

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF

My mother said that when she nursed me as a baby she had to wear 'steel nipples.' Four decades ago, the New York Times interviewed me for my first book *There's a Seal in my Sleeping Bag* and said that I had "enough energy and enthusiasm to light up the streets of New York." Last week a Nanaimo magazine reviewed my twentieth book *The Ring: Memories of a Metis Grandmother* and called me "a dynamo." So I guess I have always been this way. Energetic. Hyperactive. Intense. A typical Capricornian, trying to do everything, get to the top and never satisfied. Fortunately, I see the sunny side of life, have a sense of humour and can laugh at myself.

I see life as a story – even when I am chased by a grizzly or nearly drowning in a wild river (fortunately I lived to tell those tales and you can read them in *Winging it in the North*. Born in Western Australia, I have always had an obsession for travel and adventure and I seek out the most remote parts of the planet. I take chances, talk to strangers, am amazed by coincidences, keep a diary, and write what fascinates me. Like hitching alone through Africa, surviving apartheid riots, elephant stampedes and a Congo bloodbath, running from bandits in Belize, trying to have a baby while crossing the Northwest Passage in a rubber boat, accepting the invitation of two Poles in Resolute to walk to the North Pole, sleeping with apes and mountain lions, or sitting for nine hours in an eagle nest on Vancouver Island with two eaglets on my lap. This adventure led to Sir William Collins commissioning my first book.

I am fascinated by life's experiences and I feel compelled to communicate them - in 20 books of my own, in contributions to others, and in countless articles and pictures. Although I write non-fiction, booksellers and librarians often put me on the fiction shelves. Perhaps they don't believe that I write from personal experiences. Stories are everywhere and not yet have I had to make them up. I encourage my audiences to tell their own stories too, especially after reading my latest book *The Ring: Memories of a Metis Grandmother*. My only regret is not doing all that I want to do – despite that proverbial energy and enthusiasm.

WHAT IS YOUR LATEST PUBLISHED WORK?

Unlike my other books which are about my life with animals and outdoor adventure, or my life in BC, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, my latest book, *The Ring: Memories of a Metis Grandmother, the pioneer love story of Sam and Jane Livingston, the first settlers in Calgary*, is a family history which spans 300 years and stretches from Ireland to United States and Canada coast to coast. It is the personal story of explorers, fur traders, gold prospectors, buffalo hunters, missionaries, freedom seekers, western settlers, early farmers. It is a mystery, a ghost story, a love story,

Yet it too began with a wild animal, an orphan gibbon ape that lived for a year in my grade six classroom at Monterey Elementary School in Victoria, BC. Gypsy the Gibbon's story is told in *An Ape Came Out of my Hatbox* and *Gypsy in the Classroom*. Two of my students who cared for Gypsy were the great grandchildren of Sam and Jane Livingston and they and their parents asked me to help them tell their story in a book called *Tell Me, Grandmother* in 1985. It was published by McClelland and Stewart, sold 6000 copies and went through a few printings. I am told it sells on the internet for over a hundred dollars. The new book *The Ring: Memories of a Metis Grandmother* (for \$24.95 a lot cheaper!) contains the original story plus a lot more – over 200 photos (archival and modern), maps, illustrations and new stories.

One of those new stories shows how books produce miracles. Briefly, Sam and Jane had 14 children but their 13th child Sam 11, the unlucky one, died at 25 leaving two children, four-year-old Myrtle and two-year-old Sam 111. Sam 11's widow gave their baby son away for adoption and he grew up not knowing who he was or where he came from. His sister spent her life looking for him. How they eventually found each other is the miracle of *The Ring*.

So *The Ring* has several meanings: it is Grandmother Jane's wedding ring which she got on the day of her husband's funeral, it is the ring that binds relatives together, the young and the old, and it is the ring that joins the past and the present.

