

A Novel Experience

“While I am alive, I shall write. There will be a time to stop writing but that will probably be when I come to a stop, too.” – P.D. James

I became a novelist at age fifty-eight.

I didn't plan to. Although I had harbored a desire to write a novel since my college days, I had never been tempted to try. My first foray into creative writing was a screenplay for my graduate school film at UCLA titled *Mostly Ash and Pottery*. Next was an attempt at a comedic one-act play called *Daisy Doodle* about a marketing genius who lived alone in a basement. After UCLA I wrote more screenplays, including *The Color of Lightning* based on a true story about a National Park ranger who was struck by lightning seven times in his life and an eco-thriller set in an Alaskan timber mill town titled *The Last Frontier* which earned me \$3500 from a Hollywood production company as an advance on a future purchase (which never happened, alas). In 1995, I began writing a play titled *Canyonlands* about a family that moved from LA to a small town in southeastern Utah and opened a bicycle shop that a local resident opposes. It reflected my interest in the conflicting forces tearing up the American West at the time. I tried to make it both fun and serious. After being workshopped and rewritten, the play received two public readings including one by a professional theater company in Santa Fe. That was as far as it got, however.

In the meantime, I was happily striding down the nonfiction road. I began by adding text to a documentary photography project I had undertaken, shaping it into a book titled *In The Land of the Delight-Makers* published by the University of Utah Press in 1992. A few years later I wrote a short history of Pecos National Historical Park, where I had been working seasonally. I also wrote a research article on the park's colonial architecture which was published in a peer-reviewed archaeology journal. In 1995, I shifted to conservation writing, commencing with a regular column in the newsletter of the New Mexico Chapter of the Sierra Club, followed by one for the Quivira Coalition. In 2004, I began writing profiles of progressive ranchers and other intriguing characters for an online newspaper focused the American West, stories which I roped together into *Revolution on the Range*, published by Island Press in 2008. More books followed over the years, as did a ton of

other nonfiction writing including articles, op-eds, reports, bulletins, texts for lectures, and even a daily journal. The road became a boulevard.

I was also running an organization, raising twins, and being a good spouse. I didn't have the time or inclination to write a novel, so the decision to do so came as a bit of a surprise. That I would end up writing two was even more unexpected.

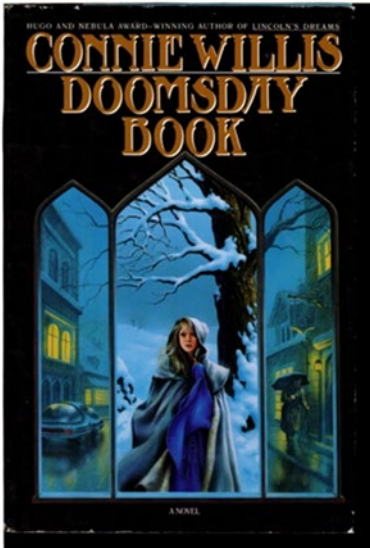
My foray into fiction began as my writing projects often do, with a cup of coffee. It was March 2014 and I sat at a table outside the Rustic Bakery in Larkspur, a small town on the bay north of San Francisco. It was a picture-perfect California spring day. The light was gloriously warm and bright. The air was soft with a hint of the sea. The bakery was part of a commercial center that included a busy gym, a Starbucks, a small dance studio, an independent bookstore, a handful of boutique shops, a charcuterie specializing in regional meats, and the popular Marin Brewing Company whose patrons were noshing on their lunches a few feet away. I had emerged from the bookstore a short while earlier after a fruitful discussion with its owner about a nonfiction book of mine that would be published in June. I settled down at the table with a cup of organic coffee and a tasty muffin from the bakery to bask in the sunlight and soak up the peace of the moment before catching a ferry for a meeting in San Francisco later in the afternoon. All was good, I thought to myself between sips, feeling content. I felt blessed too – for the calm, the coffee, the muffin, the well-stocked bakery, the convenient ferry, my nice hotel, and the big city down the bay with its many amenities.



The ferry terminal in Larkspur

That's when the idea for a story popped into my head.

In the bookstore, I had lingered over a time travel novel featuring a woman who suddenly finds herself displaced to mid-18th century Scotland. It was the first book in a series that had become very successful. I've been intrigued with time travel stories since reading H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* as a kid. Two of the most memorable books were Michael Crichton's *Timeline* and Connie Willis' *Doomsday Book*, both of which teleport their protagonists back to the medieval era, France in the former book and England in the latter. In *Doomsday Book*, a miscalculation by a time travel technician drops the heroine in



the English countryside during 1348 – the year the bubonic plague swept the nation. I read Willis’ book not long after Sterling and Olivia were born and its depictions of suffering and death among children were powerful and upsetting. In the bookstore, the Scottish story set me to thinking: if I could travel back in time, where would I go? Babylon? Ancient Rome? Elizabethan London? The opening of night of Hamlet? A Mozart or Beethoven concert featuring the composers themselves? A peek over Van Gogh’s shoulder as he painted a landscape near Arles? I carried this question with me as I sat down at the table with my coffee and muffin. Time travel isn’t possible now, but it might be in the future. Where would someone in the future want to go? Medieval England?

Imperial Japan? Sipping my coffee, the thought struck me. They’d want to come here – to Larkspur, California, 2014.

And I knew why.

I didn’t give the idea another thought until it came rushing back three months later. It happened after a signing event for *Grass, Soil, Hope* at a bookstore in Albuquerque. Book signings can be rather underwhelming events, so I wasn’t surprised when six people showed up. They were lovely and we had a great conversation about carbon and climate and cows. Lingering after the event to peruse the shelves, I saw the clerk move the unsold copies of my book to the gardening section of the store, off in a corner. Where it belonged, I supposed. Still, I felt a pang. A lot of miles and hours and words had gone into the book. Seeing it hustled off to obscurity was hard. Maybe I should have written a novel instead, I thought glumly. That’s when the time travel idea came rushing back. I grabbed a coffee from the restaurant next door and jumped into my car. On drive back to Santa Fe, I worked out the entire plot. I created characters, chapters, chases, near misses, twists, and an ending. When I reached home, it was done!

