

Anne Louise MacDonald Transcript, March 2013

Interviewees: Vivian Howard & Lee Danielle Hubbard

Transcription: Lee Danielle Hubbard

Where are you currently living?

Where you're sitting: just outside Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

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When and why did you start writing?

When and why...that is the hardest question of all. It is part of who I am, really. I've been telling stories all my life to entertain myself. I had a lot of stories in my head. I had one particular incident happen to me. I was an artist – a visual artist – at the time, and I saw a scene that I really, really wanted to paint. There was no way to stop and do it, so I thought: "I'll come back, the scene will be there, but the light will be different, so I'll describe the light and colours and then I'll be able to capture that and put it in a painting."

Describing the light and the colours and the mood – it was so difficult. Painting a picture with words was so challenging. It was also really exciting, trying to find just the right words for things. Start putting those words on paper – all the stories I had in my head. I thought: "Heck, I can do that too." And so I did, and that's basically how I got started.

But I couldn't and wouldn't have told you before the age of 35 that I wanted to be a writer, because I didn't know at that point. Once I started writing, it was all I wanted to do. Very, very clear – it was just so much fun.

It's hard work. You write, and write, and write, and then throw away so much stuff. I thought: "I'll start easy. I'll start with a picture book. Very short. That should be easy, right?" Nobody told me it was the hardest competition – picture books are just about as easy as a novel, because it's a novel in under a thousand words. But it was a wonderful skill, to have learned to write and condense all your story and thought into very small packages. When I started writing novels, I could keep them tight, focused, and that's my style I guess. I'm told I have a style.

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What do you think are some of the prevalent themes in your writing? How would you describe to someone what it is you write?

The themes have never really changed. All we've got is a whole whack of true stories, true emotional events from my life – and people around me – kind of jumbled together and put

into fiction. Quite commonly, a main character is struggling with life like I did as a child. I'm not saying I had a terribly difficult childhood, but I was very shy, very creative, which made me very separate from a lot of children. All those kinds of challenges – no matter what, whether it's extreme bullying, right down to just being a redhead versus everybody else – all these differences are totally universal. I just addressed the things that affected me most emotionally, and then everybody else gets it, you know?

There was some bullying in my life. Certainly knowing I was different in many ways, I never quite knew the answer. I remember walking across school one day and thinking: "What's going on in other kids' heads? There's all this stuff going on in my head – I wonder if it's going on in everyone else's?" And then going: "I really don't think so." So I became aware. It was a lot busier up here [points at her head] than those girls who want to look great and look at pictures of boys.

My characters are usually quite challenged emotionally, as are all children. Being ten, eleven, twelve is really, really, *really* tough. Every time I meet an adult who says: "Oh, to be a kid again, life would be easy!" I'm like: "You don't remember a thing, do you?" Because it's not easy; it's the hardest time we have, and that's why I write about it. I'm always going back there, to when I was a kid of twelve.

But then I also include issues that have come up in my life as I've grown older. My mother got Alzheimer's, and that's in my first novel, and elements of that. My current book...I've had cancer in the '90s, and in my current book, I'm now dealing with that. One the characters is going through what I went through. So it's cathartic. I get stuff out.

I don't like someone, I can write about it in my book. If I really like you, you're in my book too! They never know who they are; they don't recognize themselves. Early on, before I had anything published, I was still learning to write, I was taking a *very* good creative writing course which was one of my stages of education. They asked us to do a one-act play, and I wrote it about three sisters and a father. The father had very particular characteristics, and of course I drew it from my siblings and my father. When the One Act Play Festival was put on, they gave the script to my father. Unknown to me, he was doing some acting at the time. I was flabbergasted. He read it, and had no idea it was him. It was like a cartoon, a caricature of someone, but he didn't see it. When my own father didn't recognize himself, I felt safe after that. Just write.

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Do you have a favourite genre? Is there a reason you've tried all these different forms?

I always wanted to write a novel. So that's still my favourite genre – the young adult novel, the children's novel. The books that have affected me most in my life, even to date, are

books read in that age range, from ten to fifteen. Very impactful, emotional books. That's a really critical age. If I can write a book that really inspires or entertains someone of that age, or better yet, gives someone a grounding, a growth, an understanding in something they didn't have an understanding of, even if it's just the tiniest little thing – I think that's my main reason for it.

