



A Writer's Journey by Linda Maria Frank

One of the surprising outcomes of being an author was my entrée into the world of Local Access TV. I produce and host a show called "The Writer's Dream". I interview authors. After nine years of this venture, I've discovered that the two questions that evoke some of the most intriguing answers are these:

1. Authors take a journey when they write a book. What is unique about your journey?
2. When all is said and done, what do you want out of you writing experiences and creations?

It got me thinking about my own journey and this year I am about to publish my seventh book, a fictional memoir about a group of eighth graders on an island of the coast. It's called "The Buccaneers of St. Frederick Island".

Soon after I published the first book, "The Madonna Ghost" I started to do book talks, and the participants asked many questions about plot, characters and setting. Answering those questions, I learned more about the novel writing process than I would have imagined.

The following paragraphs represent the most common questions and what I learned about my own writing.

- "Where do you get your ideas from?"

This is the hardest question to answer, and I would give the most unsatisfying answer. "They just come."

With my science background, I found this answer inadequate for that very important question.

Note: I taught introductory forensic science for 20 years.

I changed the focus of my answers to "What inspired your story?" Inspiration comes from three major sources: a specific area of forensic investigation, a setting, and an historical event. The inspiration or idea for "The Madonna Ghost" was a wall-sized photograph in the Fire Island lighthouse of the rescue of passengers on a ship that had run aground on a sand bar off the island in a not uncommon storm on Long Island.

Following that initial inspiration came the research into the history of shipwrecks off Fire Island.

That research created the character of the ghost, a grieving mother who survived the wreck but lost her child and ultimately died.

The next part of the idea was how to weave a mystery and a crime around the ghost. Again, Fire Island history came to my rescue, smuggling, bootlegging, a vulnerable seacoast, and proximity to New York City.

Sorry, you'll have to read the book to find out the rest.

- Next Question: "Are your characters based on real people?"

Of course, they are! We are surrounded by people who exhibit lots of characteristics to choose from, to either copy in their entirety, or to mix and match into a new person.

What was more challenging for me was that I needed to make my main character, Annie Tillery, engaging, a young woman you would cheer for, whom you could envision as your friend. I knew from my own voracious reading that a character you can love or relate to can make your book a real success.

The next challenge was to create the "perfect boyfriend". Why was this important to me? It grew out of my teaching experience watching my female students, and my own life experiences, choosing the wrong guy. This is known as the bad boy syndrome, and Annie's beau, Tyler Egan, was my attempt to provide a much better alternative.

Here is an excerpt from "The Madonna Ghost". Ty realizes that Annie struggles with her mother's addiction. Ty's father has been institutionalized because of his alcoholism. He takes her to visit which he does often.

"Well, Dad, it's been great seeing you. I'll be back soon." Ty brought the visit to a conclusion, none too soon for me. He stopped at the nurses' station to ask about his father's physical condition.

As I waited, I kept thinking about my mother, how she had that same look about her, as if she just couldn't manage to jump into the fray that people call life. She always seemed to be seeking some refuge, some escape. I used to think that I was the thing she wanted to get away from. But, after seeing Mr. Egan, I began to wonder if what scared them was just anything that made you feel. I tried to imagine not wanting to feel about the things that happened in life. I couldn't. I just couldn't imagine the place that Mr. Egan and Mom inhabited. It frightened and disgusted me in turn every time I did think about it.

Finally, Ty came away from the nurses' station, looking me over, trying to appraise my mood. He looked older to me, shoulders hunched, hands jammed into pockets. What an awful responsibility he had taken on. I only wanted to run away from a similar one.

"Could we go home now?" I asked. It sounded like a big baby even to me. I tried to overcome my embarrassment.

"Okay. I guess this wasn't such a great idea," Ty consented, nodding toward the door.

“You’re wrong, Ty. You are a saint. I couldn’t do this. I’m too angry,” I said, trying to smooth over things. “This confuses me terribly. How can you be so good to him after all the grief he’s caused? Help me out here. I don’t understand.”

“Pretend you’re watching a TV show and you don’t know your mother. Look at her as if she is character in a drama. Do you envy her life? Would you want to be her?”

I ran the scene Ty described in my brain’s DVD player. I could sort of see what he meant. “But she has caused so much unhappiness!” I shot back.

“How does she change your day-to-day life, Annie?” he asked quietly. “I see my dad as pitiful. Anyone who has no control over their lives is pitiful. I walk in and out of this hospital as I please. I’m not sure he even knows where the door is.”

The bus came. We retreated into silence. Ty said, “Think about it, Annie. I had to think about it for a long time. I still do have to think about it.”

Suddenly, he put his arm around me. “And I owe you a sail. Will you settle for a frozen yogurt in Bay Shore?” He smiled that dazzling grin.

I laughed, tucking my arm behind him, and hooking my finger in one of his belt loops.

The third question: “Why do you write?”

The short answer is that it’s the only way I know to tell a story. I think of myself as a storyteller more than a writer. One of the precious that came out of my marital experiences was being told that I was a good storyteller. I know. That could be taken two ways, but it was sincere, and it got me thinking about putting my stories to paper.

Sure, I’d love to have a best seller. A movie contract would be better, or a TV series. Every writer would like to see their books make a best-seller list. But, to tell you the truth, if you keep in the game, and I mean actively keep in the game, things happen. I spoke about some of them, book talks and “The Writer’s Dream”.

Both have exposed me to readers and writers who have pushed me to think about my writing and clarify what I wanted to say in those books I wrote.

Writing the books inspired me to take the topics in forensic science I am so interested in and do a lecture series.

I’ve become involved in planning book events, especially book and author fairs at schools. Meeting my young readers and talking about the books, giving advice to your writers, and seeing some readers come back for a second Annie Tillery Mystery because they loved the first one, are some of the perks.

One Annie Tillery fan berated me for keeping her up until 4am when she should have been sleeping. Why? She couldn’t put “Secrets in the Fairy Chimneys”, the third Annie Tillery, down until she finished it.

It’s not such a bad way to spend Act III of my life.



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