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Frequently Asked Questions

How difficult was it to get your first piece of writing published?

Not hard at all, once I'd summoned up the courage- or desperation- to do it. My first novel *Rainstones* was shortlisted for the CBC and NSW Premier's awards; my first articles to the Canberra Times, Earthgarden and Hobby Farmer led to regular columns, and my first few gardening articles to a request to do a gardening book.

I was lucky; I was also desperate, and that was probably even more important than luck. I HAD to write publishable material; it was the only way I could think of to support myself and my young son in what was still a primitive shed in the bush. I simply didn't have enough money to relocate. But I was surprised at my success. I sent the first story away simply hoping to get enough money to register the car and a year later I was making a still small (but to me magnificent) reasonably regular income.

How do you become an author?.

Write. re write. rewrite again. And again. And again. Send it off. Be prepared to repeat this process for twenty years. If you're dedicated enough- and honest enough to keep improving your work, and don't close off your mind to the fact that OF COURSE it can be better, you'll get there. (But few people can do this; even fewer want to. If you both can do and want to, you're a born writer.)

How difficult is it for new writers entering the field?

I don't know. If you're brilliant, you'll have no trouble..well okay, yes you will, but not MUCH trouble. If you might be brilliant with a heck of a lot more work...you may find an editor who'll work through your book with you, but this is less and less likely as editorial staff numbers decline in most publishing houses.

If you're the Duchess of York you'll have no trouble either, no matter how boring your work is. If you're a good middle of the road writer...well, that's where luck comes in. It may also help to try a small publishing house first, or a new one looking for authors; or even self publish. Major publishing houses are more likely to accept you after your first book has been a success. So are agents.

Does writing run in your family?

Well, all the family tell stories..and don't let the facts get in the way of a good anecdote. My sister has written books on sex education for kids (her name is Wendy Darville) and Mum is a journalist, though she wasn't when I was growing up, and Grandpa wrote a book about his experiences as a psychiatrist, and Dad writes decent doggerel and sometimes more serious pieces on management...we all love books, and are all expert with words, but in very

different ways. We're all good public speakers too, and that HAS been useful!

Were you good at writing at school?

Yes, very (she says modestly). My first book was called *Tresses and the Unghostly Ghost*. I wrote it when I was six and the headmistress liked it so much she had a copy run off for every kid in the school. It was about a haunted horse. (The ghost noises were particularly good). That was followed by *Mary and the Disappearing Fish* (they were found in a cave below the sea...that one had an exploding volcano too, and a tsunami) and then a couple set in ancient Egypt, also with volcanoes, earthquakes, strange tunnels etc..

What the worst thing about being an author?

People keep giving you spoons. Can't think of anything really bad..

Do you think I could be a writer?

Of course...but I do need to give you a word of warning.

I love playing the violin- but I am a really lousy violin player. That's because I don't enjoy playing the violin enough to ever practise it...I just play when I feel like it. I'm an amateur violinist, and always will be.

Well, it's the same with writing stories. You may love writing stories- but unless you love writing them enough to WORK at them, spend weeks and months or years improving them, going over and over and over them, you don't really want to be a professional writer.

Professional writers WORK at their stories. Yes, of course you need talent too. But just as a professional football player needs to spend years training for every match they play, a professional writer needs to spend years working at their books.

If you don't enjoy the work- and aren't prepared for a heck of a lot of it- don't think of being a writer.

How many drafts do you do of each book?

I don't know. I work on a computer, so I can just go over and over the story making changes, rather than separate drafts. Some books like 'The Boy Who Had Wings' need a lot of rewriting, others like 'Walking the Boundaries' had only about six words changed.

How long does it take to finish a book?

Four weeks or two years or ten years - I write very quickly, and don't like to do ANYTHING else while I am concentrating on a book. But by the time I sit down to write I've been mulling the book over for at least a year - often many years, and sometimes the research can take many months as well.

'Soldier on the Hill' took a lot of research, especially into the way people talked in 1942 - and to make sure I didn't put in any Americanisms or other phrases not used in Australia back then.

After I finish writing a book I leave it alone for a few months or even a couple of years, then go back and revise it and rewrite and rewrite till I just can't stand it anymore and shove it off to the publisher.

Some books need very little rewriting. Some like *Daughter of the Regiment* I throw in the waste paper bin and do the whole thing again. (I tried to write *Daughter of the Regiment* as a short story. But it didn't work, because I was hurrying it too much. so I left it alone for a year then rewrote it as a novel...which did work.)

Have you had any problems publishing your books? Not really. All my books have been accepted as soon as I sent them in and some are translated into French and German or sold in the USA, Canada, New Zealand or UK as well.

Do you like reading?

I am a reading addict. I'll read the phone book if there is nothing else around. I don't think I'd be able to list all the other authors I admire - there are too many. Patrick White, because he has the power to see things so clearly, and Ursula le Guin and Randolph Stowe... but I enjoy thrillers and romances too and now I write so much fiction I find myself reading it less and less - more biographies and history and natural sciences.

I never read gardening books. They are too often wrong (and I get annoyed) or boring.

What are your favourite foods?

My favourite foods are chocolate, chocolate and chocolate, followed by cherries, watermelon, Chinese cloud swallows and char grilled or marinated octopus - which we hardly ever get here as our town doesn't have a fish shop or a very large supermarket.

What are your hobbies?

In my spare time I read and mooch around the bush and swim in the creek and gossip (gossip is a very good way of getting material for books) but in a sense I never have spare time, as anything that happens may be cannibalised and turned into fiction. I also love cooking and gardening - but they aren't really spare time activities, as I also write gardening books - and my family demands to be fed.