I always thought I couldn't write novels because it takes a great deal of time to write novels. At some point I just gave up *wanting* to do it, and just set the alarm clock an hour earlier every day, and got up and started, and that was that. After my first novel did very well, I recognized that writing was *so* important to me. I was working all the time at a job that, at the time, wasn't working for me emotionally. So I went part-time, I negotiated to get my job to a part-time position. I'd start writing.

The non-fiction book I put out was because there is a lot I want to teach and that is one way of doing it. Other information that is in that particular book is being slipped into my novels all along. If I have a pet peeve, or something I really have to say, it gets said, only no one happens to notice.

Some notice. Some children have read my first novel and they say: "I learned so much about horses." I just have a character who knew stuff, and so I kept putting it in in ways that wasn't didactic, that wasn't too teachy preachy, as part of the child's life. Little things, the kinds of things that children don't learn unless someone tells them, unless they experience it the hard way. And it's really nice, when working with horses in particular, to *not* experience it the hard way.

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Both your novels are set in Antigonish, with the same cast of characters. Do you consider these books a series? Is the book you're working on now going to be part of that series?

My editor says it's not a series, but they are connected. Series have to pretty much drop onto the bookshelves every year. If it's been almost ten years since the book was out before you get around to the third one – it doesn't work that way.

But they *are* connected. Antigonish, Antigonish County, the mannerisms and customs of this county – that's what I know. Obviously you write what you know. Well, I don't even know I know it – it's just there. When you get told by your editor in Toronto that Antigonish is as much a main character in your book as your main character, you go: "Oh! Okay..." Go with it. But I couldn't do otherwise, because the way they speak – the way *we* speak – the way things happen...I had quite an argument with her one day and she said: "Most people wouldn't speak to that child in that situation." I'm like: "Yeah, they would." Or: "You're not going to walk down the street in Toronto and..." "Yeah, but this isn't Toronto. This is Antigonish. You're in the

middle of the woods, in the middle of nowhere – of course that guy's going to say *hi* to that kid." It's just a whole new world to a lot of my readers, so it becomes very clear that that's a distinct part of the book.

I'd like, in the future, to write science fiction and make up worlds that never existed, but I think I'll stick with Antigonish County for now. I have one more book I'm right in the middle of that *is* connected, but it's not essential that it be connected. It's comfortable – there are some interesting characters.

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Horses are clearly a very important part of your writing, and your life outside your writing. Can you tell us why you love these animals, and what about them makes you want to feature them in your writing?

I'm going to start by saying: I had a very interesting conversation yesterday with someone I hadn't met before. I asked her if her grandchildren were interested in horses. She had a four-year-old and a five-year-old granddaughter. She said: "Well, they've never met one yet." And I said: "But are they interested in horses?" "But they've never met one yet." And I said: "But when I was too young to speak, I would crawl up to the television set, and scream, and bang on it every time I saw a horse." I didn't meet one until I was five, and I was crazy about horses. I was born that way. You can blame it on my grandmother, or *whatever* genetics came down to me.

So it's not a thing; that's just who I am. No other way I can be but fascinated with horses. Write what you know.

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Would you ever consider another novel, or a longer piece of writing, that doesn't have horses in it? Or do you think horses will always be important to your writing?

I do have a book – a novel that's been in my head for 30 years – and I thought I'd write it as I originally had it. And then, gosh darnit, there's a horse in it now! It just morphed into something else. Oh, why not stick with the horse thing? There's more I have to say about them.

I'm living in a time of change when it comes to horses, and horse care, and how people understand and work with horses. Do you realize it's the only animal you're allowed to hit with a stick? Well that's not acceptable to me. There are so many other ways and attitudes towards horses that can be changed. I would like to slide that in sideways into everything I write. If I can, say, have a twelve-year-old take a riding lesson, and the riding instructor says: "Do it this way,"

but in their head they know there's another way, then I've planted a seed. So I got a lot of fuel to burn.

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Your non-fiction book is illustrated with your own photography. How does photography fit into your vision of writing?

