

Kim Ford Interview with STEPHEN BLY
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Contemporary, Historical or Romantic Cowboys? Which is your favorite? Why?

That's like askin' which of my sons I like best. I love 'em all. All cowboys are romantic. Even the most dastardly villain has a misguided dancehall gal hangin' on his arm. The easiest for me to write are the traditional westerns: cowboy stories set in the late 19th or early 20th century. There is a rhythm to those stories. I call it the tune. Anyone can learn to write the words, the lyrics, but the tune comes from the heart. It's God-given, just like an ear for fine music. But the real love for me is creating wonderful, strong, slightly wacky characters. That can happen in contemporary novels, as well historical ones. I just try to keep the story within my area of expertise, no matter when the scene takes place.

After more than 100 books, co-authoring with your wife, writing non-fiction and fiction, do you have a favorite story from your pen? What would it be? Why?

Oh, rats, I knew you'd ask that. I've never written a story or novel that I didn't love. Never. Ever. Each one captures my heart, my spirit, my emotions and my mind. I could go through the entire list of over 100 and tell you why that particular story is so compelling and memorable to me. If a reader wants to know Stephen Bly as a boy, then read *Cowboy for a Rainy Afternoon*. If you want to know me as a fiction author, then read *Paperback Writer*. If you want to know what it's like having two working writers in the same room, read *The Hidden West Series* (co-authored with Janet). If you want to know my view on a woman surviving against all odds, read "The Outlaw's Twin Sister." If you want to know my view of marriage, read the *Stuart Brannon Series*. If you want my point of view as a dad or grandpa, read *The Fortunes of the Black Hills* series. If you want to know more of my childhood background, read *The Skinners of Goldfield Series*. If you want a glimpse of the most heroic woman I ever created, read *The Last Swan in Sacramento*. If you're interested in my take on how all women should be treated, study Brady Stoner & Linda Austin in the Austin-Stoner Files. If you'd like a description of how a couple can age gracefully and still have a dynamic impact on their world, read *The Carson City Chronicles* (co-written with Janet.) So, you see, it's an impossible choice for me.

Now, if you asked my favorite short story, that would be a tad easier. I'd choose either "Re-inventing Love" or "The Day the Wind Stopped." Both are set in the Old West. Each tells an evergreen story.

Adult fiction - young adult fiction – what are the unique challenges of each? Which do you prefer to write?

Again, there's no preference. I hurry to get the stories out of my head. It's like cleaning an attic that's been crammed for decades. I may forget what's up there, but there's lots of treasures stored. The challenge of youth fiction is making sure I can still capture the mind of young readers in a very high tech generation. That's why I lean to writing historical fiction for kids best (although I've enjoyed a couple of contemporary series as well). The challenge is to make sure the story is so fun, they won't stop reading. When our youngest was 12, I paid him to read my manuscript *The Dog Who Would Not Smile* and circle every word he didn't understand. It's not a matter of favorite genre or even age demographics, it's an issue of which stories in my mind need an outlet.

***"We have the need to be searched for and found the need to complete something we promised ourselves long ago. We have the need to do the right thing, even if no one knows it. The need to make a stand against all odds. And the need to be a friend (and have a friend) through all the struggles in life."* – This is a quote from an interview you completed for faithfulreader.com, and I love it! Can you share with us from your heart more about this writing/life philosophy? How has it been realized in your own life?**

A good story engages the reader. You don't view it from afar . . . you live it out. A good movie can do the same thing, but it's more difficult. The books we like best, and the ones readers remember, are the ones that add something to daily living. In order for that to happen, the scene must make sense, must be believable, and must in some way stir latent heroic qualities.

We are created in the image of God. Buried in all of us is that urge to make a stand for what's right. Whether western, or mystery, or detective story, we want good to triumph over evil. Not just the characters, but we, personally, want to be victorious. We'd like to think we have what it takes.

Some have asked which of my characters is most like me. It's a toss up, but my family and friends tell me I'm most like Stuart Brannon, one of my earliest protagonists. In reality, Stuart is how I hope I would be if I had to face what he faced. His character is what is hidden in my soul, what I desire to become. We

long to have proper, strong relationships with others (both male and female). We have needs to know that our life matters, that in the battle of good and evil (and no one can watch the news today and overlook that reality), somehow we've made a difference. Fiction allows me the awesome privilege to possibly make a difference through my characters, to perhaps inspire the readers to do the same.

"...if your story drags . . . shoot someone. Of course, that's from the perspective of the western genre, but the principle works for others too." - a quote from an interview you did on Novel Journey back in 2006 grabbed my attention. What is your biggest challenge as a writer to keep your stories from dragging with the fewest casualties? Can you make a practical application of this advice for writers?

Many assume my advice of shooting someone when your story drags is just a play at humor, but I am dead serious. Do something, anything, that makes your reader jump up and shout, "he can't do that!" To keep a story alive, you have to produce compelling action and crisp, fast dialogue. I suggest writing an entire chapter of dialogue without any narration, without any identifiers at all. No "he said, she said". . .nada. You become the tape recorder in the room and dictate what they're saying. That's all. Once you have that transcription, tweak the words around until it excites joy or crushes emotion. Draw out the subtle undertones. If that basic dialogue bores, there's absolutely no way to revive the chapter. Sumptuous scenery, sensory narration, winsome interior monologue, and other literary delights might pump it some, but won't rescue the vitality. Once your dialogue zings, you can elaborate the other details with confidence that they won't distract or diminish.

