

## **The Life of an Unintentional Writer**

**Faith L. Justice**

I grew up with "family stories." I didn't walk barefoot five miles through the snow to go to school—but my father claims he did. Grandpa Justice spent \$35 in the middle of the depression for a hunting hound and it jumped out of the back of the truck, hanging itself before it ever bayed a note in the southern Ohio hills. Grandma Justice didn't talk to him for two years. Great-Great-Grandpa Sullivan fought in the Civil War and gave his grandchildren pennies when they said their ABC's correctly. My mother's people immigrated to Ohio during the early 1800's, raised cattle, and braved the hazards of the Appalachian Mountains to drive them to market in New York. One of my mother's uncles, a hired man and two mules were killed by lightning while plowing. A second uncle, who survived the first disaster, later died from a lightning strike at Pearl Harbor Airfield during World War II.

These stories and many, many more were the stuff of family gatherings—Christmas, Thanksgiving, annual reunions. Five living generations, with the oldest having access to two or three generations before, gave our family a sense of continuity and connection to our country's history. I never tired of hearing the family stories and putting them in the context of the times. My family's fortunes followed the rhythms of war and depression, expansion and persecution, and the natural rhythms of life.

My generation of siblings and cousins produced our share of family stories. Cousin Karen went to college. She was the first but not the last. Another cousin went to prison for possession. He was the first (as far as we know!), but not the last. Our family struggled with prejudice when Cousin Dane brought a "foreign" wife home from the Philippines. And Cousin Rachel chronicled it all, as had Great-Grandma Rachel Ellen in her generation.

I was born into this sprawling, noisy, contentious family with more cousins than I could name and more aunts and uncles than a child could possibly satisfy, pinching my cheeks and criticizing my behavior. But I didn't know any better. I thought all families were like mine, so I grew up generally happy. My childhood was filled with the usual family squabbles, teen angst, disappointments, and triumphs—none of which would lead my parents or three younger siblings to believe I would eventually become a writer.

After serving a stint in the Navy during the Korean War, my dad moved his growing family to his home village to care for his aging parents. Whisler, population 103, is located in South-central Ohio on the boundary between a fertile agricultural plain and the gas and coal rich Hocking Hills. In many ways, it's a village stuck in time. My grandfather's blacksmith shop is gone, but his house is still there. The Prairie View Cemetery with five generations of Justice headstones looks down on Whisler from a low hill. There are some signs of progress. The outdoor privies are all gone, most of the houses sprout satellite TV antennas, and the county put water lines through. The population has even grown. Someone moved a house trailer onto a back lot a few years

ago and now the village sign reads "Pop. 111." My nephew and his growing family now lives in the ancestral home on the corner across from the Presbyterian Church.

I grew up roaming the fields, swimming in farm ponds, and hiking the hills. I still had to contend with my brothers and cousins, so I also learned to shoot a fair game of basketball and outrun them on foot or on my bike. But, basically, I was a dreamy child and spent most of my spare time reading about whatever obsession I had at the moment. At various times I read everything I could get my hands on about horses, ancient Egyptians, and Russian literature. I loved history and biography. These were different family stories, but I recognized the passion, the circumstance, and glory of these people.

I also had allies in my pursuits. The Bookmobile ladies knew me and let me into the "adult" stacks long before the other kids. My teachers would occasionally admonish me to put down my book and go out to play, but were generally sympathetic. They kept me busy collecting milk money, typing correspondence, and tutoring younger kids so I wouldn't get bored. The first indication that I had any writing ability was when I tested out of all the Freshman English Composition classes at Ohio State University. Reading all those classics must have paid off—or maybe my essay comparing football to the barbarism of Roman gladiatorial games appealed to the pride of misunderstood English professors at a football crazy school. College in the early seventies was an adventure. I joined the usual campus groups, protested, petitioned, and marched while studying to become a teacher.

During my year of student teaching, I realized teaching is **HARD WORK** and I had no patience with small children. Existential crisis! I had spent my entire life and undergraduate training thinking I wanted to be a teacher. I didn't want to inflict innocent children with an indifferent or reluctant instructor. Now what?

Faced with an uncertain future, I did what everyone does in that situation—I applied to graduate school. From there I went to an academic research institute. Ah, the world of publish or perish! I published bibliographies, reviews of literature, curriculum development guides, and research statistical analysis. Most of it was deadly dull, but I did build a bibliography. How many people can say they published five books, and edited over a hundred, before they were twenty-five?

From OSU, I moved to Indiana University and met the man who became my husband—a local news producer. After we married, Gordon and I moved to the East Coast to pursue career opportunities—his with CBS News and mine with a series of Fortune 200 companies in need of executive development. Sometime during this period I also hit a streak of poorly written fantasy and SF books—my antidote to the Big Business environment. One day I threw down an inane story and declared—as many had before me—"I can write better than this!"

Of course, I couldn't.