That was a happy coincidence. Some years ago, in 2008, my husband who's a very good photographer hadn't really picked up the digital photography very much. He bought the camera, but he didn't get back into it in any way. It was one of those things he was very good at. My sister thought he might enjoy it more if he could share it. She had joined Flickr online and was putting up pictures – it's a photo-sharing community where you comment. She said: "Why don't you get Frank to join Flickr?" I'm like: "Well, I can't just *tell* him to." She said: "*You* join, and he'll see how much fun you're having, and then he'll join too." So I joined. And what am I taking pictures of? Well, what do I have? Horses. And what do I mostly take pictures of? Horses. (And lots of other things).

So there I had this amazing collection – dare I say – because for me, I enjoy it. (I'm glad you asked). At the same time, I'd been working with a friend on a concept of a children's book on teaching about natural horse care. It was a great conflict: how to teach without condemning what you're doing now, without condemning what other people are doing, without saying: "That's right, that's wrong." I didn't want to do that; I just wanted to show another way, an optional way to care for horses and slide in there that it's healthier. If you have a choice, try it out.

Suddenly one day it hit me that I had everything I needed, and I had no *intention* to start doing it this way. I just had it. Then I *did* go out and shoot some more shots specifically for the book, but I already had a ton. I put them together. I was able to create a book just simply about my horses and how *I* care for them. Just put that out there like that. It doesn't say what you're doing is right or wrong. This is what *we* do, and look how happy and healthy they are. Fill it up with pictures, and it's a very popular book because of the photographs. Adults are reading it before they pass it to their kids, saying: "We learned a lot!" Okay, good!

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What are your experiences working with other illustrators on your picture books? How did the whole process of author-illustrator collaboration work for you?

I think a lot of people are unaware that almost in every circumstance the writer has a hundred per cent nothing to do with the pictures. You have to trust your publisher. The publisher's the one that knows how to make a book sell, and how to put the style of a writer together with the style of an artist. So I had very little input. I would just wait for the book to show up at the door and then go: "Ooh."

As an artist myself, some people think I would end up in conflict, 'cause I would have a clear vision of what it was supposed to look like. But I also have a good imagination and could envision that there would be so many ways it could go.

In all cases, they found artists that were very, very appropriate to the type of story it is. I was really flabbergasted by the skill of the publishers. You just have to trust.

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So you had no communication with the illustrator while they were working? How typical would you say that experience is?

Typically (not to speak for an illustrator!) their process is to draw an outline and send them in to the editors, and they discuss – just like my first text was discussed and edited.

I *did* see one book where it was sort of half done, with some of the line drawings, mostly because we were discussing which words were going to go on which page, and it was part of the word edit. But I never had a single comment. There was only one book that had a typo on the back cover – not my words – that actually got printed. So that was really unfortunate.

The jacket for the first hardcover of *The Ghost Horse of Meadow Green* – I *did* have input into the visual there. They showed me the visual. And darn it, the horse had shoes on! I'm like: "Uh-uh, not gonna happen." So I literally visually re-edited the image myself on my own imaging, and sent it back to them, and they fixed it. Because it was really last-minute. They said: "We can't change it." I thought: "Well, I can change it." And I took it. It was integral to the message of the book.

Book covers are not about what's inside anymore, in so many cases. It's about the shelf pitch. The foreign language versions of *The Ghost Horse of Meadow Green* all have this very generic galloping black horse, shod, on the cover. I thought the [English language] cover for *The Ghost Horse of Meadow Green* is the most beautiful, tasteful, artistic, abstract image. But certainly I had no input on that cover. At that point I learned you don't have control, so you don't need to sweat it. Whatever – another 120 000 kids got to read the book.

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You mentioned you're working on another novel at the moment, set in Antigonish. Could you give us a teaser about the book?

It's a different child, a different horse, but we *do* connect with a child or two from the last novels. I've written almost a back-cover blurb for it more than once, but it's altered states since then, so it's – I can't really say anything off-hand right now, because it's in a new place. It's taking its own journey. I'm writing it to be entertained. I can't really think about my audience; I just think about what I love to do, what I enjoy. Luckily that's proved to be things other people like. And that's all I do. If I start writing for a market, I think it loses strength.

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When you start a writing project, to what extent do you know where the book is going? Do you know what's going to happen on the last page?

