosed heart ailment. This week, one of our grand-dogs, a rescued Golden named Angel, died of the same thing.

Angel came into our daughter and son-in-law's life through the Academy of Canine Behavior. She had been despised and mistreated by her previous owner's husband who, swearing Angel was the dumbest dog he ever met, gave his wife of 27 years a choice--him or Angel. Luckily for Angel, the woman chose him. Colleen McDaniel at the Academy, knowing that Jon and Jeanne T. were in the market for a second golden to keep their first one company, trained Angel first (turned out she wasn't dumb after all.) Then she called Jeanne T. and Jon and asked if they were interested. They were.

Angel evidently started life at a puppy mill where in order to keep from starving she had some eating disorders which meant she ate mostly everything that got near her--except when her vet recommended she be put on a diet of very expensive Elder Care Dog food. That's where she and Kens drew the line and both of them went on a serious hunger strike. Eventually the vet admitted it was no use and the dogs went back to their customary diet.

When Angel appeared in our family she was petrified of men. It was months before Jon could convince her that he wasn't going to hurt her. That was about the time that her plumy golden tail finally emerged from between her legs. When Colt came along, Kensie and Angel both came running to let Jeanne T. know that the baby was crying and needed attention.

During the months when Jon was in the hospital losing his battle with melanoma, the two dogs kept vigil, too, spending hours a day stowed in their traveling dog house, an aging Suburban, parked in the garage at University Hospital. We have a series of family photos which year after year show Colt getting bigger and Kensie and Angel getting gradually grayer and smaller. Each morning, Angel would greet Colt with a joyous bark when he emerged from the bedroom. We used to joke about whether Colt would ever figure out that he was a boy and NOT a golden retriever.

This week, in advance of going to the Academy for a week's boarding during spring break, Angel went to the vet for a routine physical. Jeanne T. dropped her off at four and was to come back at six to pick her up. An hour or so later, the vet's office called to say there were "complications" and than Jeanne T. needed to come back immediately. During the physical, the vet had discovered what she thought was a heart murmur. When they tried to do an X-ray, without even putting Angel under anesthesia, the dog

went into cardiac arrest and couldn't be revived. The vet suspects that she had a fast growing tumor that affected her heart.

There are probably plenty of people out there who say, "So what? She was just a dog." With any kind of luck, those people don't have dogs.

And no, Angel wasn't "just a dog." She was part of the family that Jon and Jeanne T. forged in the face of an on-going family tragedy. For someone who is five, having a Daddy he barely remembers in heaven is one thing. Having his constant companion of five plus years go to heaven with no advance warning is something else.

And so, during Spring Break, while Kensie spends her solo time in Doggy Daycare at the Academy, Jeanne T. and Colt will be here with her brothers and sister and with Colt's cousins. Along with Spring Break sun block, we'll be applying megadoses of TLC.

Not that any of that will make them forget, but it might help make them feel better.

Spring Break Part 2

April 8, 2011

It's been a Spring Break circus at our house for the better part of two weeks with kids and grandkids checking in and out of our Tucson home. We've shopped for toys in the toy aisle, books in the bookstore, and bras in Grandma's favorite lingerie shop. We bought a single prom dress and had it altered in six days flat and ordered shoes to match with spectacular results. I am six one. In her prom dress and in three inch heels, my nose barely reaches my granddaughter's shoulder. I've never been this small!!

We've had dining experiences at home and out. (It's not easy finding places that can accommodate a group of 12 or 13 in a non banquet room facility. But we have prevailed.) We've also gone through countless bags of bagels, Cheerios, bananas, strawberries. Last year's favorite, grapes, are in disfavor this time around, and two big boxes of grapes are being studiously ignored.

We've had a trip to Equine Encore, a race horse rescue ranch outside of Tucson where our grandson fed immense Costco bags of carrots to sixty or so retired race horses. Today will be a visit to take dog treats to the local Humane Society, something we do in memory of Colt's other grandmother.

We've had a couple of casualties. Celeste's little toe got broken when her mother moved a patio chair on it. And spending days by the pool has caused some sun burn issues despite assiduous applications of sun block.

By far the most spectacular casualty was Grandma's latest attempt to go airborne. Those of you who have read this blog for awhile may remember that I'm something of an expert when it comes to pratfalls, and this one was a doozy. I had enlisted the help

of the older granddaughters in making dinner. The water for the pasta was on the stove. I had assembled the marinara sauce by dumping a bottle of Classico into a saucepan, adding several dollops of pesto, and three pounds of cut up barbecued steak.

The kitchen is large enough to allow for several cooks, but it has several pinch points. I was on my way to the stove with my two quart saucepan of marinara sauce in it, when I stumbled backward over an unexpected barrier--an eighty pound golden retriever. Daphne had settled down in one of the pinch points to watch the action, and she got far more action than she expected.

When you're as tall as I am, it takes a while to fall. You have time for your life to pass before your eyes, as it were. And in the process, I was totally aware of the load of tomato goo I was carrying in my left hand. As I stumbled backward across the now rising dog, I managed to do an acrobatic twist in the air so that when I did my three-point landing, it was face down on both knees and my right hand elbow. My left hand was still attached to the handle of that saucepan with something akin to a death grip. Through some miracle of physics, the loaded saucepan hit the floor flat, bottom-side-down!!! One hunk of tomato coated steak leaped out and landed on my wrist. Another landed on my right cheek. And my sunglasses landed in the saucepan!!

Long ago, while making Thanksgiving dinner, a pair of my sunglasses fell into the gravy pan. This was certainly reminiscent of that. As were the several non-grandmotherly words that escaped my lips. Bill and Jim, our son-in-law, helped get me back on my feet.

So Grandpa, one daughter, and the granddaughters finished dinner while I sat with ice on my various bruises. And I wasn't hurt badly enough to keep me from playing golf yesterday. (During Spring Break grandparents need a break, too!)

One guest left on Tuesday. Eight more leave today. One comes in. Two more leave tomorrow. The last one will leave on Monday.

I'm glad they came. It was fun. It was also tiring. But that's the wonderful thing about grandkids. Eventually they go home. With their parents.

And that's all there is to say about that.

Heading North

May 15, 2011

It's time to head north, doing signings along the way. How could snowbird season go so fast? But I know it's time. The palo verde outside the window is covered with bright yellow flowers most of which will manage to make it into the pool filter, stopping up same.

The January cold snap has left some of our plants fatally wounded. The lemon tree isn't coming back. I'll be surprised if the grapefruit tree makes it through. The coldest temperatures in 130 years have also taken their toll on prickly pear. The ones that are out in the desert--which is to say, naturally thirsty--seem to have survived mostly unscathed. But the ones that were used as landscape items had more water in their pads than was good for them. When the temperatures dropped into the teens and below, the water froze and the pads broke off. Many of them are still looking pretty desolate.

Last weekend it rained. That means that today the ocotillo are in full bloom. I think of all the desert plants, that's one of my favorites. Most of the year it looks like a bouquet of seven foot tall thorn covered sticks. When it rains, however, those long stickery stalks come to life. Within twenty four hours, green leaves pop out along the length of every branch, and the tips are covered with clumps of brilliant red flowers. (The flute shaped blossoms are especially popular with with hummingbirds.

Ocotillo are miraculous in that they shed their leaves and then leaf out again numerous times in the course of a year. None of this lazy spring and summer leaf shedding or blooming.

It was hot on the golf course today. It will NOT be hot on the golf course when we get back to Bellevue. Fortunately, we won't melt.

Doors To the Future

May 15, 2011

During the past few months I've participated in any number of public events to benefit libraries, and there's a reason for that. Libraries have always been an important part of my life.

During the endless summers in Bisbee, Arizona, the school library at Greenway School was open for business one day a week. I remember dragging my brother's Radio Flyer wagon, loaded with a week's worth of books, back and forth between home and school and then settling into the bunk bed with the luxury of a stack of books, waiting to be read.

By the time I hit eighth grade, however, the librarian was no longer a daily presence at the school library. During seventh and eighth grade, the school tried an experiment in a modified junior high program. During the mornings the classes moved from one classroom to another. In the afternoons we stayed in one place.

Our afternoon teacher was Mrs. Hennessey. It probably is indicative of our class's general misbehavior that 1958 was Mrs. Hennessey's last year of teaching. (Come to think of it, several other teachers called it quits once they were rid of us, but I digress.)

It turns out that I spent very little time in actual classrooms in 1957-58. In the mornings, I went around and collected attendance slips and delivered them to the principal's office. And in the afternoons, when I wasn't walking little kids home for Safety Patrol, I functioned as the school librarian. Which is to say, teachers brought their classes to the library. I sat at the desk and checked books out by stamping the date due on the card. I replaced the circulation cards when books came back, and I also shelved the books.

I'm not sure HOW I reshelved the books. I don't have any remembrance of dealing with the Dewey Decimal System at Greenway School. I do remember that picture books went on the shelves by the window where little kids could reach them. And there was one whole section of shelving devoted to the Billy Caldwell books.

Billy was a year older than I was. He was also terribly ill. I don't remember what his health problem was, but during the weeks when he was too sick to come to school, he loved reading. When he died in sixth grade, people donated money for library books in his memory, and his grieving mother bought the books. She didn't consult any approved reading lists with a library school mentality. And she didn't go looking for literary merit or educational value. She consulted her heart, and she bought 200 or so of the kinds of books her son had loved to read--The Hardy Boys; Nancy Drew; Cherry Ames; Albert Payson Terhune; Walter Farley; Zane Grey. Those books went like wildfire. The Billy Caldwell shelves were usually almost empty.

And that's the point about libraries. The shelves are SUPPOSED to be empty. That's what Ed Dansdill, my favorite grade school principal, told me on the reservation. "If the books are on the shelves, they're not doing anybody any good."

During my years as a student at Bisbee High School, the librarian there, Mrs. Phillipi, took me in hand and led me to books that expanded my world view far beyond what I saw and knew from living in a small, isolated mining town in southern Arizona. By the time I was on the reservation, I had a library science degree in my background, and, thanks to Eleanor Saltus at the University of Arizona, not only could I check books in and out, I could also catalog books with the best of them.

This week, when I was at the library event in Salem, it was with some sadness that I heard the news that 48 elementary school librarians had been given their pink slips that day.

We need to preserve libraries and access to libraries even in troubled economic times. For many kids, reading books engages minds and opens doors to individual futures.

Let's find ways to keep those doors open.

Have It Your Way

May 29, 2011

I have observed before that this nation is divided into two parts, and I'm not talking Ds and Rs. There are McDonalds people and there are Burger King people. We are part of the latter. Always have been.

On road trips we have to have at least one road trip Whopper Junior. Due to traveling the same roads and having to fill up on food and fuel at predictable intervals along the I-10 and I-5 corridors, we know generally where we'll stop and where nearby BKs will be found. Some outlets, visited once, are avoided from then on like the one east of Palm Springs. When we arrived, the parking lot was full and the restaurant was crowded with potential customers, but no food was coming out of the kitchen. Instead, there was some kind of brawl occurring back there. We left without placing an order.

My favorite BK meal is, as I said, a Whopper Junior; no cheese; with jalapeños. And for a long time, those were easy to find, anywhere along the line. No more. Somewhere in the world of Burger King research, some genius decided that if you like jalapeños, you must like cheese. They have now created a burger where the cheese and jalapeños are already mixed together. Sliced jalapeños are no longer an option. It's no longer possible to get jalapeños on my Whopper Junior WITHOUT the cheese.

One of the banes of my existence is a complete inability to dredge unwanted song lyrics or even jingles out of my head. Like, for example,

Winston tastes good
Like a cigarette should.

or

If you like shoes with lots of pep
Get Keds, kids, Keds.
For bounce and zoom with every step,
Get, Keds, kids, Keds.
You'll be an athlete with style
You'll kick that ball a half a mile
They're built to last a long, long while,
Get Keds, kids, Keds.

But the one that comes most readily to mind this morning is the old Burger King jingle:

Hold the pickles
Hold the lettuce
Special orders don't upset us
All we ask is that you let us

Serve it your way.
Have it your way.
Have it your way.

It was a nice jingle and a nice sentiment. But now it's history. In our recent travels, with the exception of the Burger King outlet on Fortuna Boulevard in Yuma, Arizona, it's no longer true. If you happen to be someone who likes jalapeños and who doesn't like cheese having it your way isn't an option.

So I'm not happy, but I'm not unhappy enough to switch over to McDonalds.

So far.

The Non-blog

May 5, 2011

I am a writer. I am on deadline. Writing blogs is something I do for fun. Writing books is something I do for a living.

So, no, I have nothing profound to say today; nothing fun; nothing clever.

I am working on a book.

I am working.

Yesterday's Video Coolness

May 13, 2011

I am a writer. There are currently four men in my office studying a "situation." Bella, my purse dog, and I are studying the studiers. (My computer doesn't believe that is a word, but that's the wonderful thing about the English language. It's flexible.)

So here's the problem. The house was built in 2000. The owner at the time put in what he thought was a "cool" audio/video wall which included a 65 inch plasma TV set that was installed and sheet-rocked!!!! into place before the wall itself was covered with extremely ugly faux leather. (Yes, this wall was not a big selling point for me at the time we bought the house.)

But as I said, all of this was originally done in 2000, with stacks of speakers and controllers. Electronics that were slick back then, are no longer nearly so slick or so cool. Who knew that VCRs would go out of fashion to say nothing of single disk CD players? And the problem with television sets is that they don't last forever. This one died over Christmas. We already knew from past experience, that the wiring behind the wall is a mess--a spider web tangle of wires going every which way. We managed to

install new electrical service so that while the TV set was still working, the lights in the house no longer dimmed when we turned it on.

In other words, tackling the problem over Christmas wasn't an option. Between then and now, we've been making due with a much smaller television, transferred in from the family room upstairs and set on a toy box taken from the same place. Unfortunately, it's not hooked up to the slick one-clicker control system I gave Bill for Christmas. So we've also been booted back to the world of multiple clickers. (By the way, my five year old grandson says they're not clickers; they're "remote controls.") Oh, and because screen is so small, reading the captioning isn't really possible. Who uses captioning? One guess.

Now we're undertaking the complicated process of replacing the entire system. That's what the studiers are studying. Getting the television out of the wall is going to require the use of a Saws-All. If you don't know what that is, you'd better sign up and watch a few DIY programs on the Home and Garden Network.

I can hardly wait.

Police Week

May 27, 2011

I am not a police officer. I have never been a police officer. Everything I know about interrogating suspects came from raising teenagers.

As a consequence, I was somewhat surprised, then, when my editor told me that the first Beaumont book, *Until Proven Guilty* was a "police procedural." Up to that point, I thought it was a book. And it was shortly after that that the marketing team in New York decided that my name had to change from Judith Ann to J.A. because they were convinced readers (read male readers) wouldn't accept a police procedural written by someone named Judy. Decades earlier, some other marketing team genius had come up with the same song and dance for a lady named Phyllis Dorothy, and she became both P.D. James and my next door neighbor on bookstore shelves around the world.

As a non law enforcement officer, I've been writing books about cops for almost thirty years--a long time. Last night at an event, a woman who is a new reader, bought a copy of *Until Proven Guilty*. It was published in 1985. She's going to be surprised when she finds out no one in that book has a cell phone.

But in those thirty years, I've learned a lot about police officers. I've heard from them. I've heard from their families. They tell me when I get things right and when I get things wrong. Of course, it's possible that the marketing people were correct and if my books had had covers showing they were written by Judith Ann those same people never would have read them in the first place.

There are people who tell me they knew Big Al Lindstrom when he worked for Seattle PD which is interesting because MY Big Al was and is a figment of my imagination. There are less than three dozen female sheriffs in this country, (out of 1400) but several of those women are readers of my books. Oh, and they generally like the Joanna Brady books better than the others. I wonder why?

