

Author Interview



How did you start writing? What was your first piece of writing like?

I remember the day I composed my first short story about a girl and her dog. The moment must have impressed me because I can close my eyes and see exactly where I was, standing in the shadow behind the kitchen bar, black and white tiles at my feet, the long slant of light from the windows. I especially remember feeling enormously proud of my first work of fiction.

The story itself is sadly lost because I wasn't able to write it down. I was perhaps four years old and had not yet started school.

Why do you write fiction?

Some people encounter great doctors or teachers in childhood and end up following in their footsteps. For me it was storytellers. When I was eight, my mother read to me A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Poob*, and I adored the things he did with words. When I was nine or ten she read to me *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. I've read that book again and again at various times in my life. What magic, and what a lot to say in such a simple, fanciful story! I think maybe *The Little Prince* was the first book that made me want to write.

Why do people remember a story more easily than a sermon?

I'm not sure that's strictly true. Some of George MacDonald's *Unspoken Sermons* have made a great impression on me. In fact, the little story of the pearl embedded in *To Dance in the Desert* was inspired by a passage in his sermon titled *The*

Consuming Fire. Then again, MacDonald was above all else a storyteller, even in his sermons.

I think the best stories come from a deep place in the writer, and they speak to a deep place in the reader: the place where we care more about truth than facts, the place where we weep our hidden tears and cherish our dearest hopes, and the only place where true prayer is possible. It's the one place within us that really matters, and that's where storyteller and reader join hands. In fiction, as in all art, deep calls unto deep.

What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

I hope my readers come away believing that no matter what happens, at the base of all reality there is Emmanuel, "God with us." In the truest, most mysterious sense, life is very good.

Which character in the book is most like you?

I'd love to just jump right in and say it's Jane, but Jane is the freewheeling sparrow I wish I was. And on my best days I am like her, a little. On my worst days I'm more of a cornered little mouse like Dara.

What actor would you picture playing Dara in a movie?

Let's ask Winona Ryder. She's a wonderful actress who can show an amazing range of emotion in a single moment. She knows how to look very small and lost in a very big world.

Which writers have influenced you most?

Go get Walter Wangerin Jr.'s little book of Christmas stories titled *In the Days of Angels*. Open to the first one, "The Manger Is Empty," and turn to the passage where he introduces Odessa Williams. I don't have a coherent explanation for this except that it was a truly great piece of writing, but

the moment I read that passage marked a major, emotional turning point for me. My writing changed dramatically after that, and within a week or so I started to write *To Dance in the Desert*.

Madeleine L'Engle has also been a strong influence, as have C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald. For as long as I have had faith, I've wanted to write about it, and these authors are the masters.

Describe your writing process.

Some writers spend weeks and weeks on a detailed outline and work very methodically from that. Others work by the seat of their pants, just making things up as they go along. I spend weeks and weeks on a detailed outline then toss it aside and work by the seat of my pants. When I get lost, I go back to the outline, rewrite it, then toss it aside again.

The important thing is to hold onto the emotional center of the story and to become my characters the way actors do. I'll know by intuition what they say and do next. When the writing goes well, I probably look like a dreaming dog, all full of twitches and grumbles. Twitching is a very good sign in a writer. Really.

Can you share a particularly memorable encounter with a reader?

To Dance in the Desert is my first book, so most of my readers have been wonderfully kind and encouraging friends. Author Sharon Souza became my friend because we liked each other's work. We and several other writers had exchanged chapters in preparation for a fiction clinic we planned to attend. Sharon sent me an e-mail, and the moment I read it was the first time I ever experienced knowing a *reader*, a stranger whose life had been impacted by something I wrote. It was unforgettable. I think the best thing

about publishing a novel is that I will have readers. I look forward to meeting them.

What is one fact about yourself that readers might find most surprising?

A question like this makes me want to run right out and take up kickboxing just to have something surprising to report. The urge passes, however, in the half-moment it takes me to realize such a thing would involve getting kicked.

The truth is I am the least surprising person I know. I married an amazing man with great stories (of course) who races cars and builds flying model airplanes and sculpts things out of stainless steel wire and who once, as a child, had the Andrews Sisters for his babysitters. I have two incredibly brilliant boys—don't get me started on them. As for me, I am a bookish, cat-loving, coffee-drinking homebody who reads much too slowly for one with so many books. The most surprising thing about me is that I wrote a novel. This is it.

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