No, and yes. I know the last page; I know the first page – but how I get to the last page? That's the question. If I knew, then why bother writing it? It's boring. I know authors who plot it all out, and sit down and fill in the words, and I'm thinking: "How boring is that?" Must not be boring for them, but I can't work that way. I have things and scenes I know I need to happen, but I don't know where they are, and sometimes I don't even have them in the same order at the end as I thought they were going to be in. I just get there. I start writing, and people say things.

Spoiler alert! In the first book, the grandmother dies. I didn't plan that. When it happened, I thought: "Oh my God." I was so dejected, and I cried, and my husband said: "What's wrong?" I said: "The grandmother just died." He said: "Well *you're* the writer. You can *un-die* her." I'm like: "You don't understand. That's what happened." I'd just become a channel by which the story is told, and is telling itself. When it starts doing that, I'm in Heaven, because I become the reader as well, and I'm having just as much fun with the book as I think anyone would. So it's just starting to go places. I'm like: "This is good!" I can't wait to sit down and write every day.

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Do you have a certain time of day you write?

Morning is always a writing time, because I'm a morning person. I have to get up and do chores – it's a way to exercise.

Margaret Atwood put it well. One of her rules of writing is: “Do back exercises. Pain is distracting.” So I’ve fixed this...and then when I’ve been through that, I write. And God forbid if anything interrupts me. I give myself about two – a little more than two – hours. It doesn’t mean I’m sitting, staring at the computer. I could be walking around, or I could be outside walking around, but I’m writing. It’s intense, and about two hours will burn me out. I can edit later in the day, I can come back to it in the evening, but it’s not the same creative process. So that’s my style. Everyone has their own little groove.

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What is your favourite book you’ve read?

That’s morphed over the years. When I was young, and probably still now – I see how dated they are now – but the C.S. Lewis *Narnia* series was always my favourite because of the imagination and characterizations. Even reading them now, I still enjoy the importance of them.

Some of the Roald Dahl books – again, children’s books are my favourite books. *Matilda*: I love that book. I love books that have a sense of magic in them, whether it be real magic, or just a magic spirit.

My first book, *The Ghost Horse* – I let it all be plausible if you didn’t believe in ghosts; it would still work. And if you did, it would work. The second book, I pushed it a little farther, and the next one is just: “I’m sorry, you’re going to *have* to go step off the cliff with me.”

I’ve always been a massive fan of fantasy and sci-fi. When I was young, I loved the Asimovs, *Robot Empire Series*, things like that. Again, really dated books now. Trying to think if there’s anything more recent ... There’s this one book – this little book called *Baby*, by Patricia MacLachlan – an incredibly moving and lovely book. I’m sure there’s a lot more of them out there.

I pick up a book, and if it doesn’t have me by the first line, or the second paragraph, then I don’t do it. I’ve picked up a lot of adult novels, and by the third paragraph – by the third chapter, I’m like: “Why am I reading this?” ‘Cause it may have spent 18 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, but it just never gave me that fire.

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What advice do you have for other writers?

You *do* know inside – but it’s a skill. I could pass you a flute and you may have talent, but you still need practice. It requires practice. Practice can be improved by coaches, people giving you good information. I’ve been asking people questions all along.

The best advice I ever got was: *read*. But not just read everything – which is fine, and I did that too. But read what you love. Read what you love and that will feed what you want to write. And then don't read in your genre while you're writing. Otherwise, every chapter tastes like some other author. I did that. I made that mistake. I wrote my second novel, I was reading something else. My editor said: "Why does this chapter sound like somebody else?" And I'm like: "Yes..." So I read them outside, or I read non-fiction, or adult fiction, or whatever when I'm writing.

Other advice for writing ... I know there are excellent quotes. Now I won't remember her name, but: "The art of writing is the art of applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair." Just write. And you might not get anything you can use. You might have a room that looks like those classic pictures of balled-up paper all over the floor, but if you don't start ...

I know so many people who say they're writers, and I say: "Well, show me something you've got." They say: "I haven't written it down yet." Okay ... You gotta do it. And you gotta look at it, and you gotta say: "That's really crap, I can do better."

