

## A WRITER IS AN ARMCHAIR TRAVELER

By Lin Stepp

“Writing a book is similar to launching and carrying out a voyage” (B. Francis) – and writers are always eagerly planning out, fantasizing, and envisioning the next “armchair” trip. I believe there is a distinct traveling-writing urge in every writer – and the best thing about writing to me is being an armchair traveler. Writing is a way to travel – not so much to other places – as to other lives. I vicariously live in all sorts of other lives and roles as a writer that I would never have time to “live in” within my own life span.

Writing is powerful, too. As Stephen King wrote: “When you’re writing, you’re creating your own worlds.” In much of life, people are powerless. Life happens, events occur ... and people have to ride the current of it, like it or not. They have to work with the life they are given – to a certain degree. In writing, an author can shape the lives of others and determine the events that happen to them. I love that.

“Writers wander around in a fantasy world” (V. Martin) – and it’s fun!! I have a big imagination. I have always wished I could live a multitude of different lives and try different careers I haven’t had time to experience. Writing gives me the luxury of exploring all those lives, careers, and experiences I could never pack into one lifetime. King wrote that ‘writing is a kind of inspired play for the writer’ – and I find that to be true. I have a youthful, imaginative personality – and a lot of the “little kid” left in me. Writing lets me joyfully play by creating other worlds and lives through story.

Phillip Gulley claimed, “There is a joy in creating that is unmatched by any other joy.” That is so true for me. “There is a kind of pure joy I feel when I’m taking on a character ... when I’m there nothing else exists.” (S. Field). I love the creative high of writing – of planning, plotting researching, creating characters, envisioning story, putting words to paper. Klass said it so well: “I love the sound of words, the sight of words on the paper.” I love building gentle new worlds with words; of discovering the story and letting the characters begin to live it out.

Life is somewhat of a solitary venture many days. But when I write, I am never lonely or solitary. Fosdick found a creative way to express this: “We are not solitary when we think; we are full of voices.” I am never solitary when I write – because I am full of the voices of my characters. I am “in the story”, a part of the story, living with and enjoying the emotions and adventures. The characters become friends – family – and as the novel grows to a close, I yearn to slow the writing – to avoid saying goodbye to those I have come to know so well. Literary agent Natasha Kern wrote that ‘the good writer needs to pull the reader into another point of view and into another world they don’t want to leave.’ I think because I get so immersed in my characters’ worlds – that I take my readers there with me. They write me saying they experience the same reluctance I do as the book closes – they’ve become caught up in the story and hate for it to end. I like knowing I’ve taken them into my “escapist” armchair adventures so well!

Another facet of writing I enjoy – as a psychologist, teacher, creator, and Christian – is knowing I might impact lives as a writer. As Robert McAfee explained: ‘I think writers write because they want to change things ... because they have the conviction they can make a difference.’ In

writing, I can show how love, friendship, and kindness affect lives positively, how pains, betrayals, hurts, and wrongs can be overcome. I can paint pictures demonstrating how people can find new meaning and new paths after hardship – and I can show how sweet finding someone to love and share a lifetime with can be. Tenny’s words express this beautifully: “Books are the way I go home with people.”

In writing books and in reading books – I learn, I love, I find escape, I experience inspiration. “In fantasies,” Viorst wrote, “our wishes can always come true.” It’s one of the reasons I favor romance writing. The harshness of life can always have a happy ending. Because the world can be a difficult place, an unloving and uncaring place – I enjoy creating books filled with kindness, love, beauty, simplicity, and hope. As C. Nelson Douglass put it so well: “Something I love about writing novels – is that unlike in life – I can determine what happens.” I can create a happy ending every time I write. I can let a hurt person find love, a troubled individual resolve their issues, an unfocused person discover their destiny.

I can take people to the places I love in my books, too. My current series of novels is set in the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. Through these books, I have the joy of taking readers traveling to the mountains with me to meet rural characters, to hike a quiet trail, to be touched by the beauty of a waterfall or sunrise, to experience the quiet and peace that being in nature can provide. I like vicariously transporting my readers to a place I love.

As Nora Roberts wrote, ‘creative eccentrics find a home in writing.’ I certainly have. I lament, as Laurie King does, that “the world is becoming filled with sameness, with men and women as alike as marbles, not a true eccentric in sight.” It does not surprise me that my characters are often eccentrics, as I am – marching to a different drummer, often out of tune with the regular conformity and restrictiveness of the world. I like them finding place and acceptance in my novels – coming to peace with their individuality.

Over my life, I have always been a creative person – a creative teacher, a creative crafts woman, a creative artist, a creative writer. But I think I have found the creative role of writing to be the most satisfying artistic venture of all. King called writing ‘magic – the water of life among the creative arts.’ That is true for me. It is the most intensive, the most satisfying art I have encountered – and, now, it has become my life and occupation. As Mildred Benson, famed author of all the Nancy Drew books said: “Writing is a way of life for me – it’s what I do for work.” That is so for me now. Writing is my primary job and profession – and “author” has become my primary title. It is now a disciplined part of my daily life – and I love it.

A professional writer enjoys the daily pleasure of being an armchair traveler. And it is a joy to sit in that chair with wings! Even writers in earlier centuries knew the delights of writing. Gustave Flaubert wrote: “It is a delicious thing to write, to be no longer yourself but to move in an entire universe of your own creating.” I am thankful every day that I get to enjoy the armchair journey of being a writer.

[Note. The Armchair Traveler concept was inspired by the book cover and concept of Anne Tyler’s 1988 book *THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST* – later made into a film]

*Dr. Lin Stepp is a writer, faculty member, and business woman. She is the author of The Smoky Mountain Series, a twelve book, regional, series of warm contemporary romances - with a dash of suspense, a touch of inspiration, and a big dollop of Appalachian flavor - all set in different regions around the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The first book in the series, THE FOSTER GIRLS, was published summer 2009, the second, TELL ME ABOUT ORCHARD HOLLOW, will come out spring 2010, and the third novel FOR SIX GOOD REASONS is scheduled for publication in 2011. For more information about Lin and her novels, see her author's website at: [www.linst pepp.com](http://www.linst pepp.com)*