This morning I have an e-mail from the wife of a police officer who lives in Louisiana. She told me about how much she enjoys reading about Joanna's life because it's so much like her life--including being called with the chilling news that her husband had been shot. It turned out that it was another officer in another jurisdiction who happened to have the same name although they were not related.

And so, at the end of National Police Week, this writer of pretend police stories would like to say thank you to the real folks who do this job--the ones who talk people down from bridges, who hand out teddy bears to frightened kids, who put their lives on the line when some nutcase with more ammo than brains comes out firing. And I'd like to say thank you to their families, the people who kiss their officers goodbye in the morning and hope they'll come home at the end of their shift. I'd also like to say thank you to the families of fallen officers, the ones who didn't come home, or who came home with injuries so severe that their lives will never be the same.

I'd like to say a special thank you to an amazing group of family members in Oregon who are seeing their "retired officer" through a life and death struggle with the Grim Reaper in the guise of the Big C.

Hey, Randy. This one's for you.

Make New Friends, But Keep the Old

May 27, 2011

This Sunday I'm looking forward to spending some time with an old friend. It'll be the fourth time I've laid eyes on her in more than fifty years.

Diana Conway's family came to Bisbee, Arizona, the summer before I entered sixth grade. Her father was a radio broadcaster, and the family moved into a house just up the hill from ours on Yuma Trail. There were two kids in the family, Diana, a year older than I was, and Joe, who was the same age as one of my younger brothers. By Bisbee standards, the family was considered to be quite remarkable. For one thing, the kids called their parents by their first names, Joe and Sally, which is something most kids in town simply didn't do. And on weekends, the whole family went on long bicycle rides. (Yes, Mayor McGinn, there was a time long ago when only kids rode bikes!)

The family moved in just after school got out for the summer, and Diana and I hit it off immediately. For one thing, we both loved to read. The library at Greenway School was open one day a week during the summers in those days. Diana and I would take my

brothers' Radio Flyer wagon and drag loads of library books back and forth. We hiked all over the gray limestone cliffs around Bisbee looking for fossils and fools gold. We even climbed up a steep rocky hill, one that generations of Bisbee kids have called Geronimo. We climbed up, but the only way to get back down safely was to scoot on our backsides.

When we weren't out hiking, I listened while Diana practiced the piano--four hours every day without anyone standing over her and telling her she had to practice. I sat in their living room reading while she played. In Bisbee, Arizona, where Patsy Cline and Gentleman Jim Reeves ruled the airways, hearing Diana play the piano was my first real introduction to classical music. We talked for hours every day, but mostly we read books, one after another. (That's still my favorite way to spend a summer--reading books.)

Then August came along and the Conways left town--moved to Sherman Oaks, California. At first, Diana and I maintained a pen-pal relationship. The summer I graduated from 8th Grade, I used the money I'd earned babysitting and took the train from Tucson to LA. Diana's family met me at the train station and she and I spent a week together until my parents stopped by to pick me up. (My parents and younger brothers and sister had been camping in Yellowstone when a big earthquake hit, but they all came through the quake without so much as a scratch.)

What I mostly remember about the time Diana and I spent visiting in LA that week was taking what was (for me) a very long bike ride down Sepulveda Boulevard to visit one of California's old missions. I do NOT remember which one.

After that we kept in touch by letter periodically for a number of years. The last time we exchanged letters was after we graduated from college. We had both married by then and had changed our last names. I was teaching in Tucson, and Diana and her husband were going into the Peace Corps. After that we lost touch. Losing that last letter meant that I had also lost her new last name.

In the 80s, I started trying to find her after it finally dawned on me that she and her family were Jewish. In the little white bread enclave of Warren, Arizona, it never occurred to me that I had a friend who was Jewish. Remembering all those hours of dutiful piano practice, I wondered if she had gone on to have a career as a pianist, but in those pre-Internet days, I couldn't find any trace of her. Finally, I wrote the following poem which appears in my book of poetry, *After the Fire*:

MAIDEN NAMES

To Diana Conway from Judy Busk

We were young girls together,
Eleven or twelve at most,

Yet our conversations soared to galaxies afar.

We carried books by wagon load,
Dug for fossils, climbed a rock or two
And swore that they were mountains.

We lost each other later in a maze
Of married names that easily removed all trace
Of those two friends together.

I think of you, Diana, and I know
Our paths must be in parallel.
I only hope someday they'll cross again.

Only our paths didn't cross--not for a long time. In the early 90s when I wrote *Hour of the Hunter*, the book that would be my first hardback, I named the main character Diana in honor of my lost friend, and on the dedication page I wrote: For Diana Conway, wherever you are. I hoped that someone somewhere would put two and two together and I would find her again. Before I knew it, ten years had passed.

Then came *Left Coast Crime* in Anchorage Alaska in 2000. At the signing there, a woman came up to the table and asked, "Who's Diana Conway?" I told her the story. It turned out she knew my friend and she also knew my friend's married name. Within ten minutes, I was talking to Diana on the telephone.

Diana's family had lived a rolling stone existence. I believe she told me once that she attended fourteen elementary schools. I attended one. That three month period in Bisbee was, for her, an unimportant stop along the way. For me, those three months constituted a high point in my childhood. She had not been looking for me in the same way I had been looking for her. At first she had a hard time figuring out who this strange person was, blubbing at her over the telephone. She thought I was someone from her class in Sherman Oaks.

Since 2000, we've re-established our friendship and have managed to stay in touch over the Internet. She offered me wise counsel when we were losing our son-in-law, and I hope I returned the favor when her long time partner passed away.

(I know. I know. Some people say the word "passed" and let it go at that. My head says "passed away." I think that preposition at the end of the phrase is necessary to complete the thought--even though I know full well that prepositions are not to end sentences WITH!! And if you can't stand asides in the middle of thoughts, then you probably shouldn't be reading my blog.)

Diana also gave me good advice during those difficult months when my mother was fading. Now she's dealing with the same kind of issues with her father.

Since our paths finally did cross, I've learned that in many ways, our lives couldn't be more different. She lives in Halibut Cove, Alaska, in a cabin on the water. She rides back and forth to the mainland on the mail boat. She does subsistence fishing and is an ace gardener, doing a lot of canning that includes quarts and quarts of homemade fish head soup. (Canning is NOT for me!) At the end of a long Alaskan winter, she loves to go on solitary hikes into the wilderness, sending back stories of bear sightings. I find this utterly mystifying--to say nothing of scary--but I'm sure she feels the same way about my attempting to learn to play golf. (Which reminds me, I need to tell her about the time a black bear showed up on the third tee box in Mount Shasta. See there? I DO have a bear story to share.)

In other ways we still have a lot in common. We both have blended families. And we're both writers. She writes well regarded stories for children's magazines and has written countless reading comprehension pieces for those standardized tests (They used to call them 'Achievement Tests!') that we all had to take.

On Sunday she's on her way home to Alaska after spending some time in California looking after her dad. She has a long layover in Seattle, so I'm going to pick her up and we'll go have lunch. This will be only the third time we've seen each other in the ten years since we met back up. I'm really looking forward to seeing her and telling her MY bear story.

But I will say, that song I learned in Brownies long ago still holds true:

Make new friends but keep the old
One is silver and the other gold.

The Rest of the Story

June 3, 2011

When newscaster Paul Harvey went to his reward in 2009, he was 101 years old. I remember listening to his broadcasts on KSUN radio when I was growing up in Bisbee, Arizona. He often ended his news segments by delivering what he referred to as "the rest of the story."

These were often good humored human interest pieces that left the listener with a smile on his or her face as the news ended. (As far as I can see, that doesn't happen very much any more. When the news is over, no one is smiling.)

Last week, I mentioned in passing that Bill and I had encountered a bear on a golf course. Several people have asked for gory detail. And so, with all due respect to Paul Harvey, I'm going to fill you in on the "rest of the story."

Years ago--before the Internet and LONG before Facebook, I was invited to do a book signing in Mount Shasta City in northern California. It was an evening event, and we

arrived early in the afternoon and booked into our room at the Mount Shasta Resort. Because there was a whole afternoon in front of us and because we just happened to have our golf clubs in the car, we decided to play a round of golf.

The edge of the golf course gives way to a huge gully. We played the first hole and went onto the second. While I was chipping onto the second green, Bill parked the golf cart by the third tee box. The next thing I knew he was tapping me on the shoulder. "Don't look now," he said, "but there's a bear on the tee box."

Of course I looked. Are you kidding? And right there, on the third tee box next to our golf cart and bigger than our golf cart was an immense black bear, doing what bears customarily do in the woods. Let's just say that we've referred to that particular tee box as "the turd tee box" ever since.

So there we stood, with our eyes as big as saucers, frozen in terror, and clutching . . . wait for it . . . our PUTTERS!!!

The bear finished his job, so to speak. Then with the wind ruffling his very long hair, he took two steps toward us, then shrugged his massive shoulders and went galloping off, back into the gully from which he had emerged. You should have seen our drives after that!!! Adrenaline can do wonders for your golf swing.

When we got back to the pro shop at the end of the day, we mentioned our encounter to the guys working there. "Oh, that old bear?" one of them said. "He usually just tells people to play through."

A few days later, Bill was telling the story to our friend Alan who spent years fishing for halibut in Alaska and who is a storyteller par excellence. It turns out Alan had encountered a few bears in his time as well.

"The whole time Judy and I were standing there, staring at the bear," Bill told Alan, "I kept wondering what I could do to save her."

"That's easy," Alan said. "All you have to do is run slower."

Now you know the rest of the story. Goodnight?

And if you don't know why there's a question mark at the end of that previous paragraph, you never really listened to Paul Harvey.

A Plea For Common Sense

June 10, 2011

Our grandson got in trouble at school this week for pretending a twig was a gun. He and another little boy were playing Good Guys and Bad Guys when they ran afoul of the school's Zero Tolerance policy, which is to say Zero Common Sense policy.

Back when I was attending Greenway School in Bisbee, sometime before Noah's great flood, I remember there was a definite season for squirt guns. As I recall, it began each year on the first of May which was also about the time the weather was warm enough that if you got soaking wet at recess it didn't really matter. Our teachers' version of Zero Tolerance was more on the line of DON'T ASK; DON'T TELL. As long as the teachers didn't actually see the squirt guns in action, nothing much happened. And just because we all turned up at school armed with water pistols, none of us turned into Columbine Killers, either.

When it wasn't squirt gun season, recess had plenty of games of Cowboys and Indians. Not many people wanted to be Indians, and given what showed up in the Saturday matinee serials back then, it's hardly surprising. But none of the kids who played Cowboys and Indians at Greenway School went on to become Indian killers, either.

Colt wants to be a policeman which goes a long way to explain the game of Good Guys and Bad Guys.

So how about letting boys be boys? Kids understand that they're playing a game. That it's PRETEND!!! How come the school doesn't get that? How about applying a little common sense to the playing field?

Wait, I have an idea. How about having a little Zero Tolerance for Zero Tolerance?

There. That's the ticket.

Grandma Judy

June 17, 2011

In 1975, when I was living in Pe Ell, Washington, my marriage started to go south. As a consequence, I packed up my two kids, ages one and three, and all our worldly goods and went back to Arizona. Several years later, when my marriage finally FINISHED going south, I reversed that process in 1982 and moved back to Seattle. I consider myself to be an I-5 traveling yo-yo.

On that initial trip south, my new sister-in-law, Kathy, rode in the car with the kids and me from Washington to Bisbee while my father and my brother, Gary, drove the U-Haul

Truck. They had easier duty than Kathy did because I cried the whole way, all 1700 miles or so.

Once we arrived in Bisbee, my husband turned up, too. Not yet ready to give up the ghost on the marriage, I took him back. We purchased 14 X 70 mobile home and parked it on the back of my parents' lot in Bisbee Junction. Then my sister's marriage began to unravel. She showed up with her two kids, about the same age as mine, and her soon-to-be-former husband and did the same thing--bought a single-wide and parked it at right angles to mine on the folks' lot in Bisbee, Junction. And then . . . wait for it . . . my brother Jim's marriage began to self-destruct as well, and he showed up in Bisbee, too with his wife and three kids. For a number of months, they all stayed with the folks in their doublewide. Are you getting the picture?

Jim's twins were three months younger than my one year old. His step daughter, the oldest of this astonishing group of seven little ones, was FIVE!!! I have photos of lunches at my parents' house with high chairs lined up, rank upon rank. We kids all had jobs so that left the little ones with GRANDMA, my mother. I was thirty-one in 1975. My mother was sixty-one. I had hired a babysitter, Dolores Decker, who came in and helped out. These days we would call her a nanny--and the way she came into our lives was as an answer to a prayer.

I was about to place an ad in the personal section of the Bisbee Daily Review, looking for a babysitter. Then I saw an ad that was very similar to the one I was about to place. I called the number, explained who I was, and asked if they had hired someone. They had. I asked if I could have the name and number of the one they didn't hire, and Dolores was it. And she was wonderful. Too bad for the people who missed out on having her be a part of their lives. (All these years later, she's still in the Christmas Card list, by the way.)

What Dolores did, under my mother's direction, was help run the daily bath and feeding and nap-time marathons. And my mother, bless her heart, captained this complicated ship. Having already raised seven kids, she had some experience in maintaining order with a rowdy group of little ones, and she did it with gusto. And, because my father wasn't yet retired, she and Dolores were on their own for much of the day. I appreciated what she did back then. Now, as a sixty-something grandmother myself, I am in absolute awe!!! She did it without blinking an eye. She made it look easy.

So why am I telling you this?. A couple of weeks ago, my daughter's plan for summer childcare fell apart because the person who was going to look after her son got another job. (She needs the job, so no harm; no foul, but her good fortune left our daughter's the childcare situation up in the air.)

Enter Grandma Judy. I'd like to live up to my mother's stringent standards, but doing that is pretty much impossible. Besides, I have a book to write. So two of the older granddaughters will be coming over from Spokane at the end of the week to Colt

Wrangle for one week. They'll come back at the end of the summer for another week long stint when his day care facility is closed in August.

Looking after Colt by himself will be several kids less than seven toddlers my mother handled with such aplomb. And I'll have a lot more help than she did as well as a pool for entertainment purposes. But I'll be doing it with a happy heart, and I'll be doing it in honor of my mother.

Way to go, Evie Busk! You're a tough act to follow.

Dancing From China

June 24, 2011

Last Sunday, several cars loaded with folks caravanned over to Bremerton for a granddaughter's dance recital. I've been to enough dance recitals to know that the dancers need to have flowers given to them at the end of the performance. Dodging constructing traffic in downtown Bellevue, we decided to get flowers in Bremerton. When I went into a Safeway store there, the flower department was completely bereft of flowers. "We're out," the clerk told me. "There's a dance recital today." Well, yes. I was aware of that, but what to do? Eventually the clerk chopped up a potted mum, put the individual flowers in beribboned bouquets, and we were good to go.

So we went and we watched. The dance recitals we've gone to in the past have been more like Sunday School Christmas pageants, full of kids who walked onto the stage, froze up, and remained there totally unmoving for the duration. This was a whole lot more upscale than that with slick production values. Cute costumes combined with actual dancing from little toddlers to a set of tap-dancing medicare recipients.

When Celeste's group took to the stage, it was interesting to see that everyone else in the group looked to her for leadership and direction. And dance she did, with nothing short of unrestrained exuberance.

