

**Interview Questionnaire (from Lyn Hancock: The Ring: Memories of a Metis Grandmother)**

**What made you decide to become a writer?**

**At the subconscious level, probably before I went to school. It seems I was preparing to be the writer that I am today since childhood.**

**I have always had an interest in the spoken language. I was born with a lisp. You know - "Thithter Thuthie thewth thockths for tholdierth". So from about the age of eight to my early twenties, my English grandmother in Western Australia paid for me to go to elocution lessons where I learned to recite and act out the English classics - Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Romantics, Dickens - long before I knew what the works really meant. I remember memorizing the innocent poem *The Rape of the Lock* (of lover's hair), asked my mother what 'rape' meant and she immediately washed out my mouth with soap.**

**However, for all of those speech lessons, I didn't believe that I HAD a lisp. It wasn't till the age of eighteen when I had private students of my own but couldn't collect my teaching certificate while I had a speech defect, that I was sufficiently motivated to recognize the fact and do something about it. I was sent to a convent, shown a completely different way to get my tongue around the sound S and given lists of nonsense syllables to repeat around the clock - See, Ees, Eesee and so on. I spoke no proper English till my new method of making an S became as automatic as the lisped S. Maybe it was the prayers of the nuns but after ten years of futile attempts, I lost my lisp in three weeks. The power of motivation.**

**So from an early age, I studied and taught English and French literature, mime and movement, speech and drama. I studied the Bible and taught Sunday School. I digested parallelism and balance, rhythm and imagery. I acted out stories with my body and voice, I took photographs with my cameras, both movie and stills, I kept a diary, I talked a lot, I was passionate about communication. When I analyze my writing today I can detect this background, especially the speech teacher. My style is conversational, rhythmic, dramatic, graphic, and photographic. I live life like a story (which can get me into a lot of trouble sometimes) and I love telling stories of that life to a live audience, accompanied by my pictures. My stories make pictures and my pictures make stories.**

**As early as primary school, I entered and won essay competitions but I decided to be a teacher not a writer. In Western Australia we had to decide our career at the age of twelve. I don't think writer was on the list. However, when at the age of twenty-two I set off to see the world with one of my**

major destinations the Rome Olympics, I did ask the editor of the state newspaper *The West Australian* if I could send him stories from the Games. I sat in the Via Veneto with pen and paper and wrote a story of what happened one dramatic night when I smuggled myself into the Olympic Village. Trouble was, by the time I mailed the manuscript home to the other side of the world, the Olympics were well and truly over. I think other reporters phoned their stories back home but I knew only snail mail. Perhaps one of these years I will type that story into a book of memoirs.

After hitchhiking through Africa and Europe, studying and teaching in England and Montreal, I reached Vancouver, British Columbia to board a boat home to Western Australia to teach at university. On the eve of my departure I got engaged on my first date to a student wildlife biologist while flying around eagle nests on the west coast of Vancouver Island. "You're the first girl who hasn't got sick in my float plane. You Aussie girls must be tough. Marry me," asked David Hancock. I sent a telegram back to my family on the other side of the world. "Met the perfect man. Please prepare a wedding for next Saturday." They were stunned but Aussies are adaptable and I was married within a couple of weeks. My first present delivered to the church during the wedding ceremony was a live wedge-tailed eagle. My next test as a bride was to get it back to Canada. Sorry that's another book.

Within a month or so of my return to Canada, many more animal orphans were to land on my doorstep and take up residence in my backyard, my kitchen, my bed: eagles, puffins, sealions, bears, cougars, raccoons, even a gibbon ape, and as soon as I got a job teaching in Vancouver, and later Victoria, I took them all to school. You write what you are fascinated by and I was fascinated by my new life in Canada, not only the wildlife but a wilderness of islands, fiords, rainforests and human characters. When reporters interviewed us on our bizarre life, I started writing the stories in newspaper columns myself, followed by articles in magazines which attracted the attention of Sir William Collins of Glasgow who published the Bible, the Dictionary, Gerald Durrell and Joy Adamson. Sir William flew to BC to ask me to write a book. My first book *There's a Seal in my Sleeping Bag* became a bestseller around the world and is still available today almost half a century later in an updated form.

Nineteen books followed, all starting with a passion, all based on personal experience or launched from personal experience.

**How long have you been writing?**

I started writing in 1964 for publication and am still writing in 2009.

**Are you writing full time?**

Yes, I am clicking the keys for up to 18 hours a day but now it is less writing books and articles and more writing promotion materials especially on-line to keep my books in print, emails to keep my name circulated, and letters to solicit assignments and presentations.

**What are the good and the bad of being a writer?**

I love having the adventures, meeting the characters, doing the research, feeling the joy of having written, the greater joy of being published, and then the still greater joy of meeting my readers either by mail or in person, especially when they say they laughed with me, they cried with me, they learned with me. Simon Fraser University has just announced me as the recipient of the Outstanding Alumni Award for my contributions to writing, photography and nature education. Being recognized for the long hours that I spend at a desk getting the words on paper or a screen is one of the very good things about being a writer.

