

Voyage of Discovery, or how I came to write in Retirement

by Bruce K. Byers

We who serve our country in the Foreign Service and live in so many different cultures are often moved to write about our experiences in an effort to capture those unique moments of interaction with other people, other languages, and other places. The people we meet and the places in which we live and travel motivate many of us to pursue a writing life.

I began writing in high school in an effort to have something published in the school's annual writing competition for best stories and poems. My submissions were not accepted, but I managed to create a young man – Harry Forth – that would move me to continue to write fictional accounts of his life and adventures. The latest attempt recounts his experiences as a foreign exchange student in *The Extraordinary Journey of Harry Forth* (available through Author House, Amazon, Barnes and Noble and at www.harryforthsadventure.com)

During graduate school I was fortunate to work summers in the office of the NASA Historian in Washington at the exact time when astronauts were beginning their voyages to the Moon. I researched and wrote *Destination Moon: A History of the Lunar Orbiter Program*. I told my Ph.D. advisor that it was the “dissertation” in lieu of one he had wanted me to write about Russian history. The NASA history received wider distribution than any dissertation I might have written. It was my first published work.

From NASA I made the leap to the Foreign Service and my writing skills took a different turn. Government writing demanded different skills than those I had acquired and honed in graduate school. I soon learned that good writing contributed to one's corridor reputation and, one hoped, promotion opportunities. During my Foreign Service career I continued to write fiction based upon my experiences.

After retiring from the Foreign Service in 2000 I wrote a series of short stories that reflected to one degree or another my experiences living and working abroad. I was influenced most by my years living in Iran, Afghanistan and India.

In 2012 an unexpected event occurred that moved me to retrieve my old diary which had been packed away for



My advice for authors is to search carefully and ask lots of questions before signing a publishing contract.

activities I had experienced as a young man. I succeeded in contacting my high school counselor, the woman who, more than anyone, had encouraged me to apply for the high school summer exchange program that took me from the mesas of New Mexico to a host family in the university city of Göttingen in north-central Germany. After visiting her in 2013, I decided to write a fictional story about my high school life and my extraordinary journey across the world to a new, global consciousness. The project took two years to complete.

In the quest for a publisher, I learned that our country is awash in all kinds of publishing enterprises. After months of research, I decided to contact a subsidiary of Penguin/Random House – Author Solutions. I approached the self-publishing company carefully, asking many questions and waiting to be convinced that my investment would bring me the quality book I wanted and the means to market it.

My advice for authors is to search carefully and ask lots of questions before signing a publishing contract. Be skeptical. No publisher can guarantee sales regardless of the kinds of marketing tools it may offer. The upside of self-publishing is that the author usually controls all phases of production and retains all rights to her or his work.

I am currently working on a sequel to my novel and the more I write the more I discover how expansive a story can become. I am also surprised at my recall and the ability to spin an interesting story out of old diaries, letters, and postcards that have been moldering away. I encourage all who have an urge to write to get on with it and not to worry about publishing for a long time. The challenge of taking old experiences and memories and fashioning a new story that family and friends might enjoy is worth the labor.