I have yet to write my own family history and its coincidences – the story of my grandmother Elizabeth who left England to come to Western Australia as a pioneer (like Sam left Ireland to come to North America), how Nana married an Aussie nicknamed Jailer Taylor, how she and her family cared for aboriginal convicts, how the native prisoners taught my father how to hunt quokkas, catch lobster, fish, canoe and swim on Sundays when they were allowed to leave their concrete cells. I will be writing this story at the end of my life. Till then I want to inspire my readers through the questions Dennis asks Grandmother Jane to starting researching and writing their own family histories. Don't make my mistakes. Seek and keep mementoes of your relatives. My Nana gave me her very old and valuable pearl ring. Grandmother Jane's grandson loaned me her very old and valuable gold ring. I wore them together on the same hand when I was telling people in Toronto about this book. I lost my Nana's ring and I lost Grandmother Jane's ring. You can imagine how I felt, how I still feel. I have never found my own grandmother's ring but I was very lucky to find Grandmother Jane's ring two days later in the back seat of a taxi on the floor. Now it is owned by her great granddaughter Marilyn, the student in my grade six class who cared for Gypsy a long time ago, and now it is safe and sound for everybody to see in a special glass case in the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. Go see it. Read *The Ring*.

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR IDEAS FROM?

That's easy. Ideas are everywhere. I know I have several angels who so far have kept me safe in my many adventures but I think I also have the Spirit of Writing who leads me to see the story in these adventures or the people that I meet when I have them. I thought that people only wrote books when something really amazing happened to them like taking a trip to a far off planet – or any planet for that matter. But you can find stories in your own backyard. Now I am lucky in that I found really amazing stories and characters in my actual Vancouver backyard – Sam an orphan fur seal from Alaska who got sick while swimming down to California and was washed ashore on Vancouver Island, Bubu the bear, Tom, Lara, Oola and Tammy the cougars, Reginald the Stellers sea lion, Scarlett the Macaw, and various other characters that people (is that the right word?) the pages of my first four animal books – eagles, falcons, murrets, puffins, and tortoises.

But you can write about another backyard – the backyard of your imagination. I write what I am fascinated about, what I want to tell someone about. For me, everyday life provides the ideas and I have far more ideas than I have time to turn into stories. I write stories of what really happens in my life ie non-fiction (and I mean non-fiction not just fiction based on fact). Someday I may write stories that I imagine. I will still start from a character that I know in real life. For example, while I was going to Simon Fraser University but living in the Okanagan, I had a raccoon companion called *Tabasco the Saucy Raccoon*. When Tabasco reached adulthood she wandered away and though she was doing what comes naturally, I mourned her departure. Three weeks later, she returned, sick, with a fractured pelvis. She never wandered away again. What happened to her in those three weeks? It could be an imagined story someday but the idea for it started in the real life of my backyard.

When The Spirit of Writing first hit me I was sitting in an eagle nest for nine hours with two eaglets on my lap and the parent birds sitting on perches of nearby trees in the coastal rain forest of BC. I had travelled the world for more than two years but this was the first occasion that I thought was really unusual and I wanted to tell someone about it, first to my diary then to my mother in a letter then in a newspaper article then in a magazine and then in a book – *There's a Seal in my Sleeping Bag*, the one that attracted the attention of my first publisher Sir William Collins. I am still telling that story when I give presentations to live audiences.

So my ideas always come from my fascination with some thing, some place, some person, some event. Feeling surprise, laughter, sorrow, awe. Seeing my first polar bear in the Arctic lounging on his haunches with his back against a rock smelling a tiny tundra flower in his paw. Photographing caribou in the Antarctic strolling among waddling penguins and sunbaking sea lions. Hanging Christmas lights on an

iceberg to light up an Inuit village. Bussing around villages in Belize and just talking to the people you meet. If you just open your eyes, ask questions, notice differences not similarities, hang a pencil, tote a camera, carry a notebook, you will always find ideas for stories. Even in your own backyard.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON RIGHT NOW?

I have had 19 books published by mainstream publishers - my personal experience books and the books that are written on the places where I have lived and travelled (*Nunavut, Yukon, Northwest Territories, Winging it in the North, Western Canada Travel Smart* and others - but I decided to independently publish *The Ring: Memories of a Metis Grandmother* because I wanted to do it my way and I am proud of it. I think my co-author Marion Dowler, the mother of my former students in the Gypsy class, would be pleased if she had lived to see it published. But the downside of self publishing is that the author (me) has to do all the work of promotion, marketing and distribution and work outside the established system. So at the moment I spend my days (and nights) organizing websites, Facebook pages, Linked In commentary, slide shows, writing letters, press releases, arranging readings and presentations, phoning colleagues, doing on-line interviews, mailing books and invoices, and researching all the new and ever changing modes of communication via the internet. It is not nearly as easy, enjoyable and productive as sitting at your computer and turning your diaries, notes, photos and clippings into another story on your computer.