I also have a writers' group now which is incredibly healthy. Three other people and myself sit down every second weekend – we try to sit down every second weekend – for a couple hours, and we read each other's work to each other. We critique. We trust. That's the most important thing. Because it's very hard to hear from someone else that what you're doing is not working, so we have to trust each other and each other's skill levels to be able to critique each other viciously, as necessary.

The original plan for that group was to call us *Page Five*. We never followed through with giving ourselves a name, but it was because every time we were reading something, it was like: "That would be really good if you started on page five. Throw away the first four pages!" So that was the in-joke. As a writer you need people who can give you really strong, helpful critiques. Don't let your family read it, 'cause they'll tell you it's good no matter what.

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Are there any other books by Atlantic Canadian children's authors or illustrators that you've read that have made a particular impact on you? Or do you tend not to read other regional work?

No, I have. I like Janet McNaughton's work. I met Janet earlier on. I was traveling around quite a bit to go to workshops when I was first learning to write. And then I did a lot of traveling around doing Writers in the Schools once I started getting published, and going to conferences.

I'm trying to think of names ... I'm not good at names! I can see their faces! No, can't think of all the names. I am a big fan of many Nova Scotia authors in particular, and poets. It takes my breath away how people can find the magic phrasing. I would love to be able to be a

writer who could do that, but it's not me. But some people read my novels and say: "There's a lot of poetry in this." Who knows, I put it in my own way.

As a classic, I'm not good at names. If I saw your *dog* twenty years ago, I'd still remember *his* name. I worked for a veterinarian for a number of years, and I was apparently quite popular because people would come in and I wouldn't remember their name, but I'd *always* remember their animal's name, and exactly what was wrong with them, or had been wrong with them, and that's all that mattered to people.

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Did you grow up in this area of Canada? If so, why have you remained here? If not, what draws you to stay here?

I was born in Antigonish, in town, which was a mistake. I should have been born in the country, but hey, it wasn't my parents' fault.

I really like this rural life in a quiet town. I'm an introvert; I don't like a lot of noise. I can't take a lot of people at any one time. I'm actually a very strong introvert. I'm very, very happy to go sit in the woods by myself for hours at a time, or walk in the woods, 'cause it feeds my creativity. Yes, the flies are coming out, but that means it's spring!

So yes, I've always lived here. I've visited a few other places in my life, but I like also the nature of the personality of the community. Because it's a university town, it offers a much wider spectrum of cultural activities. Anywhere from international kitchen parties to an opera singer would come in for a concert. Things like that. It's just an unusual setting for a very small town. It offers so much more – not as much as a city – but good things. So I chose to stay here in the Maritimes.

My husband's from Cape Breton. Inclined to travel a little more, maybe. Still there. My parents are – I stayed and looked after my mom quite a bit when she was getting old. It's not completely about the family commitments, but ... I have three brothers and three sisters that are a bit scattered to the wind. They still call this home. I think once you're born in a place that's got such personality ... you keep it.

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Antigonish as a character is really important to the flavour of your writing. How would you describe the identity of Antigonish?

You realize I don't make any conscious effort to do that. I'm not consciously trying to describe Antigonish in any particular way. It just happens because you go to the store and the

clerk who talks to you knew your mother. People on the street are familiar faces, even if you don't know their names. The structures of the places are absolutely still there, and their history has been sort of handed around. Everybody kind of knows – even kids seem to know – why such-and-such is there, and this pedestal is over there. So there's a connection, and it's that generational connection. I'm sure that's not distinct to Antigonish.

Some of the things that *are* distinct I do intentionally put in the book. The Scottish cairns I slipped in, though I put them in a different place 'cause it wasn't convenient where they were – too much traffic there. So there are iconic things that are in Antigonish that I put in the story because they're great colour. The fact that the United Church clock always says quarter to ten. I think it's going to go in the next book. I don't know why or how. It's just that there's these little things I see that I think: "That's unique." And the Scottish flavour, and the Dutch. The fact that my best friend growing up was East Indian. The different cultures are all here as well. I mean, you'll see that in Toronto to a huge extent, but it's kind of amazing how you'll see that in some place this small. Coady International Institute at Saint FX [Saint Francis Xavier University] – growing up, when I was a kid, it just never seemed to be the least bit surprising to see people walking around in Native African, and East Indian, and Pakistani costumes; that was normal.

