

Book Club Questions About Your Writing Life: Author: Susan A Jennings

General Discussion:

Q. What inspired you to become a writer?

A. I can't say I was a child writer in fact English grammar was perhaps my poorest subject at school with English literature being my strongest. Go figure—I've never worked that one out. As a child I read and read, I don't think there was an Enid Blyton book I hadn't read, I also devoured the Arthur Ransom books and others I don't recall. I did like writing compositions, the term used for essays in my day, but I received such negative comments regarding the mechanics and nothing for the storytelling, I gave up.

I came to writing much later in life when I was challenged to write a memoir about my life as an abused wife and later a single mother of five. My mentor during the writing of this book convinced me I could write, with a good editor—sad to say my grammar is still lacking—but more to the point I was a storyteller and that is my passion. It took many years after writing and publishing *Save Some For Me* to have enough confidence to publish again. I wrote lots of short stories and published them in anthologies but a whole book was another story until I wrote *The Blue Pendant* and then I wrote three books in one year. I am not sure whether it was being a prolific reader at a young age or getting the right encouragement at the right time that inspired me to write. I suspect the passion has always been there but meeting someone who was a published author telling me I could, indeed write, was all that I needed to give it a try. And that was the inspiration that started me writing.

Q. How many hours a day do you write?

A. I write five to six days a week. My writing time is morning. I'm an early riser so the coffee is on by 5 am and I am at my desk shortly after that. Usually I write Monday to Friday 5 – 9 A.M. and sometimes on Saturday morning, Sunday is my day off. I don't set a word

count beyond how many words I need to write for a specific goal. If I am writing a 90,000-word novel and my goal is to complete it by a certain date, I will set a daily word count. However I do not beat myself up about the word count. Four hours may sound like a lot of time but there are some mornings when I only write 500 words and others when I write 2000. Much of the writing goes on in my head before it goes on to the page so even if I'm not hitting the keyboard I am writing in my head.

After sitting for several hours I then go to my exercise class three times a week or I go for a walk in the park. By 10 am my business day starts. Yes, you heard correctly, my business day. There is far more to a book than writing, and unless you are traditionally published you have to switch hats and become an authorpreneur and like any small business owner I have to run my company. The rest of the morning is taken up with social media posting, website maintenance, blogging, accounting and contacting book stores to arrange signings or talks for libraries and book clubs. If there is a new launch coming up, there is editing, book covers and formatting to be done or outsourced. I take a break at lunchtime. During the afternoon I may complete some of what was not finished in the morning, take a course or listen to a podcast. I am always learning. There are times I need to visit bookstores, check online retailers or advertisements. By the evening I'm out of energy. My relaxing time might be a movie, a little TV or reading. That pretty much sums up my daily life.

There are also one off activities, book signings and launches, sometimes my own and sometimes my fellow writers, attending writing groups, workshops and retreats. These are all part of the job of an indie author.

The Blue Pendant - Book 1 of The Sackville Hotel Trilogy

Book Club General Questions:

Q. What or who inspired you to write *The Blue Pendant*?

A. My mother and grandmother. I grew up listening to stories of how my grandparents met while working at a hotel in Sussex England and how my grandmother fell in love with two beaus or was it the other way round? Whichever way it happened there was an interesting love triangle that went on for many, many years. My grandfather's impulsive nature brought all three to Canada.

Q. Is the book a true story?

A. It is based on my grandparents' life. Although many of the stories and incidents actually happened and as described in the novel; there were too many gaps in their lives to make it a true story. I listened to my mother speak about my grandparents and her early life in Canada and wrote about it. I stuck to the facts where possible, especially around historical events and places but there were times I embellished for the sake of the story and many parts of the book were completely from my imagination using times and places that already existed. I wrote what I thought might have happened.

Q. How much research did you do?

A. Lots! And it wasn't as easy. There is no shortage of historical facts about people, dates and places of the Edwardian era. Google searches and Wikipedia were great for facts. I wanted more information about the social environment. It was important for me to understand how people would think and behave; what they would eat, the clothes they would wear. During the wartime periods I wanted to understand how the young men felt heading to war and the wives and girlfriends managed at home. I used genealogy to find my grandfather's First World War records and worked it into the story. There was a big shift in

society during the time of the book, 1913 -1947 so I needed to know how those changes effected the various characters, from lords and ladies to maids. Anna is a forward-looking woman for her time. I read creative nonfiction to give me an understanding of these times and I found two books by Juliette Nicholson that were excellent *The Great Silence* and *The Perfect Summer*. I found a very interesting novel *The Precipice a Novel* by Elia W Peattie, written in 1914, an excellent book well worth reading. I based my strong female characters on this book as the protagonist was ahead of her time and the author was living and writing in 1914. It was perfect for a birds-eye-view of the time.

As much as I searched for books on hotel life during that time I found only one that fit my criteria, a Spanish book that had been made into a TV series called *The Grand Hotel*. This series helped me understand how an upscale hotel operated and treated both their guests and staff. The TV series *Downton Abbey* helped me understand the era in the upper class British aristocracy.

Q. How did *The Blue Pendant* develop into a trilogy?

A. After I wrote *The Blue Pendant* I knew there would be a sequel. The story hadn't ended. It had become a family saga of sorts, the story of mother, daughter and granddaughter. The second book, which is complete fiction, I intended to be about Anna with a little bit of her daughter but pretty much skipping to the granddaughter. Well, daughter Isabelle was having none of that and early on it became apparent that *Anna's Legacy* was to be about mother and daughter. When Isabelle joins Anna and Bill at The New Sackville Hotel, daughter takes over with granddaughter Sarah still a child. As I wrote this story I knew there was not enough time for Sarah to grow up in this book. Need I say more, a trilogy was born and book three will be Sarah's story.

Book Club Specific Questions for *The Blue Pendant*:

1. What was your overall opinion of this book?
2. What was it or which characters engaged you the most in the story?
3. Young Anna arrives at Bexhill station excited and full of hope for her future. What is your opinion of her expectations, given the time 1913?
4. Does Anna have lessons of reality to learn? How did her sheltered and spoiled upbringing influence her attitude in those first few days at The Sackville?
5. What role does the blue pendant and Uncle Bertie play in Anna's life?
6. What was your opinion of Mrs. Banks? Given the circumstances could she have done more to protect Anna and the maids?
7. Who is your favourite character and why? What attributes in their personalities were most interesting?
8. Who was the character you disliked the most and why?
9. When Anna is confronted with two beaux, who do you think was the best man for her?
10. In your opinion was the relationship between Anna and Lady Thornton mutually beneficial?
11. Mr. Pickles – Open discussion
12. Anna struggled to be independent but was thwarted by people and circumstance. Could she have avoided some and done things differently?
13. Family relationships are complicated at the best of times. What would you say about Alex and his mother?
14. What are your thoughts on Anna's love life including both Alex and Bill?

15. How did you feel about Bill's fling in Chicago? Did you feel sorry for Claudia? What kind of person was she?
16. Anna loved her daughter but she found motherhood difficult. How did she fare as a mother?
17. Do you think Anna was unfair when she insisted the family leave Canada?
18. Did you enjoy the story of Anna, Alex and Bill's life as British publicans at the King's Head Inn?
19. Anna's sadness brought me to tears at times. Did you feel her pain?
20. Was the ending too much of a fairytale?