I had no intention of actually writing the novel, however. For starters, time travel didn’t exist, not scientifically, not now and probably not in the future. The nonfiction writer in me objected to a made-up story that didn’t have its feet on the ground. At a minimum, it needed to be supported by the laws of physics. Then there was the famous obstacle to time travel often referred to as the ‘grandfather paradox’ where you go back in time and kill

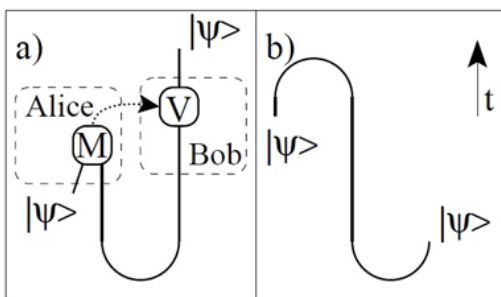
your grandfather (accidentally) thereby negating your existence – except you didn't because you went back in time and killed your grandfather. You can't mess with past, in other words, if it messes with the future. Authors have employed various stratagems to deal with this paradox, including ignoring it altogether. Connie Willis came up with a clever one in *Doomsday Book* – the time machine prohibits a traveler from getting close to a significant historical event or person. Want to study village life in medieval England? Yep, easy. Want to be a fly-on-the-wall at the Yalta Conference with Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill? No. Time travel stories also face the challenge of getting their hero home, including the precise year they left on their voyage. What was the physics of *that*, I wondered? The complexities and impossibilities were too much (as they are for Daniel in the story, not coincidentally), so I filed my plot away.

Everything changed a month later. In July, the Santa Fe Institute hosted a public lecture by Dr. Seth Lloyd, a professor of quantum physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The subject: Lloyd's recently published research into time travel. The message: it's possible. I grabbed a notebook and headed to the auditorium. I settled into a chair in the back row, still feeling skeptical.



Dr. Seth Lloyd

An hour later, I had decided to write the novel. Time travel was not only theoretically possible Lloyd told the large audience, it had been verified with a laboratory experiment. It involved photons, not people – but still, how cool was that! He had other news. The grandfather paradox didn't exist. It simply wasn't allowed by the laws of physics. Wow!



Time travel was one way – no return – for the same reason. There was a random element to time travel as well, he said. Sometimes the photon went, sometimes it didn't. I scribbled furiously in my notebook. These were *great* elements for a plot. They reinforced my original idea with facts, adding intriguing twists. No return? How interesting! And how sad.

War-time stories came to mind of heroic one-way suicide missions against the enemy succeeding against all odds. But my novel idea involved Larkspur on a sunny day in 2014,

not war. Would a traveler still go? Was it worth the heartbreak of leaving? Worth the risk? And how would they react when they arrived and saw all those baked goods? Or the calm.

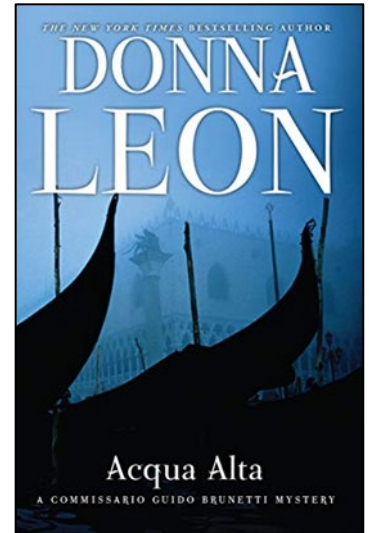
I had ideas.

I wrote the opening sentence of the novel the next day and worked my way through a chapter over the ensuing months, tucking it into the early writing hours of the morning. The subject of the first chapter was *The Store* and I used as a model a mammoth upscale grocery store in El Segundo, California, that Gen and I often visited when we went to LA. I could easily imagine the shock and awe of the main character, Jo, upon entering the overflowing store – I felt the same way. We take the cornucopia in our lives for granted (which was my point). The writing slowed to a stop, however, in early 2015 as other parts of my life began to press in. Amidst my Quivira work obligations, two nonfiction books of mine debuted, the *Age of Consequences* in January and *2% Solutions for the Planet* in the fall. The kids were sixteen. In addition to the normal family chaos, there was lots of Shakespeare going on – Sterling and Olivia had joined an acting troupe for kids. There was more cancer care for Gen too.

In the writing pause, a curious thing happened: I thought of a completely different story. A plot popped into my mind one day. It involved an outsider who inherits a large, historic ranch in northern New Mexico. I made quick decisions. The main character would be a *she*. Second, she would be a doctor. Third, her specialty would be pediatric bone cancer (a tough job). Fourth, the inheritance – from a childless uncle she hardly knew – is a total surprise and the last thing she needs, so she flies out to New Mexico from Boston to sell the ranch to the highest bidder. But her plans are foiled when a missing ranch hand is found dead in a cattle tank...murdered. A mystery novel! Hmm. I hadn't expected that. Why not a mystery? Alright. But who would commit such a crime? Here's what I jotted down in my writing notebook: "There are a range of suspects, all of whom want the ranch, and she's menaced at various times. Her ranching neighbor gets shot and she saves his life with her medical skills [this didn't happen], introducing new characters to the story. She works an intense ten-day schedule and then goes surfing. She can't make up her mind about the ranch...events come to a boil...the story ends with her decision to keep the ranch, defying everyone, especially the murderer."

Except I had no idea who the murderer was!