But you go to other small towns in the Maritimes ... so I get that Antigonish is pretty unique. But who knew until I started writing! And not only that: lately – and this is a lovely little thing that's going to end up in the next novel – a lovely woman from Scotland who teaches Gaelic pointed out to me that I'm speaking English translations of Gaelic, that some of the phrasing of words are straight out of Gaelic, and that still happens around here. Someone will say: "I'm after going downtown to get something." That's a straight translation from the way the Gaelic language is organized. I didn't know that, but we've got that all over the place.

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You've expressed that Antigonish is unique in its multiculturalism, because of the major university here. Other features of Antigonish, such as the presence of Gaelic – how representative do you think these features are of the rural Maritimes generally?

I don't think there's a lot of communities where every summer, all summer long, you hear the bagpipes and that's normal. You can, as a child, complain about it, but it's not gonna stop. Go and start to appreciate it. I'm sure every community has its flavour, but I'm not very familiar with the rest of the areas. I chose to stay here – I love it.

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Have you moved away and come back, or have you stayed?

No, my residence has always been in this county. I've visited – you know, a couple weeks – somewhere else. Been to the other coast, been to the Caribbean, that kind of around the continent, but not much else.

My great, great, great grandfather came over from Scotland, into some part of the county up that way, so we know that history. All our roots are here.

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What do you think distinguishes Nova Scotia as separate from the rest of Atlantic Canada?

Having visited the other provinces, I certainly feel that each is distinct. There's no question PEI, being an island, creates a totally different personality. That's the interesting thing – you call it "the Maritimes," you try to lump them together, but they're four very distinct places, there's no question. But for me, trying to describe all those gorgeous places – I don't think I could do that. I'm not so much into that.

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It is interesting how to some people outside of this region, your books could be considered quite exotic.

That's the truth. I've heard people say that, and I look at them and go: "O...kay..." But it is unique. There's no question. I'm starting to see that as I get older, how that makes sense. I was flabbergasted by that when I was first told that. I had no idea what it meant. I'm like: "I look at TV; they talk like I do." But it's interesting – it's not the same.

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Do you think a sense of place is important in writing? If you're reading a book that isn't set here, do you ever get that sense of exoticness?

I have continuously found a sense of place is a real solid anchor. Really, really, essential to the reading. In reading, even a children's book like the Narnia series – a sense of place was critical. That was the core; that was the characters. When you read sci-fi, the person has created this real world. It's all about real characters, but they still have to have their feet on the

ground in a real place, and some people don't do that well. That's when it's just not a good book in my personal opinion. I think a sense of place is critical to a book.

I've often seen books and movies raved about because of the place, even though they're the most wretched writing. People are saying: "Oh, but you're *writing* about that!" So, it's a very strong element to put in a book. If only everything in the book were as strong as place. You don't want it to be the number one. *I* don't write a book with the intent of that being overwhelming. I've seen a lot of that. And I certainly enjoy a good travel novel. I don't know if that's a genre or not. Where people set a book in interesting places. For me, in good writing, every element in a book is there for a reason, and just arbitrarily parking a story down in over here – you've got to have a reason why it's there. It's got to be essential to the storytelling. Or at least because it's there, it affects how the story is told, which I guess is as good as saying the same thing, just coming at it from a different direction.

I'm working with a friend right now on a book, and the sense of place is very clear in his mind, but very unclear in everyone else's – because he's writing about a place he's actually never been. I think that's interesting. Yeah, I'm sure it's a real place and not a fictional place, but it *feels* fictional; it doesn't feel hard and solid yet. That's something that's going to get worked out, because this fellow's a good writer, but it's quite clear that this is a very important thing that's not solid enough yet. Which still works even when you're writing science fiction, and fiction of all kinds.

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You've said that one of your main principles is "write what you know." Do you do additional research? Could you tell us a little about your research process?

My second novel – the boy's a skateboarder. I never knew how to skateboard – although I wanted to! It didn't seem quite wise to start that in my fifties. But my nephew's a skateboarder. All through his early teens, that was his thing. He went the Jesus look and the whole thing. He taught me so much, because I know him to be a very honest, kind, straightforward, generous young man. But if you looked at, and you didn't know him, you'd cross the street. He taught me the ultimate "You can't judge a book by its cover." He was a blessing in itself. And I wanted that nature to be in the book; I wanted that nice kid in that look. So ... interviewing him, and sort of getting to know who he thought he was back then, 'cause he's thirty now.