But It's a different world for a writer now. I do not love forcing myself to sit for up to eighteen hours a day at a computer doing jobs that publishers used to do. Nowadays, the writer has to be the editor, the publicist, the distributor and the retailer as well. The new technology can be freeing and more effective but it also can be daunting and frustrating especially for this Luddite Lyn. As a case in point, see my first blog on [www.lynhancock.com](http://www.lynhancock.com) I called it The Perils of Self Publishing. Next blog will be The Perils of Self Promotion.

**You wrote the book *The Ring*. Can you tell me a little bit about your book?**

Unlike my other books which are about my life with animals and outdoor adventure, or my life living and hitching planes, dogteams, canoes, and rubber dinghies around the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, *The Ring* is a departure.

It is a history of the Livingston and Howse families from the mid 1800s to the present day. It is the story of love between a Metis woman, Jane Howse, and Sam Livingston, a flamboyant Irishman and some of their farflung descendants. While Sam was walking, riding a horse or driving a wagon across the American prairie, Jane was riding a Red River cart across the Canadian prairie. Both seeking freedom in the west, they met at Fort Victoria near Fort Edmonton then following the last of the buffalo, they and their children rode south to the Bow and Elbow rivers where they became the first settlers in what would be known as Fort Calgary and later Calgary. Several buildings in Calgary are named after Sam and several places in the Canadian Rockies are named after Jane's grandfather, Joseph Howse. The town of Livingston, Wisconsin is named after the Livingston family in the U.S. Anybody reading this from there?

The history is told as a dialogue between Grandmother Jane and a grandson thus it is suitable for both younger and older readers. It has 235 pages, hundreds of illustrations, maps, archival images and photographs showing what life was like then and what life is like now. This story and stories still to be written about other descendants reminds me of another family history *The Forsyte Saga*. It would also make a unique film or documentary. Hollywood, are you viewing this screen? Screenwriter needed, and then of course money, lots of it.

### What influenced you to write *The Ring*?

It sounds strange but this history book starts, like most of my books, with an animal. Marilyn, one of the children in my grade six class at Monterey Elementary School in Victoria, British Columbia is the great-granddaughter of Sam and Jane. Marilyn cared for Gypsy, a gibbon ape who had been abandoned by her mother at the Seattle-Tacoma Zoo and came to live in our classroom. Yes, I did have an ape in my classroom for an entire school year (and the kids and I wrote a book about it called *An Ape Came Out of my Hatbox*. Unbelievable but true. Because of Gypsy, I developed a close relationship with Marilyn's family which led to the writing of the first book *Tell Me, Grandmother* in 1985 and now *The Ring*. In both books, Marilyn's dad, the grandson of Sam and Jane, asks Grandmother Jane to tell him about their exciting life as gold prospectors, buffalo hunters, fur traders and farmers. I hope this book will inspire others to delve into their own family histories.

Marilyn's mother, Marion Dowler, who did almost all of the research based on Walter Miles' (another family member) genealogies was motivated by the fact that people talked about Sam's side of the family but never Jane's Metis side. History books are rife with the exploits of explorers but rarely their wives whose skills enabled them to survive in primitive conditions.

My passion is to bring history alive for people today who mostly couldn't care less so my motivation apart from helping out the parents of children in my class was to start in the present with artifacts such as Grandmother's Jane's ring, go backwards in time to how it came to be, and then proceed on to the present and the future. I am a photographer, a highly visual person, so in *The Ring* I emphasize images as well as words. This also helps to bring history alive.

I am also a believer in chance and coincidence, miracles and the magic of storytelling. Consider this. In 1985 a stranger named Sam Letourneau phoned me to say that he had read the first story on Sam and Jane, a bestselling book called *Tell Me, Grandmother*, and wondered if he could be the grandson of Sam Livingston 1 as he had found his birth certificate which named him as Sam Livingston 111. Yes, he was and his sister, also mentioned in the book, had been looking for him futilely for over 60 years. Within days he flew to his sister's bedside. She was dying of cancer. To

learn the details, you will have to read the book. Every time I tell the details of this story, my listeners say they get goosebumps and I hear violins. It makes a memorable scene for a movie. Decades later, Sam 111's daughter, did the final layout of the book *The Ring* and within 48 hours of sending it to press, she decided to design a new cover. While waiting for the book to be printed, she told the printer, "Doing this book is like having a baby...sheesh!" I hope you the reader will be emotionally involved as well.