I mulled motives, plots, starting points, endings, and things in between during the spring of 2015 in what spare time I could muster, but made no progress. Although I had been a fan of Tony Hillerman's Navajo mysteries, I had read few other mysteries (my mother loved the racetrack thrillers of Dick Francis, but I never picked one up). I needed to understand the genre better. I started with Steven Saylor's *Roma Sub Rosa* historical novels, featuring a toga-clad detective named Gordianus. The mysteries were popular with Sterling who had become a big fan of ancient Rome. Next were novels by P.D. James, Agatha Christie, Louise Penny, and a long run of police procedurals by Donna Leon, set in atmospheric Venice.



In the meantime, I made a list. It happened spontaneously one afternoon in May as I waited in a doctor's office for Olivia to emerge from a routine medical procedure. I jotted down every story element I could pull from my personal experience with ranching, conservation, Quivira, and the American West. Here's what I wrote:

“Private lands, big rivers, small towns, wildfire, wildlife, endangered species, anti-grazing activists, the Farm Bureau, organic farms, quarries, medical clinics, watershed groups, Boy Scouts, real estate agents, off-roaders, fly fishing, beaver dams, hunters, elk, wilderness, cheap food, local restaurants, pesticides, Big Ag, oil and gas, mining, forests, logging, county commissioners, nonprofits, regulators, water quality and quantity, a leaky dam, lawsuits, showboating politicians, Red vs. Blue, rural vs. urban, water rights, acequias, land grants, land grabs, tribal rights, ghosts, windmills, storms, headcut gullies, riparian restoration, drought, dropping water tables, poisoned predators, cattle getting shot, spiked trees, shoot-shovel-and-shut-up, subdivisions, wildcatters, hikers, tourists, a B&B, a fancy lodge, grassfed beef, raptors, horses, flat hats, kerchiefs, snowbirds, hippies, pot farms, meth labs, bikers, a missing wildlife photographer, wet meadows, a historic flood, a historic graveyard, pioneer families, museums, a haunted hotel, hot tubs, electric fencing, herders, illegal help, immigration services, lookout towers, writers, a jug band, hoedowns, barns, young agrarians, mentors, apprentices, home cooking, heritage orchards, failed bean fields, empty houses, wine collections, archaeological sites, deep canyons, sedges and rushes, fracking, title disputes, an old mill, second homes, Safe Harbors, snakes, owls, cats, wilderness warriors, the Rainbow Family, red and green chile, traditional villages, foreign

visitors, scientists, range experts, a mobile slaughterhouse, blood and guts, sheep, coyotes, vacation rentals, wi-fi, artisan cheese, dairy cows, a movie set, documentaries, a sheriff, Smokey the Bear, academics, graduate students, a local college, big geology, lakes, backcountry hikes, environmental art, performance artists, forbs, low-stress livestock management, GPS, hay, homemade beer, jeep tours, medicine wheels, fake shamans, vortexes, golf courses, industrial fertilizer, CSAs, CAFOs, feedlots, free-range chickens, banjos, bureaucrats, annual conferences, the radical center, roping tricks, rawhide, abandoned mines, pickup trucks, widowers, toxic spills, sweet spots, marsh gas, solar power, wind turbines, leaky pipes, grass lawns, wild turkeys, buried treasure, lost mission bells, adobe walls, bullet casings, utopian communities, box stores, county courthouses, historical reenactors, public hearings, NEPA, ESA, BLM, red tape, overgrazing, trespass cattle, brands, reporters, television crews, good coffee, bad laws, dust, climate change, big profits, angry bears, rare birds, migrations, pancakes, double-wides, Sunday mass, far horizons, silence, warm-season grasses, springs, teepee rings, isolated cabins, line shacks, wild mustangs, bankruptcy courts, wild bees, local bars, desperados, Hot Shot crews, tree-cutters, fence-cutters, backhoes, poop-and-stomps, opera halls, annual festivals, backyard gardens, mud holes, guns, militia, butterflies, flow charts, Friday night football, taxes, jeans, cowboy hats, more drought, dirty snow, round-ups, resorts, airplanes, and the wide open range.”

That was a pretty good list, I thought. Ok, now what?

The next morning, I poured a cup of coffee and sat down with the list at my desk. One thing jumped out: there was more than one book here, possibly many. That wasn't really news – aren't most mysteries part of a series? Many had a name. What would I call mine? Two thoughts came to mind: Quivira County, which was the name I tentatively gave to the area in which the stories would be set, or The Sun Ranch, the name I had assigned the property. I knew the actual location of both – the Cimarron country in north-central New Mexico. There was a big ranch up there I knew that could serve as a model for The Sun, though its historical trajectories would be different. Having an actual geography in mind helped to sort out the arc of the stories, especially the first in the series. I could see the ranch, the roads, the town, the mountains, the grasslands, the river, on and on. The next step was easy: make a map.

I decided to name the series the *Sun Ranch Saga*, though not before looking up the word *saga* in a dictionary. I read this: **saga** (n) – *a prose narrative recorded in Iceland in the 12th and 13th centuries of historic or legendary figures and events of the heroic age.* Hmm, not applicable. There was another definition though: *a long detailed account, such as the saga of the winning of the West.* Better! An online resource listed synonyms: *epic, chronicle, legend, folk tale, romance, history, adventure, myth, story.* I liked them all. They gave the mystery series a feeling of heft. I checked another source: *Saga – a form of novel in which a family or social group are chronicled in a long and leisurely narrative; a dramatic history of a place or people; a very long story.*

Bingo.

The last thing I did was sketch out the plot and overall trajectory of each book in the series. In the first book, the murder is resolved (though I didn't know how yet) and our hero decides to keep the ranch. In the next book, someone shoots her cattle and then commits suicide (based on a true story). There are other threats as well, which destabilize her effort to keep The Sun, with cascading implications for the entire community. In the third book, a wolf appears and a wildlife photographer disappears (or maybe a biologist). Someone is poisoning fish in the river and coyotes are being shot – you know, the usual ranching stuff. Fire and flood dominate the next book, and maybe drought. A body is discovered. A dam bursts. In the next book the healing begins. At the heart of the saga was the ranch – The Sun. I decided to start there and build outward, one book at a time. It was a lot to write – and I hadn't forgotten about the time travel novel! Jazzed, I wanted to push on with both novel projects at the same time despite my busy life and see where they led. Unfortunately, that proved harder than I expected. In fact, it took another year before I could even try.

