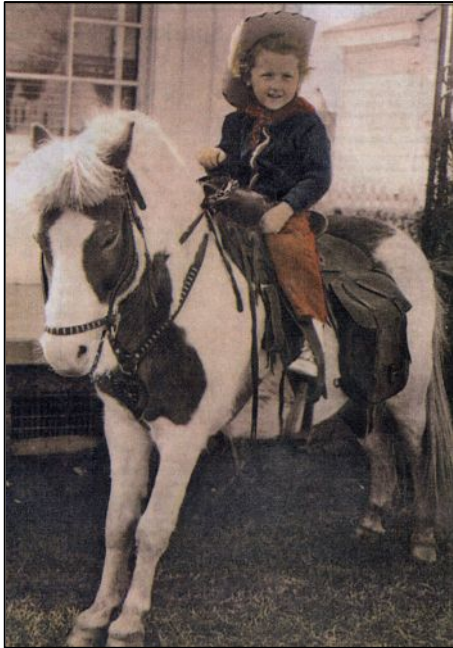


FROM RIDING HORSES TO WRITING STORIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH JENNIE IVEY

by Sarah Holloway

Flies fly and writers write, and Jennie Ivey, Cookeville author and long-time Herald-Citizen columnist, caught the writing bug way back in 7th grade. She won first prize for writing the winning essay about fire prevention in a city-wide contest and received a big, shiny new Schwinn bicycle.

"I still have that bike," she told me. "The tires are rotten but if I got new ones and maybe a chain, I could still ride it. I kept it because it was the first time I got paid to write anything."



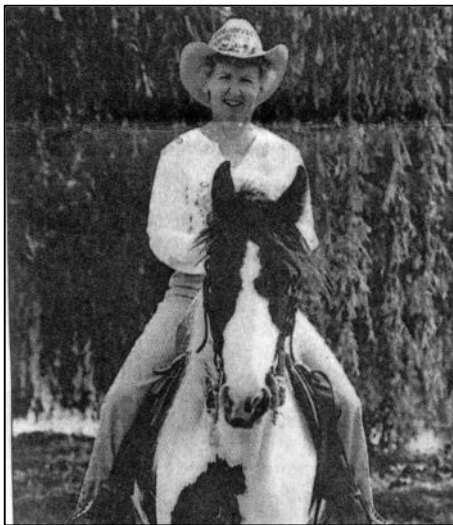
"Then when I was a senior in high school, Metro Nashville schools had a contest for writing an essay on the subject 'Freedom Is Not Free.' I wrote the essay and won the grand prize -- \$500. I got put on the radio and all this other crazy stuff and people were saying, 'you should write for a living.'"

I visited with Jennie for this interview last month at her 1840s-era farmhouse, surrounded by 60-acres of fields, woods, a pond, ancient trees, barns and other outbuildings.

(Pictured: Jennie Ivey astride a pony)

We talked in the beautiful, added-on dining area inside after a brief tour of the downstairs, which is homey and inviting and full of interesting furnishings. A large, upright piano, topped by family pictures, dominates the foyer, but Jennie said, "We're not a musical family -- none of us play it. We inherited it from George's aunts."

Jennie Ivey is a small red-headed bundle of energy. Her conversation is filled with conviction, enthusiasm and frequent laughter. Her blue eyes reflect a myriad of expressions and she frequently made me laugh out loud.



Asked about her childhood, she said, "People say that in order to be a writer you have to have all this awful stuff happen to you and I just didn't. I had parents (Rayburn and Josephine Moore) who loved each other and loved their children. I have a brother, Rusty Moore, who's three years younger than I am. He lives in Nashville. My sister, Mandy Hastings, is 12 years younger and lives in Franklin, Tenn."

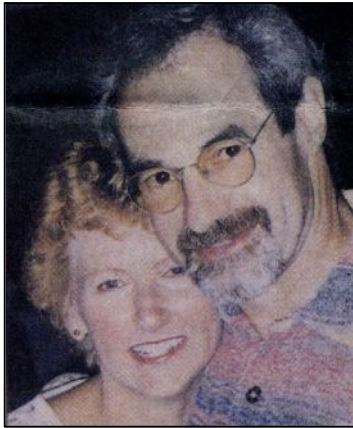
(Pictured: Jennie Ivey astride a fast horse – and no, it's not the same pony).