My first effort was a stock fantasy revenge story, which ballooned to 40,000 words. I worked it over and over, read "how-to-write" books, and worked it over again. I was hooked on fiction writing. I wrote more stories—better each time—and started to send them out. Prominent editors sent me personal rejections. A writer friend-of-a-friend read my stuff and encouraged me to "go to writer's workshop—fast!" I chose the more positive take on this piece of ambiguous advice and assumed she thought I had some talent that a course or workshop might nurture.

I signed up for a course on Science Fiction and Fantasy writing with the New School in Manhattan taught by Shawna McCarthy, a former editor at *Asimov's*. I had the pleasure of announcing to the class my first sale—a short story about a woman who wakes up to find herself transformed into a cat. It took two and a half years after submission before "Cat's Pause" saw print and a year after acceptance before I received a check for \$8.20—which didn't cover the cost of the champagne. But there is nothing in a writer's life quite like the thrill of that very first acceptance letter.

From those humble beginnings my writing career...stalled. In the same month I got my first acceptance, I found out I was pregnant and I accepted a demanding executive level position with my company. Writing outside of business, except for journaling, took a decided back seat during the next few years as I clawed my way up the corporate ladder, balancing a baby and marriage. I did make the wise decision to join the writer's group that formed out of our course. We called ourselves Circles in the Hair (CITH for short—how we got our name is another long story.) This group is almost entirely responsible for any success I have in the writing field. Writer's groups are not for everyone, but these people are my writing lifeline. If I hadn't joined...well...I probably would have earned a whopping \$8.20 during my writing career and this web site would be full of family pictures and gossip. So praise or blame them, depending on how you like my stuff.

After six years of trying to be superwoman, I gave up the corporate life to concentrate on raising my daughter Hannah and giving birth to a novel. Kids have a wonderful way of focusing you on the important things in life. Hannah was having trouble in school so I decided to teach her at home until I could find the kind of school that could deal with her unique abilities and limitations. Did I mention that teaching little kids is **HARD WORK**? Every night when Gordon came home, I'd hand off the kid, grab a glass of wine, and try to wrestle my fact-based historical fiction novel into existence. That project preserved my sanity as I transitioned from corporate executive to full-time mom and part-time college professor (teaching business courses).

My historical novel was a project of the heart. Way back in 1980 I'd attended a feminist art exhibit called "[The Dinner Party](#)" produced by [Judy Chicago](#). One of the "guests"—[Hypatia](#), the Lady Philosopher of Alexandria (b. 355, d. 415)—caught my imagination. I collected books and materials about her life and times for several years. But most of it was sketchy and much of it contradictory. In 1995, a Polish classics scholar named Maria Dzielska came out with an excellent biography, *Hypatia of Alexandria*. The timing was perfect. I had the material I needed, the time, and the motivation. So I signed up for a novel writing course at the New School. (I'm still an academic at heart.) The course didn't

do a damn thing for me in terms of teaching me how to write, but it did require me to have five pages every week for four months. That discipline held and I went to Maine with my teacher and several students for a week of writing where I finished the first draft.

The Maine workshop was an annual event for our teacher Lou Stanek and many of her students came every year. Even though this was supposed to be a writer's workshop, there were numerous distractions—breathtaking coastline to explore, midnight swims, gourmet cooking, not to mention interesting people to talk to. The night I worked on the last chapter, Karen and Hugh, my best buddies from the workshop, kept dropping by the living room and asking, "How's it going?" I would absent-mindedly answer, "Nearly there...one more paragraph...I'm on the last sentence..." When I announced "The end!" the entire workshop popped with champagne and we partied. I was surprised and touched, and didn't write another word for the next three days. CITH, Karen and Hugh critiqued my second and third drafts and contributed immensely to the much-improved final product: [\*Selene of Alexandria\*](#).

After finishing in late 1998, I went through the agonizing experience of trying to find an agent and/or publisher. I read somewhere that publishing required mostly perseverance and a little bit of luck. I persevered with over 100 queries in 18 months with mostly "Get an agent" comments from publishers and "Good story, but it's a tight market" comments from agents. With a recommendation from another writer friend, I finally landed an agent.

Woohoo! Fireworks! Pop the champagne!

Three years and another novel later, I parted ways with my agent. He admitted he had done little to push my first book and was uninterested in looking at my second. Three years lost! I thought the problem might be that my freshman book was too long at a whopping 128K words. Advice I got from other writers and writing sites recommended a first book be no more than 90K. My second novel after the usual many drafts and beta readers came in at about 93K. [\*Twilight Empress: A Novel of Imperial Rome\*](#) tells the little-known, but dramatic, story of Placidia, one of the last Roman Emperresses.

I reluctantly put *Selene* aside and pitched *Empress* instead. In addition to letters and online queries, I started pitching at conferences. Again, lots of good feedback, "good writing, interesting characters, exciting plot..." BUT, "not a marquee protagonist, no one reads fifth century Rome, historical fiction isn't selling right now." And my favorite: "Have you written anything about the Tudors?"