That's because I had decided to leave my day job.



A page from an Icelandic Saga

Is writing in the blood? Is it inherited? Where does it come from?

If I have writing skills, I didn't get them from my father. He was a respected and much beloved neurologist, but he wasn't a reader much less a writer. Reading and writing were my mother's department. Big time. For as long as I can remember she had her nose in a book. The passion started young, according to her sister Jane who was also addicted to books. They grew up poor in a household that lacked for affection, so they turned to reading for solace and distraction (their brother Andy became a librarian). Although my



My mother Joyce and me

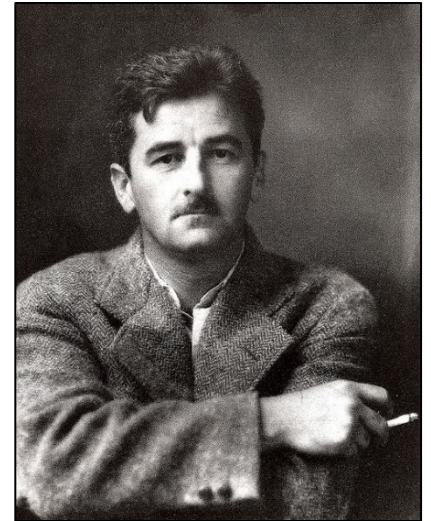
mother read almost any book she could get her hands on, she was chiefly drawn to great literature – Dickens, Lawrence, Faulkner et al – and gobbled up biographies of famous writers. It wasn't just reading, though. She loved to write. I remember long letters she sent me at summer camps (placed in manila envelopes stuffed with newspaper clippings). I knew she frequently exchanged letters with friends. It wasn't until I waded into her papers after her death in 1988, however, that I realized how incredibly prolific she was – or how good. She could write! Words flowed effortlessly and thoughtfully in letters and other papers. Topics could be anything: a recent trip, a class taught by Lewis Mumford, a play on Broadway, a book, a new movie, a favorite dog, horses, my father. They were the nonstop words of a natural writer, energetically engaging the reader. There was more. I discovered she was also a gifted photographer, with a natural eye. I found albums full of lovely pictures of family, friends, horses, trips to Europe. I had no idea! She never discussed her writing, and I didn't see any of her photography growing up. I absorbed her love of literature and her admiration for great writers, but her influence was second-hand – like a delicious smell from a kitchen.

So where does the skill and desire to write come from if one's parents aren't tutors? School, I suppose but I never took classes in writing or photography, preferring to study history and anthropology. Reading is crucial but it's not the same as writing (or there would be as many writers as readers), and it doesn't explain the source of the mysterious drive that propels writers to write. I wondered: is there a writing gene?

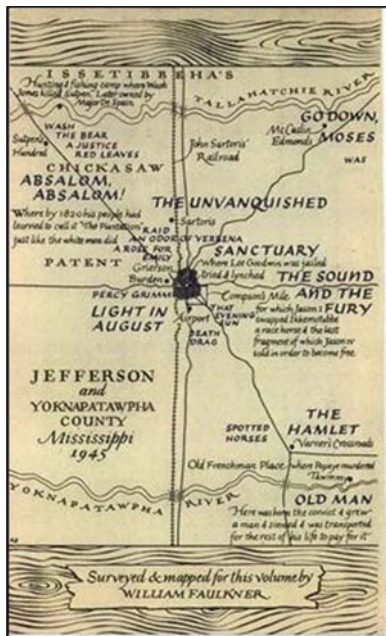
This question came rushing at me unexpectedly one day in 1986 when I learned that novelist William Faulkner was my cousin. My aunt Sara – my father’s sister – had come to Los Angeles from her home in El Dorado, Arkansas, to visit her uncle Edward Lacy in Canoga Park. I tagged along. Edward was a younger brother to Elizabeth Lacy, Sara’s mother (my grandmother). Sara had recently retired from a career in social work and had begun to explore the Lacy family tree, the roots of which apparently reached back to medieval England and Normandy, including the brothers Ilbert and Walter de Lacy who fought in the company of William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings. That was news to me! Sara showed me a thick file of photocopied documents on the Lacy/de Lacy family line. She had come to California to see if her uncle could confirm a rumor that we were related to one William Faulkner of Oxford, Mississippi.

On the drive, she told me what she had gleaned: Faulkner’s great grandmother and Elizabeth Lacy’s grandmother were sisters: Emily and Sarah Holcombe of Ripley, Mississippi. Emily married Dr. John Murry. Their daughter Sallie married John Wesley Falkner (whose famous son added a ‘u’ to the family name). Sarah Holcombe married Watson Lacy, a wounded Civil War veteran, and moved with him to El Dorado, Arkansas. Their son William Stokes Lacy was the father of Elizabeth Lacy. Faulkner was potentially our cousin. However, Sara was having trouble confirming our link to the novelist because genealogy trees heavily favored males, leaving wives and mothers to sit forlornly on limbs. Faulkner’s male ancestors could be readily traced back in time but any branch that involved a female stopped abruptly. She told me Edward was the keeper of Lacy family lore and lineages, thus the hopeful trek to Canoga Park. During a lovely afternoon of reminiscences, he confirmed the connection to Faulkner, explaining the genealogical links in detail which my aunt wrote down.

This news percolated inside me. My mother idolized Faulkner (and never forgave my father for being the family link instead of her), prompting me to dabble in his novels during high school. I didn’t get very far. In college, I tried again, making my way slowly through *The Sound and The Fury* and *Absalom! Absalom!*, as well as some short stories.