Sitting in the audience watching, it was amazing to remember how a few years ago, Celeste came home to our family from an orphanage in China. She was seventeen months old. She couldn't sit up by herself; couldn't walk or stand; had never eaten solid food. Now as a seven year-old she's a tap-dancing all American girl. (And if you don't think she runs the show, just ask her!) Her older sister, Audrey, is nine. She came from a different orphanage in China. Audrey tried dancing but didn't like it that much. She's a lot more into gymnastics and has been invited to join a community-wide team. She's another all American girl.

Somewhere in China, I believe there are two still-grieving women who have no idea what became of the daughters they each had to abandon. I wouldn't be surprised that late at night, they toss and turn and wonder where their lost daughters are and what they're doing. In their wildest dreams, they probably don't imagine their girls wearing

sequins and tap-dancing or prancing along on a balance beam, but that's what Audrey and Celeste are doing. That's who they are now. They love hotdogs and mac and cheese and Grandpa's barbecued ribs.

I'm sorry those two women had to give up their babies. Celeste was only a day old when she was found abandoned a block or so from the orphanage. I can't imagine the hurt and heartache of having to put your baby down on the ground and walk away. I don't think it's something I could have done. On the other hand, I'm grateful that they did.

I wish I could somehow wrap my arms around those two women and tell them thank you, because their girls are now OUR girls, and they're okay. Not only that, they're loved and cherished and, yes, more than a tiny bit spoiled.

When the recital was over and Celeste was presented with her collection of bouquets, including the chopped up mums, it was exactly what she expected and no less than she deserved.

And did I tell you she's got Grandma's number? Oh, I guess I didn't need to. You probably already figured that out.

Another Opening, Another Show

July 1, 2011

Tuesday, July 5, marks the opening of the book tour for *Beaumont # 20, Betrayal of Trust*. The first signing will be at the Seattle Mystery Bookshop at noon that day, and the rest of the schedule is available on my website, www.jajance.com.

So while I battle opening night jitters, it's time to take a look back. *Beaumont* and I have been character and author for a very long time--almost thirty years. We have a history together, one of writing and touring and talking about the books.

Until *Proven Guilty* came out as an original paperback in 1985 with a list price of \$2.65 and an initial printing of 30,000 books. Publishers didn't do book tours for original paperbacks, so we set one up ourselves--doing signings at any Waldenbooks or B.Dalton's or Bartell Drugs or QFC that would give us a table and a chair and a signing time. (Ann Rule and I were often referred to as the queens of Bartell Drug grand openings.) My first book tour in Arizona was done in a borrowed pickup truck in the summer, staying in guest rooms or on floors of friends' houses.

Sometimes, customers came; sometimes they didn't. (Doing a signing on a sunny Memorial Day weekend with the Indy 500 on the tube is generally a bad idea!) But when the customers didn't come, I talked to the booksellers. I ran into one of those yesterday doing a stock signing at Partners West. He works for a book distributor now, but he remembered meeting me at the Waldens at Southcenter way back then.

Between us, we recalled some of the booksellers who made a difference along the way in my career, people who are no longer with us: Holly Turner, one of my original sales reps; Paul Robertson, a manager for Waldens, B. Dalton, and Hastings first in Portland and later in Spokane; and Michael Pritikin who managed first the bookstore at the University of Oregon in Eugene and later the Bookie in Pullman.

By book number two, we decided to hold the grand opening parties at the Doghouse Restaurant, Beau's old hangout (and mine) in downtown Seattle. It was amazing to see people standing in a block long line all the way around the building, waiting to get inside the restaurant. And if you happen to remember the waitstaff at the Doghouse, I can assure you that by the time those grand openings were over, the waitresses were generally a bit more cranky than usual.

Original paperbacks, especially original paperback mysteries, don't get a lot of respect in the complex hierarchy of publishing, but to New York's surprise, J. P. Beaumont really resonated with the folks in the Pacific Northwest. The numbers here were big enough that New York had to pay a little more attention, but the publisher still didn't do anything about tours. For the first nine Beaumonts, we continued doing tours on our nickel, scheduling signings wherever we went. We sold books up and down the west coast and in Arizona, creating the audience one reader at a time. (When I was in the life insurance world, back when a \$10,000 policy was standard, doing that kind of work was called the bread and butter business.) You'd be surprised how many of those "bread and butter" people who had their first original paperbacks signed (in red ink from Beaumont # 3 on) are still fans and are still listed in my new book notification database.

Things have changed over the years. Sometime in the '80s, the American Booksellers Association convention was held in Las Vegas, Nevada. Bill and I went--on our own nickel again. We weren't there as official guests, but my editor got us a pair of badges and a room at the same hotel where the rest of the Avon Books folks were staying. I crept into the convention center, took one look at the thousands of books for sale and was awash in despair. My three thin little paperbacks didn't seem like much of a foothold in that amazing world.

Time passed. In the intervening years, I've written well over forty books. And times have changed. Last week I was invited to the American Library Association convention in New Orleans. I believe this convention was far larger than the one in Vegas years ago. I was scheduled to do two panel discussions and two signings. I flew in on the publisher's dime. (More than a nickel because we flew first class!) and was delivered to and from the airport and convention center in a stretch limo. Amazing! Big contrast between that and the borrowed pickup truck.

Panel discussions are par for the course at events like that. One of them was on the convention floor. One was in an auditorium. In the auditorium, the moderator was Rosemary Harris and my fellow panelist was Harlan Coben. We all met in the green room shortly before show time, and Rosemary told us some of the questions she had in mind. Then we were conducted to the stage where there was a lectern for the

moderator and a long table with two microphones for Harlan and me along with approximately 600 people in the audience.

As soon as Rosemary started her introductory remarks, I knew I was in big trouble. She was speaking into the two microphones at the lectern. The people in the audience could hear her perfectly. I couldn't. Not a word. Even with my two very discreet hearing aides pumped up to the max!! Eventually, she looked at me and smiled. I got the hint that I was supposed to say something but I had no idea what, so I launched off into a response that had zero resemblance to the question she had asked. Finally, on the third try, I said, "I'm not as dumb as I sound. I just can't hear through the sound system." At that juncture, Harlan came to my rescue. For the remainder of our very long hour on stage, he would turn to me and give me a two or three word clue about the question. He's my HERO, and I can't thank him enough. It doesn't hurt that he's also about 6 foot 6. At the next panel, I moved my chair NEXT to the moderator so I could hear the questions just fine without their having to go out through the sound system. I believe my mother would say, "Live and learn."

So next week I'm on the road. Bella, the Book Tour Dog is going, too. She'll be back at her old digs--the Ritz in Phoenix where I suspect it will be a LOT warmer than it was last January. I'll be talking about the Beau books in general and about Betrayal of Trust in particular. (Actually, given the opportunity, I'll probably be talking about ALL my books!)

Am I nervous about it? Always. Forty plus books into the program and I still have opening night jitters. Will it be fun? Yes! Will it be challenging? Yes. In the process it'll be good to remember the journey--from the humble beginnings of that borrowed truck to the stretch limo; from meals grabbed at Burger Kings to the soft shell crab in the Brown Palace; from the people who stood in line at the Doghouse to buy those original paperbacks to the people who now devour my books on Kindles and Nooks.

Yes, I've come a long way, baby. As for that Creative Writing professor who wouldn't let me into his class back in 1964? He's been dead for years now, but I still have a message for him. It goes something like this: Neener-neener-neener!!!

Word Salad

July 8, 2011

There are generally two sets of people in this country--there are the Facebook Folks and the NON Facebook Folks. Those of you who read this on Facebook probably saw the photo of our purse dog, Bella, dressed in her Fourth of July finery. She loves getting dressed up. Before we found her as a stray on the street last October, Bella was obviously a dog who enjoyed being dressed up. And she has since morphed into her new role as Princess Bella.

As a reigning princess she has her ways of expressing displeasure with her subjects. If we go away overnight or if a golf game lasts longer than expected, she lets us know.

And what she does to let us know isn't an accident. It's deliberate. So in our family, Bella's messages aren't considered ACCIDENTS, they're called DELIBERATES.

Thinking about that, after dealing with same, started me down the road of thinking about how words evolve in our family. We were once in Friday Harbor where we were given a bag of bread to feed the ducks that gathered outside our cabin. Except that afternoon it rained so hard that even the ducks went inside. We came home with the bag of bread, ducky bread, as we called it, which soon morphed into the code word for treats for our golden retrievers. At any mention of Ducky Bread, Aggie and Daphne would come on the run.

If you're enjoying a holiday dinner at our home and someone says you're ATL, you're in trouble. ATL means you've told that story before and are going on At Tedious Length. Being ATL is not a good thing. The only exception to this rule is when Captain Al, aka Champagne Al, aka Uncle Alan, starts telling stories about his days as a halibut fisherman. No matter how many times we hear the story of his being knocked off a fishing boat in the Bering Sea on the fifteenth of March, no matter how many times we hear about him diving under the boat to escape the propeller or how one of his fellow fisherman tossed him a life ring which he managed to grab and hang onto, we are all spellbound. Captain Al is NEVER in danger of being considered ATL.

In our household, we don't go to "beauty shops." Fully aware of our physical limitations, we generally refer to them as "adequate shops." Being beautiful isn't really an option. Beauty shops are where you go for "permanents" which, as we all know, aren't permanent at all. So we call them "temporaries."

The last time I went for a "temporary," I was in the eighth grade. I walked to the corner of Cole Avenue and Arizona Street in Bisbee, Arizona, and stepped into the an adequate shop belonging to Mrs. Loper, a recent graduate of Bisbee's "Beauty School." Mrs. Loper put my hair in all those little pink curlers. When she got to the top of my head, there was a little bunch of hair, right in the middle of my forehead, which was too short to go into one of the curlers. So she hauled out her scissors and cut it off. Right at the scalp. And so, with the rest of my hair in soft curls, that little bit of hair grew out straight and bristly, sort of like a unicorn horn.

Anyone who has ever had the misfortune of trying to grow out bangs knows what I'm talking about (Bangs!! Another strange word. Who named them that? What does it mean exactly?) Mamie Eisenhower had bangs, and she probably wore them to her grave because getting rid of bangs is a pain in the pattootee. (My spell checker doesn't like that word at all, but I'm sure you know what I mean.)

Eventually that tuft of hair did grow out, but it took a long time. It was also the VERY LAST time I went to see Mrs. Loper. In the fifty years since, I've never had another temporary and that's how that particular permanent became . . . well . . . PERMANENT!

And now, having taken the time to write this, I'd better go see if there are any Deliberates hiding under the dining room table.

Engine, Engine Number Nine

July 5, 2011

I always loved the way Roger Miller strung words and thoughts together. For instance, "the last word in lonesome is ME." And his ode to love gone wrong, Engine, Engine Number Nine, was one of my favorites which, to this day, I can still sing from beginning to end in a key that my friend, Janis Ian, charitably calls "the key of R."

But this blog isn't really about that song. It's all about Betrayal of Trust being # 9 on the New York Times Bestsellers List. So here's a big thank you to all of the people who went out this past week and bought their copies. To make the list on that first partial week of sales is truly a remarkable achievement. And, considering that the book's publishing date was moved up in a way that put me in competition with the summer's "blockbuster" books makes me even more grateful.

In the Eighties, Bill and I were early proponents of audio books, but we did it the old-fashioned way, reading aloud to each other as we traveled up and down freeways. Of course, back then we were still driving at 55 MPH, so we had longer to read.

That's how we experienced our very first Tom Clancy book, The Hunt for Red October, by reading it aloud. At that point, however, as the author of several "original paperbacks" which a New York Times book critic once disparagingly referred to as my "funny little books," it was inconceivable that Judy Busk Jance from Bisbee, Arizona, would ever be on the same New York Times Bestsellers list along with Tom Clancy. But happen it has! Amazing. And the fact that it's for Beaumont book # 20 is even more amazing!

When I submitted the manuscript for Beaumont #1 to my agent back in 1983, the title page said, "Until Proven Guilty by Judith A. Jance. My agent was well versed in the ways of New York publishing houses. She understood that since this was a police procedural written through a male point of view that ditching the Judith Ann part was probably a good idea. Before sending the manuscript on, she retyped the title page to read: "Until Proven Guilty by J. A. Jance."

The second editor who saw the manuscript, called my agent and said, "The guy who wrote Until Proven Guilty is a good writer." My agent replied, "What would you say if I told you the guy who wrote Until Proven Guilty was a woman?" His response? "I'd say she was a helluva good writer."

The upshot is that he bought the manuscript as the first book in a proposed series. Months later, when marketing got ahold of the manuscript, they were appalled. They didn't think male readers would accept police procedurals written by someone named

Judy. They wanted to stick with the initials. And so, for the first book and the five that came after that, there was no author bio or author photo, and the gender neutral J. A. Jance came into existence. (Hey, don't knock it. Autographing J. A. Jance is a lot easier than the full-meal-deal Judith A.!)

It turns out marketing was both right and wrong. I still meet people who, in order to get someone to read one of my books, first removes the dust jacket so my photo isn't visible. They don't spring the fact that I'm a woman on the hapless victim until after he (and it is usually a curmudgeonly he) has already read and liked the book.

So this week, going through my e-mails, it's been gratifying to hear from any number of men who have loved J.P. and who have aged in real time right along with his doing so in fictional time. What that says to me is that I've made the character come alive for them. Those are words that writers love to hear.

The professor of Creative Writing who wouldn't let me into his class back in 1964 because I was a "girl" is probably spinning in his grave. I have a message for him:

You snooze, buddy, you lose!

Tales of Tails from the Trail

July 22, 2011

Years ago, while I was still working on the reservation, I was given a mostly German shepherd mutt which my husband named Scratch. When we moved to Pe Ell, Washington, in 1973, the dog came with us or, rather, came after us, flying in a homemade crate in luggage when my brother flew up to Seattle. My daughter's first word was "gogs" which is Tohono O'odham for dog. And her first whole sentence "Scratchy chased the deer," happened when she looked out the window and saw our German shepherd herding a herd of deer through the yard. Did I say we lived in a somewhat rural setting?

Shortly thereafter, my then husband went to a nearby tavern and came home with one of the denizens he found there who had agreed to do some work in our yard. Scratch barked at him. Not just when the guy first showed up, but all day long. Most of the time when a new person comes into its' territory, a family dog will let everybody know that there's a newcomer around. But after a while they get over it. As far as that guy in our yard was concerned, however, Scratch didn't get over it. He barked so hard and so long that he almost lost his voice. The next day, a neighbor, Sophie, said to me, "Wasn't that so-and-so I saw working in your yard yesterday?" When I told her yes, she said, "Did you know he just got out of prison for child molestation?" No, I didn't, but obviously Scratch did.

(By the way, when we moved back to Arizona from Pe Ell, Scratch and our once feral tabby cat, Alex, started out from Portland, again in the homemade crate, in the luggage

compartment of a plane bound for Tucson, this time with a friend rather than with my brother. By the time the milk-run flight landed in Eugene, both Alex and Scratch were loose in the luggage compartment. They completed the flight in brand new fiber glass crates, landing in Tucson where my parents rescued them from the plane and took them to Bisbee to await our arrival. It's a one hundred mile drive from Tucson to Bisbee. Scratch made that whole trip sitting in the back seat with his chin resting firmly on my mother's shoulder. When we showed up, he was happy to see us, but he wasn't our dog anymore. My mother had rescued him from that plane, and he was hers from then on.)

Fast forward several decades. Bill and I were in Venice on a Rick Steves' Europe Through the Back Door adventure. We went to dinner by ourselves at a small restaurant away from the canals. While we were eating, we saw a white dog wandering the neighborhood. He seemed to know everybody and everybody knew him. Halfway through dinner, however, a man and a woman came walking down the street, and that previously peaceful and mannerly dog began barking. Like crazy. And he followed the couple, still barking, until they walked out of earshot.

