

Interview with Wendy Hinman

Tell us a little bit about yourself and your background:

I started reading very early and have fond memories of attending story hour at the library with my mother. I've always been a voracious reader and I handily won reading contests in elementary school. As a kid I wrote poems and songs.

Though I came from a family of readers, no one in my family was a writer or knew any writers personally. Writing wasn't considered a "career" in my household. I didn't have any "connections." But I had hopes. In 8th grade, for a class project, we assembled our essays and poems into a book. As modest as it was, that act left an impression on me.

As an adult I worked for years in international business, enjoying the report writing aspects of my jobs the most, During the dot com boom I shifted into working as a web content manager, a technical writer and an online magazine editor, but I always secretly longed to author books. Marrying my love of sailing and adventure with my love of writing seemed a natural place to begin publishing book length manuscripts because I had been sharing our adventures on a popular blog, through regular magazine articles, and opportunities to do presentations. Clearly there was interest in the topic and I had more stories to share.

How did you come to write *Sea Trials*, your husband's story of sailing around the world with his family as a boy:

Over the years I'd been hearing snippets of the epic voyage around the world my husband had taken with his family, complete with a shipwreck when he was fourteen. Family dinners had been filled with "you remember the time when ...

- gun boats forced us to sail across mines in the Red Sea?

- our pilot Abdul got lost in the Suez Canal?
- the boat starting sinking in Israel?
- Mom tried to poison us?
- we ran out of food and nearly starved?

These tantalizing anecdotes intrigued me to learn more. When I expressed interest in writing about the story, I was given the log book and the letters the family had mailed home during the voyage. When Garth's mother entrusted me with the modest strong box containing the letters, I felt a flash of fear that I might lose them before I could get them home. The box was so overstuffed, it could no longer stay closed and was tied with twine. Inside were hundreds of thin blue airmail envelopes edged in red and blue stripes, and covered with stamps from all over the world. In many letters, nearly every bit of space was packed with tiny cursive. These letters were the primary repository of the story. I felt like I had struck gold.

I had developed a rough outline of the major events of the voyage, gleaned from decades of being a part of the family. That was supported by the ship's log, which recorded the major sailing milestones. As I combed through the letters, I realized the overwhelming level of detail was more than any writer could hope for—too much, sometimes—but helped me to bring the story alive. Often the letters were confusing, adding to the challenge of deciphering the tiny writing. I was relieved that many of the later letters were typewritten.

Of course, I asked the family members a lot of questions and took copious notes. In addition, I consulted guide books, sailing directions, and maps. I read through a couple of attempts to record this story in manuscript form, though these were not terribly helpful. I

also read the newspaper articles and listened to interviews with the family, and I started writing. And double checking details with the ones who had lived through it. With a rough draft completed, I had them read every word to check for inaccuracies or parts that didn't seem true to their experience. It was a form of family bonding.

What I uncovered was an even more dramatic story than I already knew, one that I could hardly believe anyone had truly lived through. Especially people I knew. It featured things like a pirates, gun boats, mines, thieves, starvation and scurvy. And that was AFTER the shipwreck. You could hardly make anything up that would be better.

How long did it take you to write your books?

It took me a couple of years for *Sea Trials*, whereas *Tightwads on the Loose* took me four years. I think I had learned the best way for me to work by the second book, even though I had to do a lot of research before I could begin the writing. For my first book, I had shared snippets with beta readers as I wrote. For the second, I finished a full draft and went through several edits myself first, before sharing it in its entirety with beta readers. Then I undertook another thorough edit as I considered the comments from each of the Beta readers.

What was the hardest thing about writing? The easiest?

The hardest part at first was developing confidence in my writing abilities and figuring out the structure for a book-length manuscript. I wondered who might really want to read it, but then I started to enjoy the process so much I didn't care. When I shared my work, the reception was good. I found that when I wrote first thing in the morning every day, I developed a rhythm and momentum that kept me going.

As I turn my work focus towards writing historical fiction, I am finding new challenges. With historical fiction I have to do a lot of research and then I have to make a ton of decisions about what I want to happen in the story. I've realized that, with fiction, you can go in an infinite number of directions, so you've got to make choices before you can flesh them out to come up with a consistent and coherent story.

I read like a writer and consider reading a key part of my work. I spend a lot of time analyzing books to see what lessons they might offer for the story that I'm working on – ideas for structure, tension, pacing, character development, and language that inspires. I am always reading and taking notes. I participate in three book clubs. I consider reading the most essential part of being a good writer, immersing myself in story and language as a matter of skill development, and being a good literary citizen supporting authors and booksellers.

What were you trying to achieve with *Sea Trials*?

I wanted to show how four people living through the same events approached them completely differently. I hoped to convey that it's not the situation that people find themselves in, but how they react to it that can determine what they take away from it; whether they interpret it to be a good experience or a bad one. I wanted to show what it means to struggle to overcome obstacles created, in part, by choices people make. When it is demanded of us, we are capable of doing amazing things that we did not know we could do. We also face our shortcomings, which can be incredibly humbling. We all have our strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes we need the entire team and its package of strengths and weaknesses to succeed when we could never do it alone. This was the case in this story.

I've noticed that people seem to have confused notions of what it means to be a hero, and I wanted to explore that in this story. As Daniel Ellsberg once said, "True courage is doing things you don't have to do."

Also, I wanted to show how different life was like before the era of instant communications and modern navigation. Because of their situation, the family was incredibly isolated, yet at the same time hyper aware of what was going on in the world from first-hand encounters and listening to short wave radio reports from around the globe. I loved the dichotomy of Garth getting behind in school, yet learning so much through the books the family was reading and the places they were visiting, and listening to World Band radio. Through osmosis and necessity he learned about the world and how it worked more effectively than he could have in a classroom or through lessons. I enjoyed showing glimpses of popular culture in a bygone era from the perspective of people who witnessed much of it from afar or missed it altogether. For a teen, that can be especially profound missing element.

Which scene in your book was the most difficult to write?

The most difficult scene to write was the shipwreck scene that opens *Sea Trials*. As the opening scene, it had to be compelling. What made it more difficult was that I had to accurately depict how an event unfolded when I hadn't been there. I had to know where four people were and what they were doing each and every second. Based on interviews I had an idea of what happened, but it wasn't until I'd imagined and written an exciting moment-by-moment depiction of events as they unfolded and showed it to family members that I'd find assumptions I'd made were incorrect. They'd say, "Wow, that's really good ... except that I was outside when our boat hit the reef." So I'd go back and

revise based on those comments. I went through several iterations where I changed details for accuracy without losing the drama I had so carefully crafted, and then would recheck and refine as necessary. Ultimately, sharing the story with the family in its entirety was immensely satisfying, because I had taken the time to get things correct. At first, I worried there would be four different versions of everything from this strong-willed group of people, but my worries seemed unfounded. They each focused on different aspects of the journey, but their accounts ultimately agreed. What was most satisfying to me was to hear them say, “You really captured the story. Well done.”

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