William Faulkner



However, his dense writing style and lugubrious sentences (I thought) weren't my cup of tea. I appreciated his "southernness" and his world-building, even if I couldn't pronounce the name of his mythical county *Yoknapatawpha*. His regionalism appealed to my budding interest in my home ground, the American West. In fact, a consequence of my aunt's visit was a decision I made to do a 'study' of the West, which I conducted in the book stacks of UCLA's main library during breaks from my job in the Acquisitions department (a decision provoked into action by the arrival of John Nichols' *On the Mesa* at my desk one day). Faulkner had dedicated himself to articulating what it meant to be Southern. What did it mean to be Western? I had a few ideas, but I needed to dig deeper.

Twenty years later, Faulkner inspired me again, this time to become a writer. In 2006, following a speaking engagement in Nashville, I rented a car and drove to Oxford, Mississippi. I wanted to see Rowan Oak, Faulkner's home, and soak up the ambience of the area, which I had never visited. Before heading out to his house, I spent an hour in a local bookstore confirming the Lacy family connection – by this time family trees included women. At Rowan Oak, I took a guided tour of the old home and tried to imagine Faulkner sitting at his typewriter or drinking whiskey on the porch on a lazy afternoon. According to the guide, Faulkner claimed he only got drunk *after* he finished a novel. I was amused to learn that the author stubbornly refused to buy an air conditioner for the steamy house, only relenting after repeated pleas from his family. In one room, the outline of a book – *Fable*, as I recall – was written on a wall by Faulkner, which was a thrill to see. Outside, I wandered the grounds for so long a guard intercepted me to make sure everything was alright. It was very alright, I told him. He nodded and moved off. Not just alright, but inspired, I wanted to tell him – *really inspired*. Before traveling to Nashville, I did a bit of research on my cousin, finding these quotes:

"Read, read, read," Faulkner told an interviewer. "Read everything – trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You'll absorb it."

Check.

“You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore,” he told another interviewer.

Check. That’s been my mantra for a long time.

“Dreams have only one owner at a time. That’s why dreamers are lonely.”

Check.

“Don’t be ‘a writer’ but instead be *writing*. Being ‘a writer’ means being stagnant. The act of writing shows movement, activity, life. When you stop moving, you’re dead.”

Not check.

I was writing – a lot. My duties as Executive Director of the Quivira Coalition required that I write and write, much of it about swimming away from the shore, looking for a new horizon. As soon as the organization spotted land, I’d push us out-to-sea again. After seeing Al Gore’s documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* earlier in 2006 and reading James Kunstler’s *Long Emergency* I began pushing us *way* out-to-sea with a new focus on climate change and resilience. It required lots of writing. So, Faulkner’s quote was turned on its head – I was writing, but I wasn’t a writer. Between administrative tasks, I hustled words into various documents and articles as efficiently as possible, focused on this new horizon. It was exciting, but there was something missing. After visiting Rowan Oak, I knew what it was: writers wrote books. I needed to write one too. And that’s what I did. It took a year, including a week-long retreat at the James Ranch near Durango, Colorado, to clear my head and pull material together into a coherent text. When I was all done, I shared the manuscript with a colleague, who sent to a publisher, who accepted it right away. They titled it *Revolution on the Range* and before I could catch my breath it hit the streets in June 2008. Inspired by my cousin, I decided on my fiftieth birthday in 2010 to write more books. At the same time, I discovered soil carbon. A world of possibility opened up for ranching, food, resilience, economics, climate – you name it. My book *Grass, Soil, Hope* came out in 2014, followed by two more books. I had ideas for more projects – including fiction. At the end of 2015, I left Quivira to write full-time.

Writing may be in the blood, but you also get it from your heroes. At least I did. In deciding to write fiction along with nonfiction, and all the steep challenges that cross-over it entailed, I had two role models – both of whom I met in person and both of whom did me an act of kindness I’ll never forget.

The first was author-historian Wallace Stegner, who I had the pleasure of meeting twice, once at his home in Los Altos Hills, California, in 1991 and once at an awards ceremony in Santa Fe two years later. I went to California on a prayer. I had a portfolio of black-and-white photographs of the American West under my arm that I had shot the previous year to mark the centennial of the closing the frontier in 1890. The goal was to document the ‘modern’ frontier, replete with environmentalists, loggers, artists, tourists, retirees, subdivisions, art galleries, national parks, and the like. It was a vision of the West very much inspired by Stegner who spent a big part of his writing career pushing back against western stereotypes,



Wallace Stegner at home

especially those generated by Hollywood. His vision of the West was richer and dynamic than nearly anyone else I knew, though to be honest I hadn’t read much of his fiction before meeting him. My interests at the time focused on his essays, biographies, and conservation work. I loved his famous ‘Wilderness Letter’ (written the year I was born) and devoured *The Sound of Mountain Water*, a collection of essays written early in his career. His literary role in the successful fight to stop the Echo Park Dam deep inside Dinosaur National Monument and his environmental activism, especially as a Board member of the Sierra Club, were all terribly inspiring. If his later nonfiction became less and less optimistic as the Status Quo pushed back, frustrating his hopes, I didn’t notice at the time (though perhaps I should have).

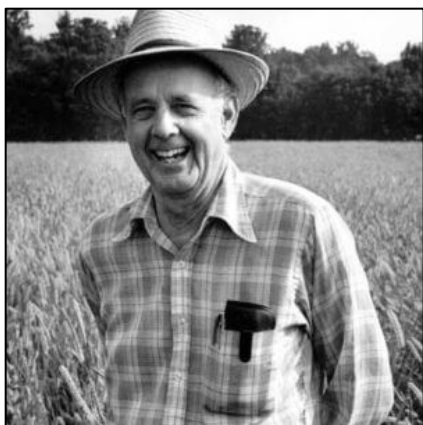
In California, I decided to call him. To my surprise, his number was listed (back in the day when you could ask an operator for a phone number). On the third ring he picked up. I quickly explained the frontier photo project and my desire to show him the portfolio. He gave me directions to his house. I was stunned. But that’s the sort of person Wallace Stegner was – willing to spend time with a total stranger who called him on the phone. I drove to his house and we spent two hours in his office going through the portfolio. A number of the images resonated with him personally, sparking anecdotes and reminiscences. We talked about a rancher he knew, a national park he used to frequent, and the region’s shameful treatment of Native Americans. I was struck by his demeanor, which was courtly

and kind. When we finished with the photographs I asked if he would be willing to write a Foreword. He agreed and it arrived in my mailbox two months later. It was a kindness that I will always cherish.