I write murder mysteries. With that previous experience with Scratch in my head, I was then and still am convinced there was something seriously amiss with the guy we saw that night. I was inspired to write a short story, Signore Bianco. I believe the story was published in an anthology somewhere along the way, but I can't remember where or when. If you're interested in reading it, you can access it through a website that carries all my short stories, iPulp.com.

Fast forward again. Here we are on another book tour with our book tour purse dog, a long-haired miniature dachshund named Bella. For the past two weeks, Bella has interacted with several thousand people, sitting up front with me while I do presentations and then offering individual greetings to fans while I sit at a table signing books. That's a lot of people, and during all those appearances she has never said a cross word. (She's a very tired puppy, however, and is contentedly sleeping in her bed as I write this.)

Yesterday, after two appearances and two hundred miles of driving, we checked into the Ritz Carlton here in Phoenix. Bella was on a leash and walking with me as we came into the lobby. As we went past, a long-haired sort of "off" looking guy with a back-pack reached down and tried to pet her. Bella barked and growled and turned a complete summersault in the air. I dragged her on up to the front desk. When I started to apologize to the clerk she said, "No. Your dog is right. There's something wrong with that guy!"

Earlier this week, when security people have tried to keep Bella from walking into places with "No Dogs Allowed" signs clearly on display, they have asked me if she is a "working dog." I've said, "She's part of the show." Now, however, I can give them another answer. Bella may be tiny, but don't try to tell her that. In her heart she knows she's a guard dog, working the security detail.

In the old days, the first essay assignment once school started was to report on "What I Did During Summer Vacation." So here are a few things I learned on the Betrayal of Trust book tour.

I've learned that driving three hundred miles in one day and doing two events is too much. Note to myself: Remind the publicity people in New York that Arizona and Washington are both BIG STATES!

Just because they have canceled summer in Seattle this year, doesn't mean summer is canceled anywhere else. Eating dinner outside at a Mexican restaurant when the temperature was still 108 was HOT, and I'm not talking about spicy hot! And it may have been a "dry heat," but it didn't much feel like it.

Bella got busted by TSA. And deservedly so. We bought two paring knives--two knives for four dollars--in Tucson to cut up Bella's dog food. Forgot to move them from Bella's carry-on to our checked luggage on our way home. So two paring knives now belong to TSA.

I met a lady in Seattle who tells me that my book of poetry, *After the Fire*, is her favorite book of all time. That's the same way I feel about C. Day-Lewis.

I met a woman in Scottsdale who has read all four of the Walker Family books in the last SEVEN DAYS and now wants to know when she can expect another one.

When I wrote the first Walker book, I told my agent I wanted to make the desert and the Desert People "understandable to the little old lady in upstate New York." It turns out that worked. I now have a fan in NYC, originally from Rochester, who after reading the Walker books is ready to come to Tucson to learn more about them.

A couple from Seattle, who first learned about the Night Blooming Cereus in *Queen of the Night*, were in Tucson this July and happened to see a notice in the paper about the Bloom Night celebration at Tohono Chul Park. They went. And even though a monsoon extinguished the luminarias, they were able to see the blooms by flashlight.

I've heard from plenty of readers, many of them male, who have enjoyed watching J.P. Beaumont age as they aged. They feel like they have a lot in common with this fictional character. Knowing I've managed to craft a connection between the real world and the fictional one makes me feel good.

But most of all, I'm glad to be home. So is Bill, and so is Bella, even if I have to wear a sweater.

I would imagine Dorothy and Toto felt the same way when they finally made it back to Kansas.

Party's On

July 29, 2011

For ten years of my life, I sold life insurance. There were usually two sales campaigns each year, one in the fall and one in the spring. At the end of each one, there would be a celebration of some kind, usually a banquet somewhere.

When I started writing, I carried on that tradition. The kids knew that when I finally got on what I called "the banana peel" of the book, the ending couldn't be far behind. They were always anxious for me to get to the end, because we'd go out to dinner to celebrate. How do you spell Mama's Mexican Kitchen?

As a Brownie, when my daughter started selling Girl Scout Cookies, she was serious about it. For three years, she paid her own way to camp by selling 1000 boxes of cookies a year! We learned that we had to have the right percentages of cookies--Thin Mints being the most popular--in order to have the complete selection of cookies available on the last day. We also learned that she had to get out early, so that by the time all the other Girl Scouts were hitting the streets on the last few days of the sale, she'd be done. And when she was done, off to dinner we would go.

The third year, one of her friends called to see if she could spend the night on the night we were planning our celebratory dinner. The friend was in my daughter's troop and, as their leader, I knew how many boxes each girl had signed up to sell which, in this case, was a dozen boxes. I told my daughter to ask the friend if she had sold her cookies. The answer was no. "Ask her why not?" I said. The answer: "Because people told me no."

I told my daughter to tell the friend that she couldn't spend the night that night. When the phone call ended, I explained to my daughter that since she had singlehandedly sold more cookies than the whole rest of the troop, more people had told her no than had said no to the whole rest of the troop and that it wouldn't have been fair for someone who hadn't sold 12 boxes to take part in the celebration for someone who had sold 1000.

I like to think that was a good life lesson for everyone concerned, sort of like my grandson taking an unauthorized trip down a down escalator and realizing he couldn't come back up.

Today we continue those traditions. It turns out that my life as a writer still mimics how life was in the old life insurance days. There are still two sales campaigns--one in the winter and one in the summer. And tonight is the banquet.

Before Betrayal of Trust came out, we sent out e-mail notices to the 9000+ !!!! people in our database. (In the beginning, that was the "Doghouse List." Those were the people in my rolodex that my daughter called ON THE PHONE before a grand opening party at

the Doghouse. She loved the sound of answering machines because getting one of those meant she didn't have to talk so long!)

The folks who received those Betrayal of Trust e-mails along with my Facebook and Twitter followers dutifully went out and bought the book--right away!!! (Thank you for that!) That's how we got on the New York Times List!! And I know there are people who learned about the books that way because they sent me e-mails, comments and tweets letting me know. That's something I appreciate, by the way. I LIKE knowing what people think of my books.

So tonight is our New York Times party. Bill and I along with our collection of kids and grandkids will be going to John Howie Steakhouse in Bellevue to celebrate.

It's a lot like going to Mama's Mexican Kitchen in the Regrade only I'm pretty sure the food will be better.

The Dow and Me

August 4, 2011

I'm in Spokane on the last leg of a book tour.

I would like to write something cheery. I am not feeling cheery. Last year, a big chunk of our retirement funds went away, stolen by a guy who was running a Ponzi scheme that he managed to walk right by our (former) financial advisors. Thanks guys! He pleaded guilty to fraud this past week, but I'm under no illusion that he'll get the 18 year sentence that he's supposedly eligible to receive. And sending him to prison isn't going to help any of his many victims regain the funds we lost.

Since I write murder mysteries, it's entirely possible that I have an overly active imagination, but I suspect that he has some of MY money stashed in an "undisclosed location," and that he'll be living high on the hog as soon as he sheds his jail jumpsuit.

And now the DOW has taken a dive, taking big chunk of our remaining retirement funds with it!

Obviously we're not alone in this very leaky boat. But knowing that doesn't seem to help.

The good news for my fans? I'll be writing murder mysteries for a very long time. I have my health. I have my mind and a set of typing fingers. I'm lucky. I can just keep working.

But there are others who can't go back to work because there aren't any jobs for them to do.

Mark me down as one of those who thinks this country is heading in the WRONG direction.

August at Home

August 12, 2011

The last rental car has been turned in. The last hotel bill has been signed. It's August, Seattle's cool, cloudy version of August, and we're home to enjoy it.

The backyard re-landscaping project is nearing its end. We now have some plants in the garden in addition to the rocks. For a long time our grandson was convinced that we were only going to have a "rock garden."

And this morning, I had one of August's perennial treats--chopped fresh peaches and Wheat Chex for breakfast.

When our family moved from the farm in South Dakota to Bisbee, Arizona in 1949, there were two kinds of water in Bisbee--clear, fresh drinking water inside the houses and brackish brown mine water flowing through pipes in yards. The mine water was pumped out of the underground copper mines, and it came with the added advantage of being free.

At the time, Bisbee was a real oasis. Everyone had yards with grass that needed mowing and fruit trees and gardens. Vista Park in Warren was a marvel of big shady trees and lush green grass. The mine water may not have been fit to drink but plants loved the mineral laden stuff. Once Phelps Dodge figured out that mine water could be diverted through the tailings dump and used to extract otherwise unusable copper, the water stopped being free, and most of Bisbee's trees and gardens and grass went the way of the dodo bird.

When we moved into the house on Yuma Trail, however, mine water was still available, and the yard had trees--apricot, peach, nectarine, and fig as well as a huge old mulberry whose fruit turned the soles of our bare feet purple by the end of every summer.

Somewhere in the family archives is a photo of me sitting next to my dad along with the two huge boxes of apricots we had just finished picking from two of those trees. As I recall, there were only three peach trees on the west side of the house, but those bore plenty of fruit, too. And each August, my mother who had been raised on a farm, went on a canning binge, putting up quarts and quarts of home-grown apricots and peaches.

Houses in Bisbee in the fifties were not air-conditioned. And canning peaches in August was hot work, with a huge canning pot full of water, boiling away on the stove in an already over-heated house. Once the canning was done, the product of my mother labors disappeared onto the shelves in the cool, earthen-floored part of the downstairs basement. Throughout the rest of the year, eating those canned peaches and apricots for dessert at supper (Not dinner, by the way!) was always a treat.

But my mother didn't can ALL the peaches. Some she peeled and chopped up. She always scalded the peaches with boiling water before she peeled them, and I was fascinated to see how she would take the peel off in one long strand. Then she chopped them up. She had our father remove the bottom of a can with a set of tin snips, and she used the sharp edge of that to cut the peaches into bite-sized pieces. Add sugar for taste and lemon juice to help keep the peaches from turning brown, and you had one of the world's best summer time treats to add to cereal or ice cream.

This week, I tried my August special on my grandson. He's a polite kid. He took one "no thank you" bite before explaining to me that he only likes peaches when they're whole; not when they're cut up.

His loss. It's still August and I still have a few more chopped up peaches lurking in the fridge.

The Puma Problem

August 18, 2011

On Sunday evening, after a summertime barbecue and marshmallow roast, people were wandering in the backyard when Bella, our ten pound long haired miniature Dachshund, stopped cold, put her ears on on full alert, and then turned tail and ran straight into the house and into my lap. We've been doing some landscaping in our back yard. Sod is coming tomorrow. On Sunday there was mud. When she leaped into my lap, so did a good deal of mud that landed on my previously pristine pink shirt.

The next morning when Daphne went outside to do her doggy duty, she expressed undue interest in something which turned out to be NOT doggy doo-doo. I had been left behind by an entity that did not pick up after itself. Later that morning a neighborhood e-mail alert went out including a photo from a neighbor whose yard backs up on the corner of ours. The picture, taken on Sunday afternoon in broad daylight, was a portrait of a young bobcat strolling along their driveway. I believe Bella got the message.

So I've been thinking about bobcats this week--bobcats and their near relations.

When I went to Bisbee High School, I became a Puma. (Bisbee's colors are red and gray, like the red shale hills and limestone cliffs that surround the town.) And although I was a Puma, I never saw one. My brother Jim did. He was coming home late one night from an insurance appointment in Willcox when he had a flat tire. He was changing the tire when the cat showed up. As I recall, he dove under the vehicle, tire iron in hand, at a speed that would have left Superman in the dust.

Then I enrolled at the University of Arizona where I became a Wildcat. Are wildcats pumas or are they something else? Maybe they're kitten cousins as it were. (Sorry about the pun. I couldn't resist.) At any rate, I started out as a Wildcat in 1962 and the

U of A Alumni Association has sent me a sticker that says I'm a Wildcat for Life, so I'm evidently not going to get over it.

Then I married Bill who had not one but three kids who were going to WSU. That made them Cougars, and it made me a Cougar Mom. (This terminology predates the current usage of cougar which implies an "older" woman preying on a younger man.) As far as I can tell, there is no set category that covers Cougar Step Moms, but that's what I am. Or at least it's what I HAVE been. And having attended more than one Cougar Moms' weekend and seeing what some Cougar Moms can get up to when they think no one is watching is pretty "UNBELIEVABLE!!" as the sales guru Tom Hopkins used to put it. You see, the word UNBELIEVABLE!! is one of those useful terms that can go either way and imply either very good or very bad. If you've been to a Cougar Moms' Weekend, you probably have plenty of examples of both.

But now I've been promoted. As of this week, my oldest granddaughter is now at WSU. That makes me a Cougar Grandmother! If they established a Cougar Grandmother's Weekend, I would guess that those of us who came of age in the Sixties could teach the current crop of Cougar Moms a thing or two. And I'm sure we would be UNBELIEVABLE!!

Now where did I put that recipe for Cougar Gold Cheese Dip?

Laughter, the Best Medicine

August 28, 2011

Last week's Puma Problem blog prompted an exchange with a reader. He said I didn't need a Grandma's Weekend at WSU to be "unbelievable" because I already WAS unbelievable. I responded by saying I was laughing. He replied by saying he loves my laugh. (By the way. I read the comment lines on Facebook and at [Pl.Com](#), but personal responses generally go through my e-mail account. jajance@jajance.com.)

That exchange of e-mails got me thinking about my laugh. For years people have told me that when I'm being interviewed on the radio or on television here in Seattle or elsewhere that they recognize me by my laugh. And I'm glad they do. But it was not always so.

I spent five years selling life insurance in the Phoenix area. I was a district manager with several people reporting to me. I had two little kids and a husband who wasn't much help. That is an example of understated elegance. Already in the late stages of chronic alcoholism, he was actually a drag on the system. I managed to get the kids into a church-sponsored pre-school just across the parking lot from my office. It was a co-op which meant that parents had to put in one morning a week as a "volunteer." The other mommies involved were stay-at-home moms. Occasionally a daddy would show up, but it was mostly moms.

I had to get the kids there and get myself to work, and then on my day-in-the-barrel, dash across the parking lot, do my bit, and then hustle the kids home to their afternoon baby sitter. I called those years the "battle of the babysitter" for good reason.

I remember one guy in the office who routinely turned up late for agency meetings. I know that his wife (of the stay-at-home-variety) always laid out his clothing the night before. They had no kids. He got out of bed, put on his own clothes, ate a breakfast that was fixed for him, and came to the office. And every time he was late and I was on time, it made me grumble. And probably worse. I've been told that I can deliver an icy blue-eyed stare that can freeze men's nether parts. I probably leveled one or two of those at him, too.

Finally, unable to fix a husband who was unable and/or unwilling to fix himself, I gave up and got a divorce. As soon as I divorced him, he started turning up on my doorstep every Saturday morning saying, "Hey, you said in sickness and in health. This is sickness." That's true, but his sickness was killing me, so I did the only thing that made sense. I got out of Dodge. I packed the kids and all our worldly belongings into a U-Haul trailer and hooked it to my 1978 Cutlass Supreme Brougham that my husband said I never should have bought and would never be able to pay for.

That's how we headed north to Seattle. We didn't have a map because, as my daughter told a neighbor in Phoenix, "You only need to know two streets to get from Phoenix to Seattle--I-10 and I-5." As we came through northern California in the early part of July 1981, I could see the bank of clouds sitting parked over the Siskiyou Pass, and I felt as though I was taking my children from the light to the dark. And I only cried when they were both asleep because I didn't want them to know how scared I was.

I came to Seattle, moved into a condo in downtown Seattle with my sister, and gave myself permission to do what I had always wanted to do which was write. I wrote my first novel which never sold to anyone. The second manuscript, the first Beaumont book, sold to the second editor who saw it.