What are your major influences?

Wombats - I'm not joking. Wombats are determined, but have a very great sense of the quality of life - which for a wombat means dirt and food. Also the valley where I live, which is part of my life in many senses. and people... but I'd have to list hundreds. 'Seasons of Content' (which is for adults, but kids would enjoy it too) says more about the wombats and the place and the people.

What is your attitude to drugs?

I drink coffee like a drug - to wake me up to work and chocolate too - I only eat it when I'm working - one novel probably makes me put on four kilos of chocolate.

But as for other drugs - I find it very hard to understand people using them. One

of my chief joys is actually looking at the world, smelling it, hearing it, understanding it, analysing it - and using drugs interferes with all of that. I like reality - and daydreams that are made up of bits of reality, made into exactly the sort of world I want.

I've never met anyone who takes drugs that I really respect- though I have met people who've given up drugs (after incredible effort) who I do respect- who have found what's important in their lives and have had the strength to change.

What were your favourite subjects at School?

My favourite subjects when I was at school were English of course, and history and ancient history - maths and art were problems for me, as I am severely dyslexic. I am the worst artist I've ever come across - but I love creating gardens and houses, so it almost makes up for not being able to draw. My son loves drawing though - mostly portraits.

How did you become so informed about aboriginal culture?

Not sure - part I grew up with, part when I worked in an anthropology museum, part study at university, part just asking questions around here, part research - old books, diaries - partly from friends and Aboriginal people I've known. None of my ancestors were Aboriginal. At least one had dark skin, but I don't know what her background was. Grandma always said she had dark skin because she was Welsh - and it wasn't till I was an adult and had met many Welsh people that I realised that none of them had dark skin!

Any other details?

I was born in Sydney on 29 November 1953, grew up on the outskirts of Brisbane, left my mother's house when I was 15, went to university at 16 and went bush at 18 when I got my degree, with a short break when I worked in the public service for a few years to get enough money to buy this place. My parents separated after many years of unhappiness when I was 12 - it wasn't a happy childhood, which is perhaps one of the reasons I began telling stories.

Who had the greatest influence on your becoming a writer?

I think most people are born writers- the passion for words and stories has to come from within you. I can't remember ever not making up stories, or playing with words in various combinations. But both my parents encouraged me to read- my mother used to scour the bookshops for me to see if another lot I hadn't read had come in, and take me by tram to libraries far afield where there might be a few books I hadn't read. One of my great disappointments was finding out that libraries mostly had the same books...I thought that if I'd go to another library there'd be a whole new lot of books waiting for me! (Libraries weren't as well stocked in those days either- our school library didn't even have enough books for every kid to borrow one!)

My grandmother Jean McPherson French also sent me lots of great Australian books- all the ones that the CBC gave prizes. Books by Australian authors were pretty rare in those days, and I was lucky to be one of the first lot of Australian kids who regularly read words about the land I lived in.

Why did you become a writer?

I was broke. I needed \$106.40 to register the car, and sending off a story was the only way I could think to do it. I was living in a shed in the bush with a young child at the time. The story was accepted, and I went on from there...

But I had always WANTED to be a writer. Just hadn't the courage to do anything about it...or possibly the desperation that made me really WORK at my story, to make it the best that I possibly could. I think that bit is what really did it....

Have you always liked reading?

Yes, passionately. Still do. I'd pine if I couldn't read.

I read that you are dyslexic. How has that affected your writing?

I doubt I'd be a writer if I wasn't dyslexic.

There was a study of road accident victims who had certain sorts of brain injuries in the US a few years ago...can't recall who did it now. After their accident their verbal IQ, or intelligence, went up by an average of 15 points. The study concluded that it's as though the visual part of the brain suppresses the verbal. In other words, if you are dyslexic you may be much more intelligent with the way you use words than you might have been otherwise. This doesn't mean that being dyslexic makes you a genius! But it does explain why so many good word spinners are dyslexic. With my form of dyslexia too (it's a very common form) it's as though the brain goes too fast to process the images in front of it. One way to tell if someone has the form of dyslexia I have is to get them to look at a word. If the word blurs before about 10 seconds is up, they have a problem.

It's much easier for someone with my form of dyslexia to read LOTS of words than to read a single word on the page. So the sad thing is that so many kids with my problem are given 'Run Spot Run!' remedial books that just make the problem much worse! I can still remember the terror in my first year at school when each kid in the class had to read a single word on the board. I didn't even know what they meant! But luckily I had learnt to read when I was about three, just looking at the page while my mother read to me...but the teachers didn't discover I could read till they found me illegally in the library one lunch time, nearly finished *Black Beauty*! I could read that okay...but not a single word on the blackboard!

Once someone with my form of dyslexia (I won't call it a disability, because I don't think it is) learns to read, they are usually a very fast reader. I read faster than anyone I know- and the more books you absorb, the more techniques you absorb to write with.

But even if dyslexia isn't a disability (I think it gives me a lot more than it takes away), *it is a problem*. I spell badly; though I'm improving all the time- I was

VERY bad when I wrote my first book. It's almost impossible for me to pick up mistakes when I type (well, that's a good excuse anyway), and I can never work out which way to unscrew a bottle of honey or find my way out of a car park...but that has probably nothing to do with being dyslexic!

What do you plan to do next?

More of the same, I hope: more books, wombats, fruit trees, long breakfast conversations and swimming in the creek.