After our meeting, I dived into his fiction starting with *Angle of Repose*, a complex frontier tale that earned Stegner a Pulitzer Prize in 1972. My favorite was *Recapitulation*, a moving and nostalgic look back at his youth. Stegner brought tears to my eyes. There is something about his words and sentiments that just grabs you by the throat. His letter to his mother written in regret many decades after her death is heart-wrenching. His short story *Genesis* sent a thrill up my spine. It was a story about a cattle drive in an unrelenting blizzard that shatters the clichéd illusions of its main character, a young Englishman. It was powerful stuff. Stegner was a ‘western writer’ in the way Faulkner was a ‘southern writer’ though Stegner’s diverse nonfiction added an important dimension to his regionalism, giving it a roundness that couldn’t be achieved by novels alone. However, although he won awards Stegner never achieved the level of success or fame that Faulkner did (of course, winning the Nobel Prize in Literature helped Faulkner immeasurably). Stegner saw it as a sign of an East-coast bias against ‘provincial’ western writers and it frustrated him. But I wonder if Stegner’s skills at writing in multiple genres made him a square peg that publishers couldn’t fit neatly into their round hole.

The second time I met Wallace Stegner was shortly before his death in 1993 at age eighty-four. He had come to Santa Fe with his wife to see old friends and accept a regional literary award for a collection of essays. Gen and I attended the banquet and I introduced her to Stegner afterwards. He was as gracious as ever. Tragically, a day or so later he and his wife suffered a major auto accident while driving in town. Two weeks later Stegner succumbed to his injuries at a Santa Fe hospital. I felt the loss profoundly. Not only had we lost a great writer but an important leader too. A year-and-a-half later, the Newt Gingrich-led ‘Republican Revolution’ in Congress would put a generation’s worth of environmental legislation in its cross-hairs, laws that Stegner had pushed with his advocacy and eloquence. His legacy was definitely on my mind when I picked up the phone the day after Gingrich’s victory and called the local office of the Sierra Club to sign-up for the struggle ahead. I had Stegner on my mind again when I reached out to a rancher a few years later with an idea to start a nonprofit organization called the Quivira Coalition with the

mission of building bridges and mending relationship in the region we all loved. The ‘Invitation to Join the Radical Center’ that I co-authored in 2003 with twenty ranchers, conservationists, and others which urged an end to the grazing wars in the West would have thrilled Stegner, I believe, and maybe buoyed his spirits.

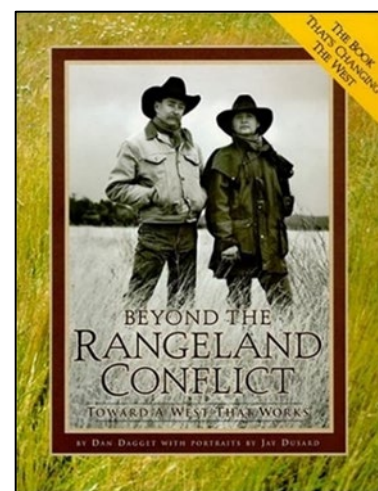


Wendell Berry on a farm

My other fiction/nonfiction writer role model was Wendell Berry. I discovered Wendell in the run-up to founding Quivira when I realized I needed to educate myself about agriculture. Instantly, I knew I had found a kindred spirit. I read a quote early from one of his books that became the organization’s unofficial motto: “You cannot save the land apart from the people. To save either, you must save both.” That was precisely the problem with the environmental movement – it had no room for people. Specifically, no *rural* people.

Working lands, whether ranches, farms, or forests, existed at the bottom of a hierarchy that put people-less parks and wilderness areas at the top. As a farmer who considered himself also to be a conservationist, Wendell understood what a divorce between land and people meant – the ruination of both – and he expressed his concern across a bewildering array of literary genres including novels, essays, poetry, and short stories, starting with his first book *The Unsettling of America* published in 1977. Wendell’s writing was a deep well into which I happily jumped.

I met Wendell through Dan Dagget, an environmental activist who liked ranchers. His 1995 book *Beyond the Rangeland Conflict* was the spark that started the Quivira Coalition for me. Dan became a founding Board member and a mentor to the organization. He had struck up a correspondence with Wendell and talked him into speaking at an event in Flagstaff, Arizona, where Dan lived. He invited me out. I jumped. Gen and I put the kids into a rented minivan and drove to Arizona. We met Wendell and his wife Tanya on a ranch south of town and hit off immediately. It was the start of a warm relationship. I visited their Kentucky farm three times, including a stay-over in August 2005 (I pinched myself – I got to sleep in Wendell Berry’s house!). Like Stegner, Wendell’s graciousness and kindness were part of the deal, augmented in Wendell’s case by a mellifluous southern accent.



Our relationship was capped by Wendell's appearance as the keynote presenter at Quivira's 2007 Annual Conference. We sat in stuffed chairs on a dais in front of a large crowd and had a conversation about land and people that I will always treasure.

Wendell did me many kindnesses during this period, but the most amazing was his decision to publish an essay I wrote in one of his own books. I had submitted the essay, titled *The Working Wilderness* – about ranching and land health – to *Orion*, a prominent national environmental magazine, with Wendell's strong endorsement. Although they had published some of Wendell's writing, they mostly shied away from agricultural content, possibly fearing disapproval from their city-based readership. At the time, the conservation community stubbornly continued to resist the obvious links between food, agriculture, and the environment. This resistance was a source of frustration to many people, but especially Wendell. When *Orion* rejected my essay, I wasn't terribly surprised, but Wendell was livid. He called me to say he'd publish it himself in his next collection of essays! Holy smokes. And there it was in *The Way of Ignorance*, published in the fall of 2005 by Counterpoint Press, with a lovely endorsing preface by Wendell.