I also went and sat and watched the local kids skateboard. I asked them questions, and they introduced themselves. I said what I was doing, and they were cool with that. They taught me stuff. They taught me stuff that you would not know – could not find in magazines. I went

online and learned as you go. Listening to them, watching them. I had a great time. That was my best research.

I've done lots of online research, and lots of reading – calling people up and asking them questions. And now I will be picking the brain of my new Gaelic-teaching friend. I want to make sure one character is very consistent in how he speaks, in being much closer the Gaelic than everybody else. And even the way we say that around here: not “to Gaelic,” but “*the* Gaelic.” It's Gaelic - hello!

So there's a lot more – there's a lot more work to be done in elements, but not letting it get in the way of the story, even if it's your own story out there. Sometimes research is done after, or during, but not all before. In the second book, people say: “How can you write from a boy's perspective?” And I'm like: “I was a boy until I hit puberty.” I was a tom boy. I had that much less girly childhood and upbringing ... but still a challenge.

An incredible number of people write in the opposite sex in the first person singular and get away with it. Once I recognized other people could do it, I was like: “If you can do it, I can do it. Here we go.”

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When did you get your first horse?

Sixteen. Saved up a hundred dollars, which was a lot of money. My mother gave me a hundred dollars. Oh my goodness. That just made me realize that the women in my life have helped me buy all my horses. My first horse was two hundred dollars – one-year-old, the biggest horse I could find, because I need big. I was shy. I wanted the size and power. I wanted the biggest dog you could get, the biggest horse you could get. I grew out of that somewhere along the way.

My mother also helped me buy my second horse, and then she died, and her sister helped me buy my last. The women in my life understood my passion. *Their* mother was the one who was interested in horses, but in her day it wasn't appropriate to even sit astride a horse. But I have a photograph of her sitting on one.

My [back ailment] is degenerative. It's not a spine injury, but it [also results in not being able to ride]. I find that is one of the conundrums with horses, and that's part of the culture, and the cost of keeping horses: people see them as utilitarian animals. I try to tell people that you can keep horses – you don't have to ride. People say: “What do you do with your horse?” And then I go: “What do you do with your cat?” I call this a horse farm.

There still are days I definitely miss riding. This is joyful. But it's too dangerous for me now. I didn't often go off a horse, except for under extraordinary circumstances, but it can happen.

You can teach them lots and lots. You know agility? Cats and dogs? You can do that with horses. They want to do anything for positive reinforcement.

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Do you do riding lessons with your horses? Do other people ride them?

No, I'm not interested in them being used for that kind of purpose. When something goes wrong with the horse, I think: "What do you say?" They [non-natural horse riders] go: "Ack! No!" There's like fifteen vocalizations. I'm like: "Why don't you just use 'no'?" Start communicating. My style – and I'm learning – is communicating. When you start communicating clearly, then they see that they can communicate back, and they start paying attention. Everything changes.

You can't have someone come in who expects to throw a halter on and push your horse around. They have no idea what it means to get hit. It just doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean "move away." Doesn't make them do anything. It's like: "What did you do that for?" They don't know. Because no one's ever tried to bully them around, which is kind of the traditional way of managing horses. I *did* say bully, because that's what's happening. People don't even know they're doing it – they love their horses!

I teach hoof-trimming and I have a lovely young girl who's an assistant now, learning how to trim her own horses, and helping me with mine because now my back's a problem. When I first met her, she was very frustrated. Her horse wasn't standing still, and she gave him a whack. I said: "Don't hit your horse." I mean, I can understand being frustrated. I said: "Don't beat your horse." She was totally stymied; she had no idea how to control the animal without hitting it, because that's what you're taught.

We're discovering there is another way, and she's really enjoying it. I'm not saying that I'm an angel. On occasion I'll get frustrated, like: "Oh, get out of the way!"

You also have to recognize that there's a safety. You must not get hurt. But if you create a relationship with a horse where they respect you and you respect them, you're not at risk. There's always that safety. Speaking of which, have you ever been kissed by a horse? Would you like to?