This last question gets at the heart of why I write historical fiction. I've never been a "must write or die" kind of person. What I do have is a drive to share my passionate love of history through stories—stories about people—family stories. Most people hate history, and rightly so, given how it's taught in public schools: dull facts, lists of dates, wars and pestilence, and the stories of elites (mostly white men). I want to make history accessible to anyone who enjoys a good story and spotlight some little known people along the way. That said, there are some eras and people who are over-exposed and

anything Tudor fits that bill. I didn't want to retell stories that hundreds of other people have already told. I wanted my readers to learn something new, be introduced to an overlooked but important time, and possibly recognize the contributions of real women to history.

It was looking more and more like my goals and those of the traditional publishing industry were at odds. They wanted more knock-offs of last year's best sellers. I didn't want to write those. Still trying to break into that traditional market, I decided I might meet both our goals with something "more commercial." I had an idea for a third book based on female gladiators which had been nagging me. Gladiators are always cool and interesting, right? I threw myself into that project and produced [\*Sword of the Gladiatrix\*](#), the story of two women from opposite ends of the Roman Empire who meet and fall in love, but are forced to fight each other in the arena.

Agent reaction? "Aren't lesbians kind of a niche market?" Me with a stiff smile saying the obvious, "Men love to read about lesbians!" My personal sales at conferences and book fairs have proved this out. My "lesbian gladiator novel" always attracts streams of male attention and outsells any of my more traditional books.

I was at an impasse. I had completed three highly researched, polished novels in ten years, but had no interested agent or publisher. I was making a modest living doing freelance non-fiction writing. If I wanted to get back into the more lucrative corporate track, I needed to do it now, because I was aging out. (If you think getting an agent is hard, try to get a corporate executive job when you're female, over fifty and have been on "parental leave" for ten years.) I decided I didn't want to go back to the corner office, but my business skills did open up another opportunity: self-publishing.

During those ten years I was writing and raising my daughter, a revolution started in the traditional publishing industry. Amazon brought out the Kindle, disrupting the marketplace with eBooks. Print-on-demand (POD) had improved its product and affordability. Author services companies (some good, some scammy) were popping up all over and desperate authors were forking over cash to get their books out. There had always been "vanity publishers" who would take your money to print your manuscript, then send you the boxes of books to sell as you could. POD allowed you to upload files and only printed when you or a customer ordered the books. No inventory to keep track of. No garage or attic littered with unsold books.

My confidence in my writing was at an all-time low. I thought I had good books. My writers' group thought I had good books, but I didn't know if other readers would like them and—more importantly!—buy them. I decided to test the waters with *Selene*, while still pitching *Empress* and *Sword* traditionally. I read everything I could about self-publishing, participated in on-line forums and took a couple of classes before I thought I was ready. I put together my publishing and marketing plan and took the plunge putting most of my money in a paid copy edit and a professional cover. I used a reputable POD company for print and converted the manuscript to an eBook for free through Kindle and Smashwords. The cost to customers for ordering print books through Amazon and Barnes

and Noble was at the high price end for the trade paperback market and that caused me some problems. Later as I got more skilled I moved *Selene* to the free CreateSpace service and dropped the price by \$3.00, making the print price competitive.

I now had a professional looking print and eBook available. Time to see if anyone liked it. I entered *Selene* into contests (won finalist in the Global eBook awards), gave away free copies at readers' sites like LibraryThing, and launched what is now called a "Blog Tour." The reviews from professional reviewers and historical magazines (Historical Novel Society, Mid-West Reviews, Copperfield Reviews, etc.) started to roll in and...they liked it! They really, really liked it! Sales were modest, but steady. I blogged regularly about Hypatia and collected those posts into a companion book titled [Hypatia: Her Life and Times](#) which turned out to be my best seller (non-fiction always sells better than fiction). I did (most of) the marketing things I was supposed to, but it was a learning experience and I keep learning to this day.

It's been eight years since I launched *Selene* and I now have my own imprint: [Raggedy Moon Books](#). I'm in negotiations to buy a venerable small press and its inventory. I've published eight of my own books in print and eBook and four in audio book. I have another novel, a novella, a couple of short stories, and a children's book in first draft waiting for me to polish, edit and publish. At least two of those should be out this year. I have two more novels partially done and outlined.

My sales have steadily grown as I get more books out in more formats allowing me to hire a part-time social media manager and have more time to write. I have a small, but loyal following, and hope to expand that as I enter into my next learning phase: all things discoverability. At least now I have several books for readers to discover. Many writers are afraid to take the plunge into indie publishing because they don't want to market their work. I totally understand, but unless you're a best seller or are on the first page of their quarterly sales catalog, traditional publishers will expect you to do your own marketing and promotion even if you do get a contract. Many former mid-list writers are jumping into the self-published game as they get their rights back and have found they are much richer for it, especially if they have an established fan base.

It's been a roller-coaster ride for this unintentional writer. I hope my story has inspired someone to tell their stories and to publish, whether with a traditional publisher or indie (as we're calling ourselves now). Did I mention that writing and publishing and marketing are **HARD WORK**? It's a good thing I love it!