I was over the moon.



In January 2016, now unemployed, I picked up where I left off in my time travel story. In the interim, I discovered that the novel belonged to a genre: speculative fiction. When I first came across the term I had no idea what it meant. Its definition was fuzzy and its boundaries were broad. It could be anything from literary fiction with fantastical (speculative) elements to regular science fiction and fantasy grounded in the real world. The term was coined by Robert Heinlein, a pioneering science fiction author who was also an aeronautics engineer. In 1947, he published an essay titled "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction" that described the genre as "concerned not so much with science or technology as with human actions in response to a new situation created by science or technology." That was exactly what I was trying to do! My speculative novel now had a title as well: *Consilience*. I picked up the word from biologist E.O. Wilson's book of the same name in which he called for a melding of science and humanities as a way creating a new narrative form (*speculative nonfiction?*). The word consilience was coined in the mid-

19th century by English scientist William Whewell to describe the convergence of diverse lines of evidence into an empirical truth. Measuring the distance between two objects by different means and getting the same result is an example of consilience. So is the theory of evolution. It seemed like an appropriate word to describe the science of climate change, I thought, not to mention other aspects of our modern world. Consilience also meant ‘jumping together’ which had a nice time travel ring to it.

Consilience had also become a contemporary story in a worrisome way. In my original outline of the plot – way back in 2014 – I envisioned a speculative constitutional crisis engulfing the nation. My source was a fabulous link between time travel and the U.S. Constitution in the shape of Kurt Gödel, an Austrian mathematician and close friend of Albert Einstein. A famous logician, he confirmed the existence of closed time-like curves, mathematically establishing the basis for wormholes in space and time travel. Applying for American citizenship in 1947, Gödel applied his logical mind to the U.S. Constitution, discovering an inconsistency, he told Einstein, that could allow the U.S. to become a dictatorship. He never divulged the details of his discovery



Kurt Gödel and Albert Einstein

(Einstein notably didn’t ask), leading to much speculation later. For what it was worth, I added my guess to the plot of *Consilience*. It was just fiction, right? Then came the rise of Donald Trump. A path to dictatorship suddenly didn’t seem so fantastical. In a surreal coincidence I began writing Chapter Six – The Library – on January 20, 2017, while listening to Trump give his dark Inaugural Address. I had a bad feeling about things to come. I was also worried about Trump’s blurring of fact and fiction in order to intentionally mislead people, demonstrated immediately by his rejection of official estimates of the size of the inauguration crowd. They weren’t big enough for his ego, so a few days later a presidential advisor famously touted “alternative facts” in disputing the numbers. Fiction, in other words. We know the rest of the story: two Impeachments, a botched response to the start of the Covid-19 crisis, a desperate attempt to overturn a free and fair election, and the instigation of a violent insurrection.

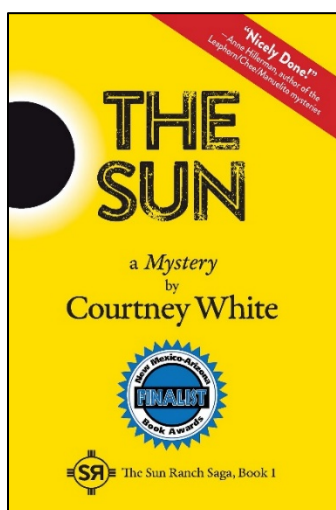
All nonfiction, alas.

I completed the first draft of *Consilience* in the fall of 2017. I had no idea how to write fiction, so I adopted a two steps forward, one step back approach to getting ideas onto the page. Each paragraph was a beachhead. I would make progress for a day or two then back up to make sure the beachhead was secure. Then I would move forward into new territory (the next paragraph) not quite knowing what I would find. When I reached the end of the book, I felt a mixture of relief, elation, and sadness. That was fun. And over too soon. I gave the book to Olivia to read during the Christmas holiday. She cried at Jo's death and then gave me a big hug. That was all I needed. She had comments and I worked them all in. The rewriting process turned out to be a pleasant chore, mostly because it allowed me to spend time with my characters again. I enjoyed their company. They had become family, which might be why I cried at the end of the story each time. Should a novelist admit these things? I have no idea. I don't know what novelists do.

After rewriting *Consilience*, I poked around a bit in the publishing universe. An editor at a trade division at a major house who I had approached about a potential nonfiction project was blunt when I told her I had written a novel: don't confuse my readers. I was a nonfiction writer, she said. Stay in my lane. I sent the manuscript to three literary agents I knew anyway. The first one loved it. After consulting her boss, she came back with the question that I knew would sink my chances: how many followers did I have on Twitter? I told her I didn't have a Twitter account. There was pause in our conversation. What about Facebook, she asked? Instagram? Hmm. She passed. The second agent, an older gentleman who had been in the business a long time, also passed on the novel but not before sharing a historical perspective with me. In the old days, he said, publishers asked prospective authors "What can we do for you?" Now, they ask "What can you do for us?" I could do nothing for them. I was deliberately neglectful of social media, preferring to be writing instead, as Faulkner would have wanted. I knew it put me out-of-sync with the world, but it made me happy. I consider social media to be a black hole of time, energy, and emotion, filled mostly with angry people shouting all the time, spreading lies and misinformation. I didn't want any part of it. As for the 'attention economy' – I took a pass. All that attention-seeking looked a lot like narcissism to me. Fiddling too. I knew these decisions would cost me, but it was worth my peace-of-mind.

The third agent never returned my call.