**How did you come up with the title to name your book?**

Excellent question. The first story titled *Tell Me, Grandmother* sounded too much like a kid's book, and nowadays kids don't refer to their grandmothers as Grandmother. They are more likely to call their grannies by their first name. A friend of mine, one of the many helpers who brought this book to fruition, suggested *The Ring*. Perhaps *Grandmother Jane's Ring* would have a better 'ring' (pardon the pun) to it, but then that would make it "just" a kid's book and this story is more universal than that. The title of *The Ring* signals the suspense that is set up in the first line of the first chapter. What is this mysterious ring that Jane keeps twisting around her finger? Her grandson has to wait to the end of the story to learn the answer. Marilyn who was the monitor for the gibbon in my grade six classroom is now the owner of this special ring and she has loaned it to the Gelnbow Museum in Calgary for several years. Back in 1985 I wore Jane's ring on a book tour across Canada and lost it for a period of 24 hours before it was found in a taxi. It is those kind of anecdotes - the story behind the main scenes - that I include in the current book. I hope it makes history more memorable. You can also think of the symbolism of a ring in the sense that history as I see it is a circle, present to the past and back to the present. After you read the book, you can probably see other meanings in *The Ring*.

**What is the feeling you get knowing that your book is out there for the world?**

This is my 20th book and every time I open the box from the publisher or printer delivering one's new book to the door, I feel the same pride as a mother giving birth. The pain of production is over and you want to present your baby to the world. *The Ring* has taken many years of dedicated effort by many people. Walter Miles of Spokane, Washington who produced the first genealogies wrote more than 15,000 letters (before the days of computers) in his two decades of research. Just in the last six or so years, *The Ring* has foundered on many rocks including disasters such as death and divorce and it has been rewritten many times.

But now is the time to reap the rewards. As anyone who knows the book business, these are seldom monetary. They come when a sister finds a longlost brother, when a brother finds he has a widespread family he never knew he had, when for the first time cousins meet cousins - or nieces or

nephews - in other cities or other countries, when families learn for the first time they have an aboriginal background and as a result enter whole new worlds, when some student or reader is inspired to ask their older relatives the same question Jane's grandson asked Jane, "Tell me....."

**What makes you feel that *The Ring* is an excellent book to read?**

Because you can read it on several levels. It cuts across a huge swath of history from Sam leaving Ireland to seek his fortune in America and Jane leaving the Red River settlement in what will become Manitoba to seek land and freedom in the Metis way right up to today (in fact, I learned some critical recent history just a few months before the book went to press and hastened to include it). I haven't told the whole story. This is a work in progress indeed. Sam and Jane had 14 children and each child has its own history. It is written in a user-friendly way to attract all ages of reader. It is highly pictorial and some say a picture is worth a thousand words (mind you, I did include the thousand words, in fact many more). It has unusual unexpected anecdotes such as my involvement beginning with an ape. And the book doesn't end with the story. It continues with what happens while the book is being written and after it is published - scenes of how and where it was researched and promoted, scenes crossing the country to present it to media, libraries, stores, schools and interest groups, meeting with family at regular reunions, linking it to blogs (see mine at [www.lynhancock.com](http://www.lynhancock.com) and [www.grandmotherjanesring.com](http://www.grandmotherjanesring.com)). And it has an extensive index, reference list and author biography. But then people often judge a book by its cover. *The Ring* has had a number of different covers. The presently published one was born just a few hours before delivery. What do you think? Comment here or on my websites or to my email address [lynhancock@shaw.ca](mailto:lynhancock@shaw.ca)

**Will you be writing more books?**

I spent three years promoting my last book *Tabasco the Saucy Raccoon* (and that was published by an established publisher). I hope the internet and word of mouth will now take over the selling of *The Ring* so I can spend my next years in writing children's books on each of the animal orphans I raised and took to school. Kids have written to me on Facebook and by email telling me their most memorable school years were the ones they shared with a seal or sea lion, a cougar, a bear, a coatimundi, a gibbon. Who wouldn't? Sure beats Mary's little lamb! Remember my childhood and early adulthood? I want to do more story telling presentations. In fact, I enjoy talking about my writing than actually writing.

**Is there anything else you would like to add about your book? (Special comments, announcements, notices, etc).**

Yes, do read it and write to me how you felt about it, whether it is good or bad. I printed it out and even published it at least a dozen times (I don't

trust editing on screen) so there would be no errors, either in content or spelling or formatting. Did I succeed? Rarely does a book get published without errors. I hope this book is one of those rarities. Most books are sold through word of mouth so I hope you will pass the word around the ring (there's that pun again) to your neighbour, your school, library or store, your history or genealogy society, your local newspaper or radio or TV station, your social media site, my website, this site. And if you think you could be related to the Howse or Livingston family I would love to hear from you and connect you to other relatives.

I will attach a press release. Feel free to pass that around *The Ring* as well. Oops! Just remembered..is there a screenwriter or film producer reading this? Have I got a story for you!!

Thank you readers. Every writer needs one, more than one.

Lyn Hancock