Soon I must be stern and say, "That's enough. My baby, my book, is born. I have announced its birth to as much of the world as I can. Now it must stand on its own." And then I can pursue all the other ideas that are teeming in my diaries, my photos and my head.

DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS OR ADVICE FOR ASPIRING AUTHORS?

Keep your antenna up and running. Carry pen and paper (or some newfangled gadget you know more about than I do) and a camera. Open your eyes and your mind. Be on the lookout for things and places and people and experiences that enthuse, intrigue, concern you, that make you laugh or cry. See your world in pictures. Read as much as you can. Aloud. You learn to write by writing. Remember there is more prewriting and rewriting in writing than writing. Read your first drafts aloud to a listener. Find out if what you thought you wrote is what you actually wrote. Be prepared and patient enough to go back to the drawing board of your mind and do another draft – and another.

I wrote almost 300 pages of *An Ape Came out of my Hatbox* and *Gypsy in the Classroom* in less than three weeks, night and day. It was easy because the subject was in my heart, my mind, my soul, and I had done my homework. I was surrounded by diaries, notebooks full of thoughts and random jottings, books of library and university research. The only hard part was the end. Gypsy died. I knew that most readers, mostly adults, did not want me to kill off the main character in the last chapter, even if that is what happened. But I had to tell the story as it happened as with children honesty is the only way. I closed the door, surrounded myself with Kleenex, and started to type the dreaded words.

I thought it would be impossible. But if you are totally immersed in what you are writing, you will find that the words write themselves. It was as if the Spirit of Writing took over my fingers and clicked their way to the end of the chapter and the book. When I read what was written I found that past tense changed to the more dramatic present, that long sentences became short, that the words sang to a climax powered by hope and inspiration. A picture and a poem finished the book. Stories aren't necessarily always told in words.

DO YOU HAVE A CRAZY STORY ABOUT AN ASPECT OF THE WRITING LIFE, PERHAPS FROM A SCHOOL VISIT OR AN EVENT?

Yes. It sounds unbelievable but it's true. Writers are always writing even when they are not at their computers – and even when they are being chased by a grizzly bear. I tell you this from personal experience. A few summers ago, I was hiking the tundra near the Yukon Northwest Territories border

when I realized that I was being chased by a grizzly. As I was running, probably stumbling is the better word, I wasn't thinking of throwing it my lunch, hitting it on the head with my tripod, or playing dead. I was actually thinking this would make a good story, if only I lived to tell the tale. More than that. I was thinking of who would read it, where would I sell it – it is important when you are writing to have an audience in mind, to write as if you are talking to your reader. But most important, I was thinking of what I would say in the first sentence, the lead, the lure, the hook that gets the reader to turn the page. Where would I begin? With what I had for breakfast at the naturalist lodge at the beginning of the day? Boring. Too many writers start too far back in the story. Noon time when I was sitting by a stream with my guide and feeling nervous because I felt something was following me yet on the treeless plain of the tundra you can see for miles around and I could see nothing to be frightened about. A better start because it gets your reader wondering if there's going to be something following the two characters. But I had an even better beginning. When I wrote that story for an outdoor magazine first and then a chapter in a book *Winging it in the North* I began in the afternoon, at the most exciting point, when I am running away from the bear and I can almost feel its claws in my backside.

And if you want to know how I did live to tell that tale, well, you will have to get the book. It is out of print at the moment but try a library.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

Please visit my website www.lynhancock.com and www.grandmotherjanesring.com to view all my books and some of my photographs. Keep clicking and you will find some unusual pictures – of me wearing a raccoon on my head and a bear on my back, pulling a swimming bald eagle out of the sea, playing leapfrog and sleeping with a cuddly 200-lb pound mountain lion, and one picture that was published in the National Enquirer. I wonder if you can guess which one. You can also see what people think of my books, pictures and presentations. I love connecting with my readers and helping them write their own stories. So teachers and librarians can contact me from the website if they want me to visit their schools and libraries. And keep visiting as a Calgary web designer is revamping the site with a real zany and colourful home page that shows a video of me presenting in a school where one of my former students is now the teacher. That video is also on You Tube.