Eighteen months after I divorced him, my first husband died of chronic alcoholism at age 42. After his death, I learned that being divorced had no effect on the grief I felt. I also came across the poetry I had written during those tough times. They ended up being published in a chapbook called *After the Fire*. At the time I was writing the poetry, I thought I was being true to my calling of being a writer, but when I saw them again, in the aftermath of my husband's death, I realized that I had been using art and words to deal with the essential conflicts of my life.

After the Fire came out in 1984. In 1985 I was invited to do a poetry reading of that book at a widowed retreat sponsored by WICS (Widowed Information Consultation Services) of King County. It was at that retreat that I met Bill. It turned out that his first wife and my first husband had died on the same day of the year two years apart. For the first several months after we met, we compared notes, finding the similarities in lives inalterably changed by spending years with a spouse dying of a long term chronic

ailment. Eventually, however, we started having fun. Six months after we met, we married.

The next year, we went back to Arizona for my parents' 50th wedding anniversary celebration. While we were in Phoenix, I took Bill to the office where I had worked to introduce him to my colleagues in the insurance business. None of those people recognized me. They had NEVER seen me smile, and they had NEVER heard me laugh.

So when I come back to home Seattle, whether I'm flying into the city or driving up I-5, I see the Seattle skyline and I smile, because Seattle gave me back my laugh.

This week, I've heard from three different people who have written to say how much After the Fire has meant to them, so I've decided to close this with one of those poems. (By the way, After the Fire is now available in an annotated version from the University of Arizona Press. If you know anything about my dealings with the Creative Writing department at the U of A, you'll know why my being published by the U of A Press is also grounds for a hoot of laughter.)

I grew up in the desert. There's not much fog in the desert. Dust? Yes. Fog? No. As a newcomer to Seattle, I joined a breakfast networking group in hopes of meeting new people and prospects for my life insurance business. As I walked down the hill from the condo on Second Avenue to the Edgewater, there were times when the fog was so thick I could barely see across the street. When I came out of the meeting, an hour later, I would be amazed to discover that the fog disappeared completely. So here's the poem I wrote about that.

Fog

I walk in fog.
Its velvet touch
Caresses me
And hides the hurt.
Beyond the fog
The sun shines clear and bright.
I must keep moving.
I have earned the light.

These days, I see my current laughter as part of that light. And yes, I've earned it.

Lay Down the Hours

September 2, 2011

One of my favorite singers is Iris Demint, and one of my favorite songs by her starts like this:

Sweet is the melody, so hard to come by
So hard to make every note blend just right
You lay down the hours without a trace
'Til a tune for the dancing is there in its place.

The moment I heard those words written by a song writer, I knew they reflected every writer's life, mine included.

There are plenty of people out there who want to be writers. I don't blame them. Writing has been good to me. But, and there are always buts, it is WORK.

I'm sitting here in the family room with my laptop in my lap. (That's how I avoid carpal tunnel. I work with my keyboard on my lap with my wrists supported by my lap!) On the wall beside me are framed copies of the covers of all my books, except the latest one. More than forty. Not closing in on Louis L'Amour's 90 books, but getting there. People who come here and see the books, might recall where they were when they read it or one aspect of the story. I hear what they say as they point at one cover or another. "Isn't that the one with the burning fishing boat?" "Where's the one with Anne Corley?" "That's the one where Fat Crack dies." Or "That's the one I was reading when we were in Hawaii." Or, "I was reading that one when my dad was in the hospital."

What those covers represent to me, however, is thirty years of work, one book after another. Each one contains approximately one hundred thousand printed words. However, that total doesn't take into consideration all the words that were put in and then taken out or maybe put BACK in later on in the story. We're talking well over four million words here, all of them typed by my fingers. And those are just the books on the wall. Add in five year's worth of blog updates and thousands of answered e-mails and you will understand why the keyboards on my computers are always the first to go.

One of my kids came home from college years ago and asked to use my computer to write a resume. I was in favor of that, so I handed it over. He looked at it and frowned. "But their aren't any letters," he said. That was true. I had worn off all the letters. Unfortunately for him, he wasn't a touch typist. (God Bless Mr. Biba, my high school typing teacher wherever he is!)

That was on one of my former Toshibas. I'm almost two years into this MacBook Air--two years and almost four books. (I'm currently at 63.34% of next summer's Joanna Brady book. Sorry. That book STILL doesn't have a name.) The keyboard is getting tired. Some of the paint has chipped off the C-key, so it looks more like a backward 9.

I'm sure some of the others are going to start losing pieces of paint soon. That doesn't really matter, however, because I don't ever LOOK at the keys.

In other words, you may think a writer's life is all about being out in public with my makeup on and my hair combed signing books. And that's certainly an important part of it. But in large measure, writing is typing and counting the words. Knowing how far I am in that 100,000 word process helps me know how many more words I have left to use and how many scenes I need to create in order to wrap up the book.

But something has to happen BEFORE I can type anything. I have to THINK! I have to have quiet time while I mull over the characters--who they are; what they'll do; WHY they'll do what they do.

Quiet is sometimes hard to come by around here. All summer long we've had workers on site doing a much-needed landscaping job. There have been people coming and going almost every day during the week, and on weekends we have kids and grandkids in and out. As a consequence, my best thinking time is when I'm in bed and supposedly sleeping. People who see the book covers hanging on the wall don't think about my tossing and turning in bed, trying to make a book come to order. When I look at the book cover, I see the parts of them that came to me in the middle of the night, striking me as funny or touching--the tough-talking parrot in *Improbable Cause*; the adoption scene in *Kiss of the Bees*; the trip down Schnebly Hill Road in *Edge of Evil*.

People ask me sometimes if I outline. I think of it more as in-lining than outlining. I put myself inside the story and see where we all go.

In this case, I have 34,000 words left to use, so I need to get busy. The deadline on this book is actively ticking because the LAST book took longer than it should have. Fortunately, while I was typing this, I just figured out how to resolve one of the problems in this book. That was thinking that happened WHILE I was typing.

But what I can tell you is this. Like Iris Demint, I am laying down my hours without a trace, and Joanna Brady # 15 will be there as expected next summer.

V-A-C-A-T-I-O-N!!

September 9, 2011

Bill and I are in Ashland this week on vacation. We've been coming to Ashland to see the plays for the past twenty-five years. In the interim, we've moved several times; bought and remodeled and sold several houses; had occasional health issues; had kids grow up, leave home, go on with their own lives, but Ashland has been a constant in ours.

Originally, while Bill was still working "outside the home," we'd come down on the weekend and see six plays in three days. That's two plays a day. Then, gradually we got older and smarter. Now we come for a week. We see one play a day--and see six plays during the week. We used to try to play eighteen holes of golf a day. See "older and smarter" comment above. Now we play nine. Usually On Monday of this week, with no play in the evening, we made arrangements to play eighteen. At the end of nine, however, with the temperature in the high nineties, we asked for a "sun check." A "sun check" is the opposite of a "rain check, and they let us come back on Tuesday to play our "second nine."

So the pacing this year is good.

We're having Rick Steves style picnics each day. Those are fun. Once was on the terrace at Weisenger's Winery south of town and the other was in the garden here at the Ashland Springs Hotel (formerly the Mark Anthony.) Bread, cheese, sliced ham, fresh fruit, and good conversation. What could be better than that?

Originally Bill and I came to Ashland by ourselves. Over the years people have joined us for a while and then dropped out. Now we have six "regulars" but we added a new couple for three nights at the beginning of this week's stay. They were totally unaware of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (It's not ALL Shakespeare, by the way!) and they were thrilled with the caliber of performances they were able to see. As I'm writing this, we've only seen two plays. I wasn't overwhelmed by either of those, but we always know there will be at least one walking-away winner. Sometimes it's a good day to save the best for last.

On Sunday we'll hie ourselves over to the Blue Giraffe Spa for our Spa Day. We'll be manicured and pedicured and cut and curled and massaged. That's always a high point of the week, but it also means the week is coming to an end.

On the way down, we took an extra day and made a detour to Cannon Beach where we surprised our grandson and his mommy at their vacation hotel. Being able to see a carefree five year-old frolicking on the beach at sunset with his white faced golden retriever pal is one of those experiences we'll always treasure.

The only drawback to this whole trip is a bad case of separation anxiety--from Bella, our rescued dachshund. When Boney, our now deceased half German shepherd/half Irish wolfhound suffered from separation anxiety, he ate a rubber tree plant (frond by frond) a checkbook, and a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses. We've been dealing with separation anxiety by eating desserts. The Ashland Springs is a "pet friendly" hotel, and Bella has stayed here before, but we couldn't very well leave her alone in the room while we went to play golf and see plays. So Bella is spending some quality time at Woodinville's Academy for Canine Behavior, doing what they call Board, Train, and Spoil.

I'm sure she'll be glad to see us when we get home, and I'm sure the reverse will also be true.

We'll be more than ready to see her!

Share the Road

September 16, 2011

This morning there was an article in the local (Seattle) newspaper exhorting drivers of cars to be more conscious of the welfare of bicycle riders as we "share the road." The article was written in the aftermath of three horrific incidents in which three bicycle riders died. I'm sorry they died. I'm sorry their family members are having to deal with terrible and unexpected losses. The problem is, when cars and bicycles come to grief, bicycle riders are likely to come away the big losers.

In the most recent incident, a two-wheeled rider crashed into a four-wheel vehicle. Despite the fact that emergency medical personnel were already on the scene, they were unable to save the rider. My understanding of the case is that the driver was turning right and the bike crashed into him, T-boning the side of the car. Reporting on the incident mentioned that a police investigation had determined that the driver of the automobile was not "impaired." There was no notation about whether the bike rider was impaired or even wearing a helmet. There are some crashes that even a helmet can't fix, but the driver of the car is the one who was automatically suspected of being in the wrong.

Which brings me to tonight. As I write this blog, my hands have finally stopped shaking. Late this afternoon I went down our hill to pick up my grand son from school. At the bottom of our hill there are two stoplights within about a half block of one another. When you turn from our street onto Northup Way, there is usually a backup because traffic wanting to go on toward the freeway in the left lane. I needed to be in the right lane to turn right at the stoplight in order to go northbound on 116th. And I was. I was also signaling to make the right hand turn.

The light turned green. As I began to turn right, a bicycle rider passed me on the RIGHT!! I missed him, but by bare inches. He was very nearly a hood ornament. And had I nailed him, the reporters would have been constrained to report that I was "unimpaired." The only thing I've had to drink in the last several hours is coffee. Had my grandson already been in the vehicle, I believe he would have heard several very un-grandmotherly words!

So okay, I'm all for more civility--in politics and on the road. But bicycle riders NEED TO OBEY TRAFFIC LAWS. DO NOT PASS ON THE RIGHT. Passing on the right when someone is making a right hand turn is NOT ONLY illegal, IT IS ALSO STUPID!!! And if you're passing traffic stopped for a four way stop on 116th northbound as my daughter was several weeks ago, only a jackass riding a bike would pound on the trunk of her car as he rolled past. She almost had a heart attack on the spot. I know because I was talking to her on her HANDS FREE PHONE!!! (By the way, for all you car drivers out there. Talking on your cell phone or texting while driving is ALSO ILLEGAL!!)

Let's all get a grip, folks. Share the road? Yes. But before we put our feet on the gas or on the bicycle pedal, let's make sure our brains are fully engaged.

Renewal of Vows

September 19, 2011

In 1975 I was living in Pe Ell, Washington, and selling life insurance for a living. I had two little kids, a troubled husband, and a mortgage to pay. When Western Electric shut down a manufacturing plant and laid off 800 people over a six month period, my district manager for The Equitable asked if I would go to Vancouver, Washington, to let those soon-to-be-former employees know about their rights to convert their group insurance policies to individual policies.

Let's see now. How easy could this be? I'm expected to go sell life insurance to people who have just lost their jobs. No problem, right? But that's what Paul Huntington asked me to do, and that's what I did.

On Monday mornings, it would take me 27!!! trips back and forth to the car to get my stuff for the week, the kids' stuff for the week, the high chair, the potty chair, the car seats and the kids loaded into the car. Then I drove 25 miles to Chehalis where I dropped the kids and their stuff with a babysitter. Then I would drive to Longview, have lunch with my manager, and then go on to Vancouver. Once there, I'd set appointments for Monday evening, all day Tuesday and all day Wednesday. On Thursday morning, I would reverse course. I'd drive back to Longview, drop off my applications, pick up groceries, go get the kids, and go home where I would immediately start running the washer and dryer which ran pretty much non-stop all weekend long. Did I mention, weekends weren't much fun?

Once I paid for the babysitter and the mortgage, there was very little left over to handle my living expenses or for anything other than a flophouse type room on those nights I stayed in Vancouver.

One day, while reading the local newspaper, I saw that the Orchards United Methodist Church was welcoming a new minister, Reverend Mary Ann Swenson and her husband, Jeff. There was no rule that said I was only allowed to sell insurance to people who had lost their jobs, so I tracked her down, and set up an appointment. She wasn't buying, but at the end of the appointment, I said, "I have to be in Vancouver three days a week. Is there anyone in your church who would be willing to take in a boarder three days a week?" Mary Ann looked at me, smiled, and said, "You could stay with Jeff and me."

And so I did. For six months in 1975 and early 1976 I slept on the hardwood floor in their guest room. They weren't being mean to me. They were just starting out. Their guest room didn't have ANY furniture.

Those were tough days. I would go out on evening appointments. Driving past lit dining room windows, I would see families sitting down to dinner together and I would burst into tears. Those people were all sharing their evening meals together. My children were ninety miles away. When I got to the appointment, I'd often have to stop long enough to fix my makeup before going up to ring the doorbell.

During that time, Jeff and Mary Ann's home was a little island of sanity in a world that was flying apart. I'd come back from my evening appointments, we'd watch Johnny Carson and M-A-S-H. And when Thursday came, I would leave sanity behind and return to chaos.

Eventually I went back to Arizona, got my divorce, and finally started writing. Years later, when I went to write the first Joanna Brady book, *Desert Heat*, I created Joanna's pastor and her husband, Marianne Maculyea and Jeff Daniels, by modeling them after the two good Samaritans who had been so kind and caring to me when I was in a world of hurt. And when you read the dedication to that book, you'll see that it mentions the REAL Jeff and Mary Ann.

For a few years Mary Ann and I lost track of one another, but when we finally reconnected after Bill and I married, it was wonderful. Bill and Jeff hit it off. Bill had recently retired from working "outside the home," and Jeff Swenson willingly gave Bill tips on surviving house-husbandry. (He's a guy who bakes his own bread, by the way.)

Then life happened. Mary Ann went from Vancouver to Wenatchee and from there to Pasadena, California, where she serves as the UMC Bishop for Southern California. When our ailing son-in-law and our daughter wanted to do a renewal of vows in honor of their fifth anniversary, Mary Ann (the real one) flew to Tucson from California to officiate. Doing a renewal of vows for a couple, one of whom was a cancer patient, wasn't an easy call, Mary Ann did a magnificent job of it--not a dry eye in the house.

When Jon was in the U Dub Hospital, Mary Ann visited him there when she was in town. When he was in hospice, she visited him there. And when he was gone, she flew into Seattle to speak at Jon's memorial service. In other words, Bishop Mary Ann Swenson is family.

Last weekend, in honor of our twenty-fifth anniversary, our daughter's twenty-fifth anniversary, and our friends' twenty-third, we had a renewal of vows celebration of our own here in Bellevue, and of course, Mary Ann stopped by on her way home from Chicago to Pasadena with a five hour layover here in Seattle to officiate. More than once, in introducing her, I mistakenly called her Marianne Maculyea, because when I write about that character in the Joanna books, that's the person I visualize.