What is your favorite writing collaboration that you've completed with your wife? What is the biggest challenge of working together?

I love doing anything with my Janni-Rae. We've been known to sit hand in hand and watch everything from beach sunsets to desert ant-hills. So, when it comes to co-writing, I've enjoyed each and every project, every part of it—the brainstorming, the research, the discussion about who does what.

The best way to understand the challenges of two writers working on the same project is to read our *Hidden West Series*. The protagonists happen to be a husband and wife writing team. Their names are Tony and Price Shadowbrook, but those who know us claim they're really Stephen and Janet Bly, in essence, if not specifics.

For us, the best/worst fact is that we are very different as writers. I'm the idea guy. I write fast. I hurry through scenes, can't wait to see what happens next. I rarely work with a plot in mind. I just let the words explode like an overdue

volcano. Janet is the craftsman (okay, craftswoman). Every little detail and nuance must be exact, perfected. Every word has its proper form and place. Each scene must be decorated with historical detail. That works good as a balance, most of the time. As long as she allows my heroes to drop their g's and doesn't gum up the scene with things like a red velvet pillow labeled "Chicago, 1881."

What do you envision the future of western writing to be? Is this genre seeing growth or decline? Or is there a pretty steady demand for cowboys?

As long as people read and hanker for heroes, there will be a place for cowboy stories. As long as men exist who feel something missing in the modern workaday world and as long as young girls desire the arms of a strong, faithful man, there will be readers of westerns. Many still enjoy the tales of the Knights of old or the Roman legions or the Greek Spartans, so I believe the genre will survive. That is, as long as books survive. . .and that is a separate dilemma. At present, the problem is not a lack of interested readers nor of writers. It's the challenge presented in distribution and marketing.

What countries, outside the U.S. have a love for cowboys and westerns? Have you developed a fan base in a country where there is a large demand for this genre?

My books have been translated in German, French, Spanish, Indonesian and even Chinese. However, I'd guess the strongest readership hails from Europe. The cowboy is the symbolic romantic hero of the planet. From the Arabic countries in the mid-east to the barren bogs of Siberia, the cowboy is king. In fact, the president of the Wild West Club of Siberia once showed up at my door. No kidding!

You still pastor a small church in your community in addition to all of your writing. What do your parishioners think of your books? Any fans among them? Any who aren't so fond of a fiction-writing pastor?

Some of them are great fans. Others have never read any of my books. I don't think I've thought about that much. The Lord called me to preach way before he allowed me to write books, so the preaching is the foundation of everything. Paul said, "Woe unto me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). That's my life's prime focus. That ministry also keeps me intertwined with real people and their chronic problems. That helps in keeping my characters real. I've never based a fictional character on a real person, but all my relationships give me insight into the human mind, heart, soul, and spirit.

Is writing a talent/passion you have passed on to your sons? Their children? What does your family think of the many stories you've written? What impact has it had on their lives?

A good question that I have contemplated as I've grown older. I'm not sure how my stories have impacted any particular family members, but I do hear from a general readership through tons of mail telling how my books influenced their lives.

Two of our boys (we have three sons) show real talent in writing. The third is an artist, taking after my own father. They could develop their writing if they made it a priority. Perhaps some day. One of my heartbreaks is that my father died before I ever published anything. He was a consummate reader. How I wish I could have handed him a novel and said, "What do you think, Dad?" On the other hand, my mother read dozens of my books while she was alive and loved them all. Aren't these kinds of affirming moms swell?

"Sometimes I think a book is merely the sub-title of life. We live our lives with triumph and tragedy . . . and a good book tells the story in print...just in case you missed the storyline somewhere. So a good book, even historical fiction, is in sync with real life." This is another quote from an interview you completed with faithful reader. **Is there a book (besides the Bible) that has "sub-titled" your life? A book that has taught you something significant or caused you to consider something in a different way?**

Nothing compares to the Bible or great non-fiction works like *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer, *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis, or *Basic Christianity* by John Stott, as far as impact on my life. But as far as fiction is concerned, William Saroyan's *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* or John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* or Ernest Hemmingway's *For Whom the Bells Toll*, as well as Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* each had strong influence (as did the films, "High Noon" and "Stalag 17").

What is your most recent life-challenge that has taught you something significant or meaningful? What is God doing in your life that is particularly exciting?

Discovering I have incurable cancer has given me challenges that I didn't think I'd have to face for a long time. After a process of acceptance, I realize this disease is a kind of gift from God that has allowed me to grow in the likeness of Christ in ways that alluded me before. It has helped me better focus my life, my message, my family, and my Lord. What is He doing that exciting? First, he's

given me even deeper, more incredible love for my wife of 47 years. We are enjoying some of the best times of a very magical marriage. Second, I'm playing better golf than at any time in my life. I don't have a clue what that means, what could possibly be the purpose at my age, but birdies and eagles give me great joy and satisfaction.

Any closing words of encouragement you'd like to share with your readers?

Writing, no matter how enticing or successful, is merely an "added thing." In itself, it will never satisfy or complete the missing parts of the soul. The challenge will always be to "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). Don't consternate or obsess with chasing added things.