Meanwhile, I figured out who the murderer was! It came to me while sketching a map of the ranch one day for the mystery novel. Years ago, I had been offered a stay at an isolated writing cabin on a ranch in Montana. I never took up the offer, but I liked the idea, so I added a remote cabin to the map – and presto! The murderer was clear. In early 2018, I put fingers-to-keyboard and began writing *The Sun* in earnest. I felt much more confident now *Consilience* was under my belt. To get it into print and avoid agents, I decided to go the desktop publishing route, inspired by a friend who was successfully self-publishing an action-thriller series featuring a bad-ass Chinese-American teenager. I dived deep into the details of self-marketing – how to get reviews, readers, sales. Prospects were daunting, to say the least. Much of the self-publishing world is geared toward generating as many books in a series as quickly as possible (captured in a popular industry book titled *Write, Publish, Repeat*). That wasn't my goal. Still, I took notes and made a long checklist. I completed the paperwork to start a small publishing business and set a publication target for October 2018. I engaged a friend to draw the map for the book and another to design the cover. I bought self-publishing software and a Mac computer to implement it. When I finished a satisfactory draft in mid-summer, I sent it to friends for feedback and potential blurbs. Early indications were positive. Lastly, I enlisted the dreaded Amazon corporation and its self-publication service to make the book exist as a real thing.

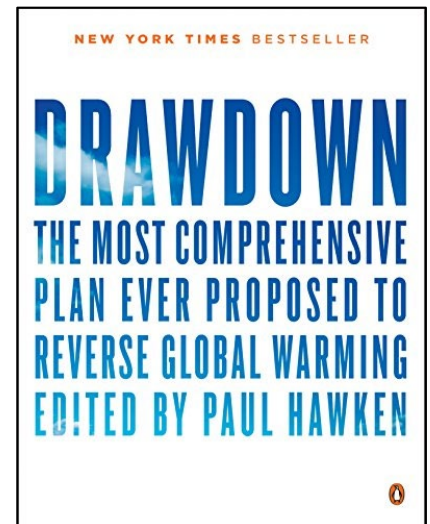


I debuted *The Sun* on October 13, 2018. It looked good, read well, and didn't have too many typos. It promptly bellyflopped. Beyond my circle of friends, I couldn't get many sales despite the lengthy checklist. I didn't give up though. I went to marketing workshops, did more research, and even managed to get the book into the hands of the long-time publisher of High Country News, a respected regional news organization (but no review ultimately). I got a great blurb from Anne Hillerman, daughter of mystery writer Tony Hillerman and a successful mystery author herself. We did a book reading together in Santa Fe in May 2019, which was great fun. I decided to pay a local book consultant for a detailed marketing plan

(she had attended the reading). Another checklist! Meanwhile, I worked on the sequel, called *Sun Down*. It opens with cows being shot on the ranch, based on a true story from my early Quivira days (I actually met the shooter, but that's another story). By October I

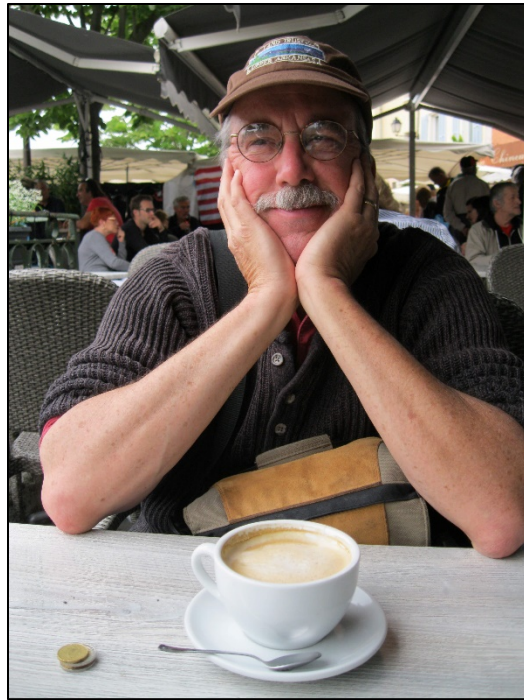
was 30,000 words in and cruising. A month later, *The Sun* won second place at the annual New Mexico Writers Banquet in the mystery category. Sales remained sluggish, but I was a newbie at this business, so I kept pushing on, fingers crossed.

Then one day I stopped cold. I was worried about the world again. Things were not going well on the climate front, or any other front. On July 25, 2019, Gen and I endured a record-breaking heat wave while traveling on a train from Berlin to Prague. It got me thinking. Things were serious. Windows were closing for real this time. Fiction felt like an indulgence, not just for me but all of us. Telling each other made-up stories while Rome burned. I had tried to push the world away after leaving Quivira, but old habits die hard. Still wanting to pitch in, I created a side job in 2017 helping regenerative farmers and ranchers turn their stories into books. I tried to avoid the news, but it was hard. The feeling that I needed to do more grew stronger, motivated in no small part by Donald Trump and his fascist cronies. In October 2019 I started a newsletter called *Terra Firma* focused on nature-based solutions to land and food challenges. Three months later, Paul Hawken called me. A widely-respected writer and activist, Paul and I had become acquainted through the Quivira Coalition. I loved his 2017 book *Drawdown*, a seriously significant publication about solutions to climate change. Paul told me he was launching a new book called *Regeneration*. He had been reading my newsletter and wanted me on the project. Full-time. Writing. I didn't hesitate. One last save-the-world run, I thought to myself – promised myself.



I'll come back to writing fiction. It's not an indulgence. It's a necessity as Faulkner, Stegner, Wendell and others have taught me. I miss making up stories. I miss the characters, the land, and the sense of discovery one gets working through plot, paragraph by paragraph. I'll pick up where I left off with the mystery series, though with fewer checklists this time (and maybe none at all). I'll figure out how to get *Consilience* into print. Meanwhile, on my 60th birthday I began researching a five-book family saga about the de Lacys, stretching back thirty-five generations, inspired by my aunt Sara's sleuthing. Completely nonfiction. Fiction, nonfiction – it's all drawn from the same well. It's all writing. For whatever reason, it's in my blood and that means I'll keep writing until I, myself, stop.

Hopefully, not soon.



The author with a cappuccino



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My Story / A Novel Experience