It was a wonderful party--sort of a first and last gasp of summer, with close to seventy people wandering around our re-landscaped and recently completed back yard garden. We ate wedding cake and sipped champagne after the ceremony. We had a band playing music. Our son Tom roasted a pig; our daughter-in-law, Kathy, supervised the

hors d'oeuvres. After the feast, we finished up by roasting countless marshmallows for some-mores at the outdoor fireplace. Luckily, the rains held off until the last marshmallow was roasted.

Lots of people came to the party, some of whom were guests at the original ones twenty-five years ago, but of all the people in attendance, other than my daughter, my sister, and a single stray cousin, Mary Ann Swenson was the person I've known the longest--longer than my husband or our joint kids or our grandkids. And what she said about the importance of renewing vows when you're no longer blinded by love and when you know that marriage is a process of give-and-take was just as inspiring when she spoke of our marriage vows as it was years earlier when she did a similar ceremony for Jon and Jeanne T.

And now, as I sit here in the aftermath of that wonderful celebration, I know that the old Girl Scout song had it right.

Make new friends but keep the old.
One is silver and the other gold.

Pass It On

September 23, 2011

Years ago, when I was writing *Beaumont #10, Without Due Process*, my daughter was in high school. The book I was writing was always a topic of dinnertime conversation. One night she said, "You know, Mom, you write books that are set in Seattle, and the radio station I listen to, (KSLY at the time) has a thing called the Teddy Bear Patrol. Have you ever heard of it?"

I hadn't, so she told me. It's a program where donated Teddy Bears are gathered and then made available for police officers and other emergency responders to give to traumatized children. As soon as I heard about it, the idea made sense to me. As a consequence, in that book, Beau encounters a little boy, Benjamin Harrison Weston, at a horrific home invasion crime scene where the child is the sole survivor. Beau had once been a Teddy Bear Patrol Doubter, but he was grateful that day when he was able to go back out to his car and find comforting Teddy Bear in his trunk.

And that was the beginning of my relationship with the Teddy Bear Patrol, the organization to which that book is dedicated.

Time passed. Years, actually, and I found myself dealing with a difficulty in my own life. One day, when I went to the Post Office, there was a note telling me I had a package. When I picked it up, it was from someone I didn't know. When I opened it, inside I found a wonderfully soft Teddy Bear. It was from a lady in Colorado who, inspired by my book, had joined the Teddy Bear Patrol by MAKING Teddy Bears. On that particular day, I was the traumatized kid, and her bear--one I still treasure--was a real day brightener.

Now more time has passed. KSLY has morphed into KWRM, but the Teddy Bear Patrol marches on. This week, the woman in charge of the program forwarded me a copy of an e-mail exchange from a woman in Australia, asking for guidance in instituting the same kind of program in Australia.

The Teddy Bear Patrol was a good idea to begin with. I'm glad my books have made it possible to pass it on. And if some scared little kid finds himself holding a Teddy Bear Down Under, he'll have my daughter to thank.

Holiday Milk

September 30, 2011

I'm currently in Anchorage for a series of Sisters in Crime events. A medical issue (Nothing life threatening, don't worry!) is keeping Bill at home, so for the first time in years I find myself out on the road on my own without even Bella, the Book Tour Dog, for company. The ladies at SinC are treating me well, and last night they took me to dinner at one of their favorite hangouts here in town.

We arrived fairly early. My hostesses had chosen a booth in the bar. The problem with that was that the bar was very noisy--full of people talking loudly and having a good time.

I am a lady of a certain age. I have a serious hearing loss in both ears. I wear hearing aids, and that level of background noise makes conversation pretty much impossible. I asked if we could please sit in the restaurant part of the establishment, and my request was graciously honored. At first it was fine. (That's a real fine, not a two-raised-eyebrow fine which, those of you acquainted with female non-verbal communication understand isn't fine at all!)

Over time, however, the restaurant filled up with noisy conversation, too. So I sat there during the evening, trying to listen and participate, but mostly watching what I could see of the kitchen--the food being slapped up onto the counter where it sat under heat lamps until the server came to pick up the order. And suddenly I was stuck trying to remember the name of restaurant heat lamps. Not crocodile. Not alligator. But one of those low built, creepy/crawly creatures. No matter how hard I tried to remember, both at the restaurant and after I left there, I couldn't come up with the word Salamander. Because that's what they're called. I know because my husband told me so this morning.

What I remembered instead was having a friend call me shortly before a Christmas party to ask if there was anything I needed her to bring from the store. There was, but right that minute, I couldn't remember the word 'eggnog' to save my soul. In fact, I'm having a little trouble remembering eggnog this morning. Because that's what we call it now--holiday milk.

Those of you who read my books already understand that my mind doesn't run in a straight line. I often go off on what my high school English teacher, Mrs. Medigovich, used to call tangents.

The idea of having to ask for help on a missing word made me think about my mother. After my Uncle Harold suffered a debilitating stroke, he was severely aphasic. Occasionally he could say a word or two, but not necessarily the word he wanted at the time. While he could still travel, however, he loved to come to Bisbee to stay with my folks. Bisbee had two attractions for him. The weather because he lived in South Dakota and my mother. She was a wise woman who could usually get to the heart of any matter in no time at all and who, through an uncanny ability to play Twenty Questions, was unerringly able to sort out what Harold needed or wanted. Once he was anxious, worrying about whether the property taxes on his farm would be paid on time and my mother figured that one out in a trice.

But her all-time high mark came when he was upset about something on the farm, something in the house, something up in the attic. Within a matter of minutes, she was able to unravel the mystery. They were getting ready to do an auction on Uncle Harold's property, and he didn't want to lose track of his electric train which had been stowed away in the attic of the farmhouse since he was a kid.

So don't look for a logical connection between the two parts of this story--my husband gifting me with Salamander this morning and my mother coming up with the electric train for my Uncle Harold. The nexus is somewhere in my head, and as everyone knows, women's heads are full of "cotton, hay and rags."

Hey, it's already October. How soon do you think it will be before they have holiday milk in the stores?

Window On My World

October 7, 2011

I think a lot of people regards writer as . . . well . . . oddballs. And maybe they're right. Many of them seem to think the job of writing is best done in attic kinds of places, shivering from the cold, and huddled next to a too small coal burning fire. Or perhaps they think of someone turning out books in an opulent office, complete with walls of book shelves, gorgeous artwork and leather chairs.

We actually have an office like that in our house. It belongs to my husband. He handles the business end of our business. I like to say I write the books; he writes the checks, Believe me, on that score, it takes two to Tango. If I had to do his job and my job, neither one would get done.

So when people come into the house and find out that their first assumption is wrong, that the office isn't mine, then they wonder where I really work. Because this blog offers a window on this particular writer's life, I'm going to tell you. But first, as is my habit in blog creation, a small digression.

I grew up in a family of seven children. This was back in the old days. We ate meals at home around the kitchen table--a very long kitchen table with three on each side, two on the end, and one in a high chair. Both before we set the table and after the table was cleared, that's where we did homework--on the kitchen table. It was always busy in the kitchen. Our mother was cooking; people were talking; people were singing--that almost always happened while dishes were being done.

Fortunately I learned to cope with all the extra noise. I did my homework in spite of it or maybe even because of it. When I went to the University of Arizona and moved into Pima Hall, each girl had a desk in the various rooms, but that was too quiet for me. So I often chose to study in the dorm's dining room with people coming and going around me. That was what I was used to.

For a time after Bill and I married, I worked in the living room of his house in Bellevue--one brimming with kids and dogs and people coming and going. Eventually though, the kids grew up and went off to school or life or whatever, and suddenly the house was TOO QUIET. I tried listening to the radio. Easy Listening didn't work. Even when there were no lyrics being sung, the lyrics were in my head, and that got in the way of writing my own words. Thus my late-blooming affection for classical music. After a childhood of listening to KSUN which was long on Gentleman Jim Reeves and Patsy Cline and short on Mozart, I suddenly found myself listening to KING-FM where there generally are no lyrics. And quiet was once again banished so I could work.

Which brings me to where I work now. Not in the attic. And not in the office, either. I work in the family room with people coming and going. My commute is the twelve steps it takes to get from the coffee maker to my chair.

There are four matching white leather chairs lined up in the family room. Mine is the one on the far left. The next one belongs to Bella and her Furcedes dog bed. (Yes, it looks like a little Mercedes convertible). She spends most of the day here beside me, sleeping with her nose tucked into the roll bars. (Did I tell you she's very cute?) Her bed shares part of the hassock that Bill uses, because his is the next chair. The one on the end belongs to Daphne, our 13.5 year-old golden retriever.

And this is where I work, laptop in lap, hour after hour, day after day. My chair is next to the wall with a gas burning log fireplace in it--something we really treasured a few years ago when the lights went out for several days and we didn't have a generator. (We do now!) So I like the fireplace in the wall and being able to turn it on, but what I really love is what's ON the wall.

This year my son and daughter-in-law had the covers of each of my books copied and blown up to a standard size. They're all framed with simple black mat metal frames, and they're all hanging there, not in any particular order. That means people may have to look for a while in order to find a specific book, but with all of them gathered in one place it's easy to see that it IS a body of work. When I look at the covers I remember something that inspired a certain book or something that was happening in our lives when I wrote it or when I was doing a particular book tour.

This week when one my publishers was putting together catalogue copy for one of next year's books, I had them add up the number of books in print--21,500,000. That's a lot of books. Not bad for a girl.

And I'm sure the guy who didn't let me into his Creative Writing class really is spinning in his grave.

500 Miles

October 14, 2011

I come from the West, the part of the country where, Jimmy Carter's 55 mph speed limit notwithstanding, we generally look at destinations from an hour standpoint rather than from a mileage standpoint. In Arizona, Phoenix is four hours from Bisbee; two hours from Tucson. The exact mileage of either one of those escapes me.

When I first moved to Washington and spent most of my time in downtown Seattle, I didn't realize that Washington is the same way. It wasn't until I had kids going to school in Pullman that I realized Washington is WIDE!!! I had a tough time getting my head around the idea that after driving two hours or so and turning off the freeway at Vantage, there were still THREE HOURS left in the trip without ever getting beyond the state lines.

A few years ago, I had a publicist who thought I could do a noontime signing in Seattle and an evening one in Spokane, driving all the way. I had to explain, no that didn't work. That was the same publicist who wanted me to do a noontime news broadcast in LA and drive to Sacramento for an evening event. That wouldn't work either. She is no longer my publicist, by the way.

But over the years, I've tended to make jokes about New York based publicists, suggesting on occasion that a degree in GEOGRAPHY ought to be a requirement for becoming one. I've patiently tried to explain to one publicist after another that it is Or-ahgan no OREEGONE and that it's Spo-can not SPO-CANE. As for Sequim and Puyallup? Don't even go there!

I'm typing this as we're driving through Snoqualmie Pass. (You can imagine what the folks in New York would do with that one.) We're on our way to Spokane where I'm the keynote speaker at a librarian conference this evening. On Saturday, I'll be doing an event in Kennewick, and on Sunday I'll be in Burns/Hines, Oregon.

Where is that, you might ask? It's somewhere in the middle of Oregon--see pronunciation guide above. It's also in Harney County which covers a piece of territory the size of Massachusetts and contains a total population of 7,500. Why am I going there? Somebody asked, for starters, but it's also a long story, and given what I wrote above, it's also my just desserts.

Twenty years ago, I spoke at a conference for WALE (The Washington Association of Library Employees.) It was their first-ever conference, and it was held in Yakima. I walked into the convention center and was met by a middle-aged woman with a headful of curls and a mouthful of braces and who was dressed in a gingham pioneer outfit. That woman, Carol Mackey, has since become a good friend. When they invited me to come to Spokane and speak at their 20th conference, I couldn't very well turn them down. A lady from Kennewick had been asking me to go there, and so had the people from Harney County. And so, without consulting a map and without any input from New York, I decided that I'd do all three of them this weekend. After all, how far could Burns/Hines be from Kennewick? Had I Googled it, I might have seen the error of my ways because it turns out to be a VERY long way--a four hour drive from Pendleton, the last place to spend the night after Kennewick.

So we're on the road and speeding along on I-90, while I hum the tune to the song *Five Hundred Miles*, under my breath. By the time we do the whole 1300 mile round trip, we will have driven as far as a one way trip from Seattle to Tucson. For three events, one of which is a community pot luck in Hines.

But this was all my doing. Maybe it's time I took Geography which, by the way, was always my mother's favorite subject both before and after she had to drop out of school after completing the seventh grade.

But thinking about that first WALE conference reminded me of something else. My kids were still in high school when we went to Yakima, and we had my son and a German exchange student named Lars along for the ride. Since it was Mom's Weekend at WSU, after the speech we drove to Pullman. Lars was astonished that we drove that far and were still in Washington. A few years later, he and some of his pals were coming to the States to visit, and he called for advice. They were planning on flying to New York, renting a car, and, in two weeks, driving to Yellowstone, Yosemite, Las Vegas, and the Grand Canyon before ending up at Disneyland. Oh, and could they spend one night with us along the way! Bill gave them good advice. Fly to the West Coast. Buy a car. Sell it when you're done. (They did. They bought a Subaru, and sold it for the same amount they bought it for at the end of the trip.) They did NOT come spend the night with us in Seattle, but they had a great time as well as a life lesson in how big this great country of ours actually is.

And now I'm in the process of learning the same lesson myself.

Are we there yet?

Notes From A One-Percenter

October 21, 2011

It's hard not to be preoccupied with the Occupiers. They seem to be everywhere, mouthing empty-headed nonsense that sounds like lame high school football cheers. Anyone for "Two bits, four bits, six bits a peso. All for Bisbee stand up and say so." It maybe made sense in Bisbee in 1958, but now? Not so much.

When I came to Seattle in 1981, I was driving a 78 Cutlass Supreme that I bought used. My two kids were in the back seat, and we were pulling a U-Haul trailer loaded with my family's worldly possessions--and not many of those, either. I was a single mother with two kids and no child support. I worked full time in the insurance industry, took care of my kids, and spent the early morning hours--from 4 AM to 7 AM--working on my dream of writing. In the mid seventies, while still married to my first husband, I lived in a single wide mobile home parked on the back of my parents' lot in Bisbee Junction where their barbed wire back fence and the border fence between the US and Mexico were one and the same.

Since then I've written 46!!! books. The place we call home now is something I never would have dreamed possible when I was living in that mobile home. Since 1982 I have worked on writing every day. Every SINGLE day. I've either been writing, thinking about writing, answering e-mail, or doing book tours. I have worked my way up from that first paltry \$4,000 but nonetheless encouraging two book advance to much larger advances. Where I was then, that \$2,000 that came on signing was downright miraculous. I went straight to Costco and splurged by buying myself a bright green soccer shirt.

But it has been work. No paid vacations. No paid sick leave. Yes, I have health insurance because we bought it in a world where buying health insurance for a one person business was no easy task. And two years ago we were victimized by Seattle's mini-Madoff Ponzi scheme, one that walked away with a third of our retirement fund. If the Occupiers were protesting that guy, I'd be out there with them.

But they've decided that I'm the bad guy here. So since I have some skin in this game, I'm going to speak up.

Westlake Park closes at 10. That's the law. Why are there no consequences to breaking that law? When there are tolls on the 520 Bridge, if I were to decide "Hey, I'm against tolls so I guess I won't pay them," I'm assuming there would be consequences to that. When I walk Bella, my purse dog and she does her business in public, I pick it

up. This morning I was disgusted to see a photo of an Occupier somewhere doing his "Number 2" on a police car. That wasn't here in Seattle. Our Occupiers evidently have Porta-Potties. Who's paying for those, by the way? I'll bet it's the good people who go to work every day, maybe at jobs they don't love, but ones that pay the bills, as opposed to the folks with the slogans and signs and the bedrolls and tents who evidently have all the time in the world. And wait a minute. What about the signs along the highway that say, "If you litter it will hurt?" Those evidently don't apply to the Occupiers, either.

