

July 17, 2007

Dear Janet,

When you asked for a personal story about the writing life, I thought I'd tell you of the letter written by an ex- police officer whose partner died. He couldn't save him. His life went downhill after that: he turned to alcohol, lost his job, his wife and custody of his two young children. He lost hope, too. Then someone gave him a copy of *Homestead* a memoir about my husband and me leaving suburbia in the 1980s to build a new life on "rattlesnake and rock ranch." Though that book had nothing to do with his life story, he said it brought healing to him, told him that God keeps calling our names and that he had a chance to redeem his life. His next step, he wrote, was to get his alcohol under control and develop a relationship with his ex-wife in order to have time with his children.

Or I thought I'd share with you the story of a military woman whose father had died when she was young and who feared constantly her husband's early death. Then she read *All together in One Place* a book based on an 1852 Oregon Trail diary entry about eleven wagons driven by women because their men had all died and been buried on the trail. That story helped her see that she could not control what would happen in life – to anyone she loved – but she could trust that God was in control and that she did have action she could take. Because she spent most of her days with men she told me she was making a conscious effort to develop more friendships with women who would "tend and befriend" in a time of trial. One of the purposes of fiction is to move people and this woman had made positive moves from my story.

Then there was the man who said my books gave him a sense of community because he felt he'd been born a century too late. After hearing me speak about story and how we can change the stories that hold us hostage, his wife told me he'd called his sister whom he hadn't talked to for 20 years. Turns out, she read my books, too, so they had something in common to begin talking about, expanding his contemporary community.

Or the woman who said her daughter was in prison and she'd have my books sent to her so when they visited, they had strong women to discuss, women who made mistakes but recovered. The stories didn't have the pain and hardship of their own strained journey to impede their family healing.

Even the letter from the man who said he didn't read female authors was one I thought I'd share. His wife liked my work and she slipped *A Name of Her Own* into his luggage. He was "stuck in Montreal" he wrote and while he had the latest John Grisham novel, he decided he'd appease his wife and read a page of my book. He read through the night then wrote his letter. "Reading this book will not only make me a better husband and father," he wrote, "it will make me a better man."

But I think a call asking me to do something out of the ordinary is still the most poignant reminder of the power of story. I found that reminding letter as I was cleaning my office this morning, something I always do before beginning a new project.

Some years ago, I'd signed a book for a woman whom I was told loved my historical novels but who couldn't come to the signing. A few months later, her daughter-in-law called and said the book had been welcomed but that her mother-in-law couldn't read what I'd written in it. (I've often been told as I sign, that my handwriting is lovely but my husband says that's because people are looking at it upside down. He finds my grocery list hard to read.) "What do you think I wrote?" I asked the daughter-in-law.

"May all your memories nourish and transform.' Does that sound right?"

“Yes, that sound like something I’ve written inside *What Once We Loved*.”

“My mother-in-law is dying,” she went on to say. “I know she’d love to hear you tell her that yourself. She can’t talk to you but her sons are with her and they could hold the phone to her ear. Would you be willing to call her?”

Call someone I didn’t know, someone who is dying? “I guess I can do that,” I said.

So I did. Her sons graciously acted as translator and at one point this woman wished to talk to me herself but she could barely get out the first words. “What she wanted you to know,” her son said, taking the phone, “is how much your book about the first teacher in South Florida meant to her, *Mystic Sweet Communion*. She grew up there and your story of those pioneering times, the manatees, the everglades, the insect battles, the fragrances and lush beauty reminded her of her childhood. She wrote you a long, long letter about that and then realized she couldn’t send it to you, a perfect stranger, someone who didn’t know her at all. But she wanted you to know what a gift your book was to her in reminding her.”

“Did she keep the letter?” I asked.

He asked her and she must have nodded, yes.

“That’s all that matters, then,” I said. “Because you’ll have it, her sons. You’ll have her story. I guess her memories did ‘nourish and transform,” I said, the very words I’d written that she couldn’t read that had precipitated the call.

Something Madeleine L’Engle wrote came true to me that day: that when we write we co-create: we co-create with Spirit and we co-create with readers. Until then, I didn’t understand how this creative process belongs to the community of readers and writers who together are blessed by God’s grace. The Norse word *Raedon* gives us the word “to read” and it means “to unveil a mystery.” That’s what reading does for us; but it’s what writing does, too. We unveil mysteries in our characters lives, in our own lives and by the grace of God, in the lives of our readers as well. It is a privilege to be a writer; my readers keep reminding me; and a privilege to read.

Thanks for asking.

Warmly,

Jane Kirkpatrick

Oregon

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JANE KIRKPATRICK ranches in Oregon with her husband, Jerry. Her two non-fiction titles and 14 bestselling historical novels have won or been finalists for numerous awards including the Wrangler for Outstanding Western Novel (an award won by Barbara Kingsolver and James Michener). International Book clubs have featured her works. Her memoir *Homestead*, was reissued in 2005 with a new section about her writing life. She speaks internationally to varied audiences about the power of stories. www.jkbooks.com and www.janekirkpatrick.blogspot.com and www.shoutlife.com.

Note: *A Mending at the Edge*, Book Three in the Change and Cherish Series (WaterBrook Press/Random House) hit # 10 on the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Bestsellers list its debut week!

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