Article for Live Well 4

A funny thing happened on the way to autographing

Long before I sold my first book I would close my eyes every night thinking how grand it would be to autograph books I’d written. I would be sitting at a long table with a white table cloth and a vase of yellow roses centering the stacks of books I’d published. I’d be thin and wearing a big white hat as I smiled and greeted every fan.

Then I sold and real life set in. Forget the thin part and the white hat. So much for positive visualization. The dream that kept me going all those years when I was sending manuscripts in and never selling, was just that, a dream.

Hometown signings are great, but my advice to writers: Don’t leave the city limits. It’s scary out there.

Sometimes when you autograph it is grand. The manager calls you by name, takes you to a table that is covered with your books and then circles by asking if you need anything. I’ve had them put out banners, have live radio interviews just before the signing starts, set up punch and cookies, and make sure there is an ad in the paper.

I’ve also had bookstore owners forget I was coming, make me go to the back and sit up my own table (no clothe, sorry). A few stores have even moved me around during the party. One huge store in Dallas moved me to the drug aisle. Another put me in front of the baskets so I had to lift my table and step sideways if anyone needed a basket.

The out of town signings: There I am in a strange town where I don’t know anyone. I’m sitting all alone. A sitting duck. I swear the same three people always come up to me.

One: The guy whose wife is shopping. He grabs a cup of coffee and parks in front of my table. He doesn’t read books, just magazines, but wants to know what mine is about. Fifteen minutes later he wanders off to get another cup of coffee and think of more questions to ask. Things like, “You write historical, right?”

“Right.” I answer. “My favorite time is around the Civil War.”

“Oh,” he takes a drink. “So do you write from personal experience?”

Two: This person hangs around until no one is near before running up and saying, “I got a great story. How about I tell it to you. You write it and we’ll split the money?”

When I explain that I have more stories in my head then I’ll ever have time to get down on paper, this person disappears.

Three: The last person always shows up no matter how few people are in the store. He starts with, “You know, I’ve always thought about writing a novel. It couldn’t be all that hard. I might take off a few months from work and write the next best seller.”

When I suggest books to read on writing and writing classes, he adds, “I don’t have time to do that. Just tell me where to send it. How much do you think I can make? What’s your editor’s e-mail? Would you give me a quote for the front? A friend says that’s all I’ll need.”

My life signing books: I’ve been the lost and found for free-range kids in the store, the information desk, the complain department for every book someone had to read in high school that they didn’t like, and the entertainment for anyone on break in the store.

So why do I do signings? Because, now and then a fan comes in. In the lonely out-of-town signings they sit with me and we talk about my characters that have come alive for them. I feel a bond with them, an honesty, an acceptance. They’ve walked through my mind and understand what I wanted to say with each story. They’re the reason I write.

Last week a lady came to a signing in Oklahoma. She said, “Your character, Mary Blaine, came so alive to me as I read that I prayed for her safety each night.”

Another asked, “Any chance I could meet Tinch Turner from JUST DOWN THE ROAD? Don’t tell me you just made him up. He was too real.”

Fans become friends. I write for a living, but now and then I stay up a few hours later because I know they are waiting.

May your life be rich in joy both in life and in fiction.

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