But just because it's all over the news, don't think Seattle and Detroit and New York City are the only places where there are demonstrations going on. I saw one this weekend in Eastern Washington as we were driving from Spokane to Kennewick. It was out in the middle of nowhere where we came upon this ragtag group--mostly older people, white-haired retirees, but they were out there on both sides of the road, protesting like crazy. What were they protesting? Garbage, that's what!! They were out along the highway picking up the trash that other people had tossed out of their cars along the way--maybe on their way to Seattle to spend some quality time in Westlake Park!

What? You didn't hear a word about that particular protest? Of course not, people out there doing what's right and not demanding any recognition or air time for it don't usually get any inches in the world of newspapers or attention on television news.

But they're getting some inches here. And some respect, too.

And a sincere "Thank You" from me to them.

Let's hope that maybe some day the litterers, otherwise known as Occupiers, will figure out that they need to clean up their OWN mess. And if Westlake Park is clean as a whistle when they do finally go home--cleaned up by them as opposed to cleaned up by city-paid employees funded by my Seattle property taxes--then I'll be glad to say so, but I'm not holding my breath!

Thank You

October 28, 2011

Yesterday Bill earned a huge THANK YOU from our grandson by fixing Colt's broken Disneyland On Ice sword by doing a "guy" thing. Bill replaced the batteries and magically, the magic was back. Colt got to go to his Show And Tell session with a working lighted sword as opposed to a dead one.

My relationship with my paternal grandmother was never particularly cordial. Every year for my birthday she sent me three pairs of panties and every year, they were too small. My mother assured me that because my grandmother didn't see me very often, she had no idea how tall I was. Ironically, although that grandmother and I shared a birthday and we also share the same height--six feet plus a little--didn't mean the two of us were pals. Nonetheless, every year after my birthday undies arrived and were passed along to someone smaller, my mother made sure that a properly written thank you note was sent in a timely fashion.

When students write to me for their class projects asking to interview me, I try to help out. I balk at answering questions for which answers are readily available from other sources. Rachel Riggins, our Bisbee High School journalism teacher, insisted that you had to prepare for interviews and know as much as possible about the interviewee before asking that first question. Back then, the Internet wasn't available. Now it is. And so, part of what I do is ask that the student do some of the work before coming to me. That's part of the learning process.

A few weeks ago, I came across an old e-mail from a student asking for help with her senior class project. My e-mail history showed the response I sent to her, but that was it. There was no thank you note in the history. And so, channeling my mother, I sent a note asking if her thank you note had gone astray. What came back were two thank you notes--one from the student and one from her mother for reminding her daughter of her manners.

A few days later, someone else asked me to do an interview. This was for a graduate school project and, based on the questions, it was easy to see that the person doing the interview had done a good deal of advance work. She asked thoughtful questions and I answered them in the same fashion, a process that occupied the better part of two hours while I was sitting in a hotel room in Anchorage. I expected I'd hear back from her as soon as I submitted my answers, but I didn't, not for several weeks. There was a round-about request for a snail-mail address, but that was it.

Then a week or so ago, a package arrived. Inside was a dollhouse diorama of my writing chair in the family room, complete with a miniature cup of coffee. It's a brown leather chair, so it's more like my writing chair in Tucson than it is the writing chair in Bellevue, but let's not quibble. On the tiny end table with its coffee cup there's a tiny framed picture taken from the cover photo of one of my books--the one with me and the two golden retrievers, Aggie and Daphne. Piled around the chair is a scatter of tiny books, all of them wearing covers from my various books. And on the seat of the chair is a tiny laptop.

When I bought my first computer in 1983, the man who installed my word processing program fixed it so that, each day when I booted it up, these are the words that appeared on the screen: A writer is someone who has written TODAY! Those were words I clung to back in my "pre-published" days. And they are words I pass along as a gift--as an encouraging word--to other beginning writers. Published or not, if you're writing today, you ARE a writer.

And that's the message on the screen of the tiny laptop in the tiny writing chair. The gift I passed on to others has now come back to me.

I was blown away. This particular thank you note is nothing short of a work of art. And as soon as the family framer, Alan Hoviland of Ace Frames, gets back from his trip to Italy, my miniature writing chair will be going into a shadow box.

Thank you, Andrea Gonzales. You really made my day.

The Missing E

November 4, 2011

Those of you who are devoted Joanna Brady fans will be pleased to know that the final draft of next summer's book went to my editor in New York this week. Whew! It felt like a long hard climb.

It was one of those books where, for a long time, the name eluded me. When I finally hit on the title Judgment Call, it seemed like a good idea to me. My editor disagreed. It seems that long ago and far away a guy named Noah Webster declared that the extra e in the word judgment was unnecessary. Who knew? When I write the word judgment without the E, it looks to me like something is missing, but I am willing to bow to a higher authority where spelling is concerned so the next Joanna Brady book, Judgment Call (with no E) is now in the can.

When I was growing up in Bisbee, there were several rules, one of which was no dessert unless you clean your plate. I apply a slight variation of that rule to my writing life. I'm not allowed to think about the next book until I clean my plate of the current one. So with Joanna on her way, I can now turn my attention back to Ali.

In the meantime, we're spending this weekend in Sedona. It was clear and warm yesterday. Today it is cloudy and windy with a storm due to blow in over night and where it will probably be colder tonight than it is in Seattle. So don't think we're escaping bad weather by heading to Arizona. Not this time.

I'm slated to do two events with Michael Coleman this weekend. For some reason, yesterday I sent out an announcement in which I referred to him as a watercolorist. WRONG!!! He does landscapes in OILS. So where my writing brain went when I wrote that? I give up. I must have used up all my writing brains finishing Judgment Call.

So now I'm going to give my head a rest.

It sounds like it needs one.

A Gift For Veteran's Day

November 11, 2011

Growing up in Bisbee, my best friend was Pat McAdams. Her father, Mac, was a gruff, dour sort of man. I don't ever remember hearing him laugh, and until I caught him talking baby talk to the family parakeet, I never saw him smile, either. He went to work in the copper mine every day. He raised his family. He never complained about his lot in life. It wasn't until after his death that his widow, Thelma, told us that he went away to World War II as one person and came back another. He arrived in Europe on D Day + 1

and he lived through the Battle of the Bulge. No wonder he changed. No wonder he lost the ability to laugh. And every Veteran's Day, I think about the people who went away and came back different or else didn't come back at all.

Two years ago, at a book tour appearance in Walla Walla, I was approached by a young woman, Karen Fisher-Alaniz who told me she was writing a book about her father's World War II experiences, based on letters he had written to his parents while he was away during the war. The daughter seemed passionate about the project and, unusual for most wannabe writers, already had a completed manuscript in hand. She wanted to know if I would read it and did I recommend self-publishing? I told her my opinion of an unpublished manuscript probably wouldn't be particularly helpful. As for self publishing? I suggested that she needed to find a publisher who believed in the project as much as she did.

And she did. Once she had a publishing house in hand and a publishing date, she wrote again, asking for advice. I suggested that she join Toastmasters as a tool for preparing herself for doing interviews and signing appearances once the book was published. She took that piece of advice, too. I also suggested that she create a database to let people know when the book was due to come out. And now it has.

Breaking the Code: A Father's Secret; a Daughter's Journey was published by Sourcebook last week. And last Sunday, Karen and her ninety year-old father were interviewed on NPR's Sunday Edition. Toastmasters would have been proud. I know I was. Here's the NPR link if you're interested in hearing the interview: [NPR Interview: Murray Fisher and Karen Fisher-Alaniz](#).

So this week I've read the book. It is a story of unconditional love and unconditional loss as a daughter, using her father's letters as a tool, gradually unlocks the World War II memories her father has kept hidden from himself and from everyone else for more than fifty years. It's a story that left me covered with goosebumps time and again and eventually moved me to tears. These are the lives our parents led, their triumphs and tragedies, before that generation of unlikely super-heroes finished saving the world and returned to their mundane lives of farming and mining and railroading and teaching.

Give Breaking the Code to yourself in honor of Veteran's Day. You won't be sorry.

The Road Not Taken

November 18, 2011

Of all my elementary school teachers from Greenway School in Bisbee Arizona, only one has fallen through the cracks. I can't for the life of me remember the name of my kindergarten teacher. I believe I forgot her name for good reason. She was the only one who ever sent me to grade school's version of Outer Mongolia--the teacher's closet. It was during an arts and crafts event when I committed the unforgivable.

We were supposed to be making Japanese lanterns out of green construction paper and gooey white paste. I got impatient and somehow failed to follow the directions properly. Instead of a green Japanese lantern, I ended up with a page of green construction paper fringe. I was immediately told to go get my blanket and take myself into exile on the floor of the teacher's closet where I was expected to consider my egregious arts and crafts sins. That experience was a life-changing event. I sent the teacher's name down the black hole of memory, never to resurface, and I've spent the remainder of my life with an antipathy towards doing anything in the arty-crafty world. I don't paint. I don't draw. And I CERTAINLY don't make Japanese lanterns. And let's not mention Brownie Scout sit-upons, either. Mine was another spectacular arts-and-crafts failure! So was my paper mache mask in Mrs. Gilbert's third grade class.

But enough of my craft-making humiliations and back to my elementary school teachers. I was assigned to Mrs. Kelly's first grade class. She was a tiny red-haired woman. One day on the way to school, walking along Cole Avenue, a crow attacked me. He may have been attracted by the gold barrettes in my braids. As I ran screaming down Oliver Circle, Mr. Trecise came out and chased the bird away with a rake. I ended up being late for school that morning. When I told Mrs. Kelly about the crow, she bawled me out for making up stories. (Obviously that bawling out didn't take! Or, maybe it did. Telling me not to do something is an excellent way of getting me to do it.) But all during first grade, even sitting in the front row, I remember squinting in order to see those fuzzy green cursive letters posted above the blackboard. By second grade, thanks to an in-school vision test, I was wearing a pair of much-needed glasses.

I have no idea how kids got sorted into classes in Greenway School. Maybe the teachers disappeared into the teachers' lounge and drew straws. Maybe they threw darts. Maybe they made use of a Harry Potter style sorting hat. However it happened, when it came time to go from first grade to second, there were only two choices as far as teachers were concerned--Mrs. Barker or Mrs. Spangler.

I ended up in Mrs. Spangler's class, and that, too, was a life-changing event. On a shelf under the window, Mrs. Spangler had a collection of books. If we finished our work early, we were allowed to go to the bookshelf and choose a book. I always finished my work early, and that's where I discovered *The Wizard of Oz*--not the movie, but the book by Frank Baum. And not just that one book, either, the whole series, all of them. For me, it was love at first sight.

Some kids encountering *The Wizard of Oz* focus on the Wizard himself, the funny little guy hiding behind his green curtain. What I saw was Frank Baum hiding behind the words, and as soon as I realized someone had put those words on paper, that's who I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. I wanted to write books; tell stories; put words on paper.

And that's what I do now, in large measure because someone somewhere was looking out for me and made sure I ended up in Mrs. Spangler's class. What would have happened if I had ended up in Mrs. Barker's class? I have no idea, but I'm convinced my life would have been very different from what it is now.

And I'm very grateful.

Goodbye To the Golden Girls

November 22, 2011

This year there's a hitch in my Thanksgiving get-along. Last week, two days apart, we lost the last two members of our family's current generation of golden retrievers. Kensie was our daughter's and grandson's, and Daphne was ours. Kensie was 12 and Daphne was 13 and a half.

Our family has a long history of Goldens. When Bill and I married in December of 1985, we came home with two golden retriever puppies five days later. We brought Nikki and Tesla, named after electronics genius Nicolai Tesla, into our family in hopes that they would be part of the glue that would help bind our newly blended family together. And it worked.

The puppies got into all kinds of mischief. They bedeviled the kitchen remodelers by stealing their tools. They ate the cover off my husband's unabridged Webster's dictionary. They devoured a whole BOX!!!! of Newport High School Band chocolates. They ate a dish of our daughter's freshly baked youth group brownies. She accused each of her brothers in turn of doing the deed, but it wasn't until the cleaning lady found the licked-clean baking dish hiding under the dining room table that we realized who the culprit really was.

Even so, in a family where we were all trying to find our way, Nikki and Tess provided common ground--the one place where we could all come together. Puppies are like that.

We had a yard with no fence. The dogs had to be walked on leashes. Since I mostly worked at home, guess who did most of the walking. Consequently, when my husband read a "free to good home" ad in the Journal American, one advertising a ten-year old golden retriever, my first thought went something like this. "We need another dog like I need another hole in my head."

But Mandy came to live with us anyway. The kids from her previous home had all gone away to college, and the parents were moving into a "no dogs allowed" condo. Mandy had a few issues. For one thing, she was shy. She didn't want anyone watching her when she needed to do her business, so a leash was out. And in the process of teaching me that lesson, she also taught Nikki and Tess.

Mandy was with us for only six months. Her terror at the very sight of a broom made us suspect that all had not been well at her first home. And she was terrified of going to the vet. We had been told she had arthritis in her one leg, but six months after she came to live with us, we learned that it was really bone cancer that had already metastasized, so we lost Mandy. But she had opened our hearts to the possibility of new dogs, and when our sons came home that Thanksgiving with a scrawny, tiny pound puppy named Boney, we didn't turn him away.

Boney was NOT a golden retriever, by the way. He was a mutt--half German shepherd and half Irish Wolfhound. But he was also a great dog. At about age six months, he broke a tooth when he crashed into a brass and glass table while chasing a tennis ball. On the recommendation of our regular vet, we took him to a canine dentist who tried doing a root canal without sufficient anesthetic. When we came back to pick him up, the dentist told us he was vicious and needed to be put down. Our regular vet advised us that he was really insecure and that he needed to be taught how to be a dog.

And that was the beginning of our family's long relationship with the Academy of Canine Behavior in Woodenville. Boney went for six weeks of boot camp and came back as a gentleman dog who was with us for the next eleven years.

Meanwhile Nikki and Tess were aging. We lost Tess first and then a year or so later, Nikki was gone, too, and Boney went into mourning. So one summer day, we went to Puyallup to choose a new puppy to keep Boney company. Wading through a sea of 13 red dog golden retriever puppies, I chose one with a green ribbon and named her Aggie, after Agatha Christie. I thought we were done, but we weren't. While I was choosing Ag, another puppy, one with a pink ribbon, had untied Bill's shoelace and then promptly fallen asleep on his shoe. Naturally we went home with two and Daphne was named after Daphne du Maurier.

In families, kids grow up and leave home, going off to school or to get married. When our daughter married, there were pictures that included Boney, Aggie, and Daph.

When the doctors convinced Jeanne T. and Jon that they would never have kids, they went looking for a golden retriever. The Academy for Canine Behavior called saying there was a family where a combination of health issues and a divorce meant that a dog was losing her home. Were Jon and Jeanne T. interested? And so Kensie came to live with them.

Then our vet called saying he knew of another golden retriever in need of a home. Was anyone in our family interested in her? And so Sky Girl went to live with Tom and Kathy.

Then the Academy called again. This was the case of a golden in a family where the husband hated her. Did Jon and Jeanne T. want Angel? Yes! When Angel came home, she was terrified of everything and most especially MEN! She had come from a puppy mill where she had almost starved to death, so she had eating issues. But she thrived with Jon and Jeanne T. As Jon's battle with melanoma worsened, Angel and Kensie

spent more days than I can count in their traveling dog-house--a 1991 Suburban. They spent hours a day, parked in the garage at the U-Dub hospital, but on those occasions when Jon could come out to the patio in a wheelchair, they were thrilled to see him. And when Jon and Jeanne T. were unexpectedly blessed with a son, Kens and Angel welcome Colt with open paws.

And years went by. Angel greeted Colt with a joyful bark every morning when he climbed out of bed and came down the hall. Kensie made it her job to make sure that their front yard was free of squirrels. Sky was the clown in the family, one who loved to snatch scrunchies out of hair-dos during family get-togethers. Aggie was the worry-wart in the family, the dog who refused to lie down and rest during the long drives back and forth between Seattle and Tucson and who would arrive at the destination too tired to stand. Dog tired, I believe is the proper term. And she made sure no jets from Davis Monthan EVER landed in our yard in Tucson

As for Daphne? She was mostly a happy-go-lucky dog. Not the boss dog. Not demanding, just content. She learned to bark whenever anyone said the word "Arizona." That was her best trick.

Five years ago, when Aggie was eight, we lost her to a raging case of pneumonia which was actually a non-typical case of Valley Fever. When Daph came down with the same ailment, we were back in Tucson. The vet there set out to save her and did so with an astonishingly high vet bill which she paid back in full several months later when she rose from her sick bed and drove an intruder out of our BEDROOM!! Yes, Daphne's vet bills, past and future, were completely covered by that single act of canine heroism.

But this year has been a bad one for our family of goldens. Angel was at the vet's for a routine vet exam when she died, with no warning, while undergoing an X-ray that revealed a tumor around her heart. Tom and Kathy lost Sky to cancer a few months later. This week both Kensie and Daphne are gone as well.

When I took Colt to the vet's office so he and his mommy could say goodbye to Kensie, the vet read us a picture book about Dog Heaven. (Don't try to tell me dogs don't have souls and won't go to heaven. Don't waste your breath.) And this morning, at the vet's office, I was wishing someone would read me that book again.

And so, this year, our holiday celebrations will be tinged with sadness. We had dogs who loved opening their Christmas presents but who never got into them early. We had dogs who knew that when it came time to clear the table after Thanksgiving dinner that they should immediately head for the kitchen. (Yes, we gave our dogs kitchen scrap dog treats. No, the dog treats didn't kill them.)

We're sad they're gone, but we don't have to live with regret. We took good care of them. We didn't turn them out on the street. We didn't let them suffer when the time came to make the call. They were well loved, and we were well loved in return.

So this is a Hail and Farewell to our family's Golden Girls--Nikki, Tess, Mandy, Aggie, Daphne, Kensie, Angel, and Sky. And to Boney, too, even though he wasn't even close to being a Golden.

Bella, our stray purse dog, is the family's last puppy standing. She's not a golden, either, but we're glad she's here. Without the dogs who came before, she probably wouldn't be here, either.

Dogs come into our lives to teach us the miracle of unconditional love. So yes, I guess I'll be thankful for that.

I've Gone Over To the Dark Side

December 2, 2011

Years before I hefted the weight of a driver in my hand or stepped up to a tee box, I heard a joke about a cheeky American golfer who, while playing a round at the St. Andrews course, had the unmitigated gall to complain about the weather. The old Scotsman who heard the complaint looked at him and said, "If there's nay wind and nay rain there's nay golf."

I do not presume to call myself any kind of real golfer, but I do golf. In wintertime Arizona, early morning golf means that you started with greens coated with frost. For that kind of play, the golfers show up for their tee-times layered like Eskimos and shed same as the day heats up. In other words, you start out cold and end up hot.

But we're not golfing in Arizona right now. We're in Seattle. It's early December. Last week, the local weather guru, Steve Pool, said that the torrential rains that blew through here over the weekend would give way to dry weather--dry and cold and with a chance of fog.

So what did we do? We did what any self-respecting nutcase Northwest golfer would do--we made a tee-time. For this morning--9:37. What Steve Pool referred to as a chance of fog turned out to be more like one hundred percent. And it was thick!! Even a golfer as bad as I am could hit a drive into the fog and have it disappear. In fact, it wasn't until we were on the back nine that we could actually see the greens from the tee boxes.

And it was cold!!! It may not have been actually raining, but with all that moisture in the air, everything was wet, wet, wet. And hands in wet gloves holding cold metal clubs? Let's just say that it's three hours since we left the course. I'm sitting in front of a roaring fireplace. I'm wearing my coat and my fingers are STILL cold!

So yes, I'm officially over the edge, beyond the pale, and any other tired cliché you'd like to fill in here.

But we learned our lesson. When we came home, the Washington clubs got cleaned and then they're going into storage until next spring.

And no, I have absolutely NO intention of telling you my score.

Our Halls Are Decked

Friday, December 9, 2011

It's the second week in December. Our halls are decked and, with any kind of luck, the Christmas cards will go out today.

The season is always a joyful one around here. As the decorations emerge from their boxes, there are always special memories that show up with each one.

Shortly after Hour of the Hunter, the first non-Beaumont book was published, I received a cranky letter (pre e-mail days) from a reader named Alma who lived in Bellingham. She said that she was having lunch with some of her friends, and they were complaining about my newest book. They hated it. She was of the opinion that wasn't possible, but then she read it, and she hated it, too. In other words, "Bring back Beaumont."

When I wrote back to her, I explained some of the background lurking in that book, including the fact that my first husband and I had crossed paths with a serial killer in the early seventies. With that in mind, she went back and reread Hour of the Hunter, and then wrote to me again, assuring me that the second time through she really liked it.

Time passed. Christmas was coming, and one day the postman brought a package to the door. The return address said it was from Alma in Bellingham, but even before we opened it, the still closed package made the whole room reek with cigarette smoke.

Inside, also reeking of cigarette smoke, was a green, white, and red beaded doily. I wrote Alma a proper thank you note without mentioning that we'd been obliged to take the doily outside onto the patio where we let it air out for several days. Alma has been gone for years now, but her beaded doily will be under the poinsettia centerpiece on the kids' table for Christmas dinner.

Our Christmases now are a far cry from what they were long ago. The first Christmas after my divorce, our tree was covered with packing popcorn strung on dental floss and flour/salt decorations we cut out with cookie cutters and baked and painted ourselves. (Eventually some mice broke into the decoration box and ate the cookie cutter decorations.)

For Bill's and my first Christmas together, not only did we blend our families, we also had to sort out how to blend our Christmas decorations on what we all agreed later was one of the world's ugliest Christmas trees. The popcorn packing strings outlasted the cookies by a year or two, but eventually there came a time when they went away, too.

There are angels that came from a company trip to North Carolina back when Bill still worked "outside the home." And there's a collection of Santa Clauses, including one holding a golf club that has to be glued back into his hand each and every year.

Last year, when Colt was five, he was helping Jim Hunt, our decorator in chief, put up the creche. In the process, one of the wise men fell to earth and broke his neck. Fortunately, Grandpa was able to put the head back on in an almost completely invisible fashion. Back at the scene of the crime, Colt was asking questions a mile a minute. "Who's that?" "That's the baby Jesus." "Who's that?" "That's Mary, Baby Jesus's mother." "So," Colt said, pointing at Joseph. "Is that Baby Jesus's father?" There was a long thoughtful pause before Jim answered. "That's a long story," he said at last. "You should probably ask your mother."

And so the creche, like the beaded doily, comes with its own story to be passed along, year after year.

Memories are made of this. So enjoy the season. And remember, if your heart is breaking this year, that over time even that, like the poor wise man's broken neck, can be mended.

Going to the Dogs

Friday, December 16, 2011

Longtime readers of this blog have already gathered that dogs are a big part of our family's life, so I'll be writing about dogs AGAIN. People who don't want to read about dogs have my permission to stop reading here. See you next week.

For everyone else? Hang on. I have several threads of story that I need to pull together in a wad.

We've always had large dogs. Until October 9 of last year when Bella--a long haired miniature Dachshund--came into our lives entirely by accident. For those interested in the Bella back-story, please go to my website, www.jajance.com, look in the blog archive for last year. Somewhere in the late fall, you'll find a blog called For Whom the Bella Tolls.

Bella, being your typical Dachshund, came into our household and took over. There were doggy rules in our house like no begging at the table and no dogs in the bed which immediately went by the wayside. She is a purse dog, and she goes where we go. Including on book tours where she is the star attraction at signings. Her rise to stardom

from being found in a ditch in Bellevue is worth of a legend all its own. In fact, we probably should have named her Cinderbella.

But here she is, running the joint. And our forty-something kids have voiced some complaints. As our one daughter said, "I didn't expect you to be so mushy over that dog." But mushy we are, unabashedly so.

A month or so ago, I read an article in the paper that indicated the Seattle Repertory Theater was going to the dogs--literally--with a play called Sylvia in which a "middle-aged couple" takes in a stray dog and promptly goes all mushy. In honor of the play, the Rep was doing a performance where dogs were welcome to attend. We called immediately, but the show was sold out. Completely. I asked to be put on a waiting list. We were number 13 on the list. No one ever called about that performance, but they did call last week. The dog show had been so popular, that they had scheduled another dog-gone performance. Did we want tickets?

Are you kidding? Of course we wanted tickets. Third row tickets it turns out.

Over the weekend, I heard one daughter grouching to the other one. "Guess who's going to a play on Sunday night? Not one of the HUMAN kids!"

And that's exactly what we did on Sunday night--we took Bella to the theater. Of the hundred dogs in attendance, she wasn't the smallest, but she was one of the prettiest. (In my opinion!) It took a while to get everyone seated. Each of the dogs had their own designated ticket and seat. Bella sat between us. At ten pounds, she didn't have enough weight to keep the seat from folding back up. With the help of a purse and a coat for ballast, her seat stayed down and, since there was a beagle seated in front of her, she was tall enough to see what was happening on the stage.

The play begins with the man of the house letting the newly found stray, played believably by a talented human, into the house. Sylvia came charging across the stage yelling , "Hey! Hey! Hey!" at the top of her lungs, and the one hundred dogs in the audience immediately voiced their objection. Bella included. She and the long haired Doxie next to us did a vocal duet about the two interlopers on stage for the next several lines of dialogue.

After that, though, Bella settled down to watch. She didn't much like the scene changes when furniture zoomed back and forth on the stage and trees and benches appeared out of nowhere. On Bill's far side was an immense poodle who showed zero interest in what was happening on the stage. S/he only had eyes for Bella. As part of the story, the characters on stage go to couple's counseling because of the husband's chronic "mushiness" about their new dog who, by now has taken over every aspect of their lives. The counselor had some kind of remote that turned the music in his office up and down with a bell-like sound. Obviously the sound imitated somebody's doorbell, because each time it rang, one of the dogs in the audience barked a heartfelt alert.

In the play, Sylvia did several recognizable doggy stunts. When the man tries to read his newspaper, the dog puts her paw through it. (Daphne used to put her paw on my laptop and unerringly hit the delete key every single time!)

All in all, the dogs in the audience were very well behaved. I doubt the Rep will do it again, but it was fun this time, and I'm sure Bella had a great time.

And yes, we are mushy, and likely to remain that way.

Psychological Income

Friday, December 23, 2011

I'm sitting in a room with a fire in the fireplace and a beautiful Christmas tree in one corner. There are Santas in the windows and an angel on the mantelpiece. Sometime today or tomorrow, Internet notices will go out letting the people in my database who read paperbacks know that Beaumont # 20, Betrayal of Trust, will go on sale in paperback two days after Christmas.

But right now it's still BEFORE Christmas, and I'm thinking about the gifts readers have sent me over the years--sometimes in person, sometimes by letter, sometimes over the Net.

As I write books, I think about the characters and their actions. I often lie awake at night, pondering about how a certain character will react in a certain situation. My concern at that point is always for the story. I'm not thinking about the readers. They're in the background. What's going on in the story has to come first. It's only later, that I find out how what I have written may have impacted someone else.

Years ago Bill and I met a couple from Florida on a Rick Steves tour of France. They had never read any of my books, so when we got back to Paris, I bought a copy of *Until Proven Guilty* and gave it to them as a farewell gift. The wife read the first book and began to collect the others. Months later, when she underwent surgery for a lung tumor, her twenty-one inch incision was attacked by a flesh-eating bacteria, and she spent the next three months in Intensive Care on a ventilator. I'll never forget the letter her husband wrote to me:

Dear Judy,

I have now read every one of your wonderful books. I don't know how I would have gotten through this time if it hadn't been for your wonderful stories.

That one meant far more to me than making the NYTimes list.

While attending the Texas Book Festival years ago, I met a young man who told me his story. He had started out reading the Beaumont books while in junior high in Redmond,

Washington. He said that as soon as he read the first one, he knew he wanted to be a cop. He joined the military where he worked as an MP. Once he got out, he told me, he was a raging alcoholic, but he still wanted to be a police officer. He was hired by a small jurisdiction in Texas and was sent to a police academy. On the day he graduated from the academy he realized that if he was ever going to be the kind of cop Beau was, he had to get sober. And he did. He went straight from the academy to treatment and has been sober ever since. The last I heard he was still working as a cop--the police chief, I believe, in that same jurisdiction.

A friend told me that in the last several years, he had found himself becoming as he put it--a bit of a hermit. Then he read one of the Ali books in which a character says, "Sometimes all you have to do is just show up." "And that's what I've been doing this year," he told me. "I've been making a conscious effort to just show up."

Last week an Internet present turned up in my e-mail box. A man who had just finished reading the fourth Joanna book wrote to me. In the story, Joanna, struggling with her troubled relationship with her mother, comes to the realization that Eleanor's own self-worth is so damaged that the only way she can feel better about herself is to diminish others. Joanna's fictional realization set off a light bulb in my reader's head. His stepfather had been the same kind of person, one who had made it his mission to belittle his stepson as a way of feeling better about himself. My fan is now in his sixties. The stepfather has been dead for twenty-five years. After years of therapy spent trying to overcome his childhood demons, my reader said that encountering those words caused something to shift in his head. He finally understood what had made his stepfather tick, and now he's able to move on.

I know there are a lot of people out there who look down their literary noses at what they term "genre fiction," including an editor from New York who told me once, "writing original paperback mysteries is the place where anyone who wants to get published can get published." "That's true," I told her. "I write the kinds of books that can be found in better bus depots everywhere." Needless to say, that editor and I did NOT become pals.

Next week, when *Betrayal of Trust* hits the paperback racks in drugstores and grocery stores and train terminals and airports, maybe something inside that book will speak to someone in a life-changing way. And then some day, months or years from now, I'll open an e-mail and read about it.

It's what my husband calls the "psychological income" of being a writer. It's also something to be treasured on this almost Christmas morning.

Merry Christmas and Happy Reading.

Correction: FATAL ERROR Now in Paperback

Thursday, December 29, 2011

What's in a name? Let me count the ways. Fatal Error may be the name of the sixth Ali Reynolds book, but it's also the the truth about last week's erroneous announcement about Betrayal of Trust. This is a complete mea culpa!! The announcement I sent out saying Betrayal of Trust would go on sale December 27 is WRONG, WRONG, WRONG!!! It's actually due to go on sale in APRIL!! The book that is currently on sale in mass market--paperback in the non-publishing world--is last year's Ali Reynolds book FATAL ERROR!!

Having had a couple of bouts of vertigo recently, I have now been officially diagnosed as a DIZZY former blonde. And this counts as proof positive that the word DITZY former blonde also applies. (Please do not send me MORE blonde jokes. I have a full load of those already, and they're not in my SPAM file, either.)

I have been assured by my web mistress that egg washes off the face very easily. I'm not so sure.

Sorry about that.