"My father worked for J.C. Penney in management for 29 years so we moved a lot when I was a child. We moved from Little Rock, Ark., to Jacksonville, Fla., to East Brunswick, N.J., so he could work in the New York corporate office of J.C. Penney. This was in the mid-60s, and my mother, who was born in Arkansas, was very unhappy up north. It was hard on her and therefore it was hard on us."

"People assumed that we were ignorant, racist and all that stuff. Just the way we talked, cooked and did things was very different. When someone mentioned playing 'boil' I thought that was something you did with an egg -- not playing ball. We later moved from New Jersey to Augusta, Ga., and thought we'd died

and gone to heaven. When I was in 8th grade, my dad was transferred to Nashville to what at the time was the biggest J.C. Penney store in the south. He opened it in the 100 Oaks Mall in 1967, and I lived in Nashville until I left for college at Emory University in Atlanta."

Jennie met her husband, Cookeville surgeon George Ivey, at Emory. He was in medical school and she was in graduate school working on a master's degree in education and teaching high school social studies.



When I asked what her first impression of George was, she said, "Muscles! It was summer and he was wearing a short-sleeved shirt and I could see his arm muscles. He's still strong. He chops wood, hauls water, moves furniture and even put this floor in (for the dining area). He's really multi-talented. He can fly a plane, ride a motorcycle and a horse, scuba-dive, snow-ski and water-ski. And he's a fabulous cook. He can do just about anything."

(Pictured: Jennie Ivey and her husband George Ivey).

I asked if she did those things too, and she said, "Well, I don't like to cook. And I don't scuba-dive or go up in his airplane; sitting in it in the hanger once was terrifying enough. I'm afraid of heights. Falling from a high place is an ever-present fear. I can swim and ski. I can ride a motorcycle, I can ride a fast horse and kill a snake if I have to, but I don't like to go anywhere near a ledge."

After their meeting at Emory, Jennie said, "It was pretty much an immediate attraction and a couple of years after we met, we got married. He did his surgery residency at Vanderbilt because my parents were in Nashville, and that's where our daughters, Meg and Leigh, were born. We moved here in 1986 because there was an opportunity with Upper Cumberland Surgical Associates and this is where our son, James, was born."

"Meg lives in Denver. She works for Swallow Hill Music School in marketing and will marry Andrew Yon this July in Breckenridge, Colo. Leigh and her husband, Matt Cocanaugher, have just bought a house in Danville, Ky. She works for Centre College (where she and Meg went to school) as the assistant director of the Study Abroad Program. She and Matt are expecting our first grandchild in early October, and we're thrilled to death about that. James recently graduated from Tech with a degree in accounting and lives in Cookeville with his wife, Natalie."

"Were you always interested in writing?" I asked.

"I was always a reader and my mother read to me a lot; and my dad, who grew up with parents who had no education but were wonderful story tellers, told us great stories. I had stories read to me and stories told to me throughout my childhood, and I thought I should write stories; but what I succeeded at more than stories was non-fiction pieces and that holds true today. The first job I ever got at a newspaper was with the 'Nashville Banner' -- a summer job where I worked two summers before I graduated from Emory. Then I taught school in Fulton County, Ga. After George graduated from med school, we moved to Nashville and I started having babies. I had three kids in four years, so taking care of those babies was my job for a long time -- and I'm still taking care of 'em!"

"When did you start writing again?"

"When my children didn't have to be watched every minute, and for me, that came pretty early because I'm not one of those hovering mothers. My kids (knock on wood) never got hurt or anything because I said, 'Never drink the Drano and don't play on the roof when I'm not around. Don't go in the street or to the pond' and they pretty much didn't. I guess I was lucky."

"I was in the Cookeville Creative Writers group where I met you and Janet Biery, Rubye Fowler, Martha

Burns and Nancy Jarrell and so many wonderful people who are gone now. I entered one of their contests with a piece called 'Confessions of a Middle-Aged Biker Chick.' It was about George buying a motorcycle and me having a fit about it and then him buying me a bike, and it won the grand prize.

"Charles Denning, then editor of the Herald-Citizen, was one of the judges and he called me and said, 'I want to run your piece on the front page of the paper and I'd like a picture of you and George riding your motorcycles. So it ran on the front page and that was a pretty exciting thing. Then I wrote a piece called 'Why Can't the World Be Like Waffle House?' This was before I became a columnist, and it won a big prize from CCWA, and Charles called and said, 'I want to run your Waffle House piece in the paper.'

"During this period, I was writing a lot of free stuff for Children's Theatre, and my church and also started writing for the depot magazine, 'The Highballer.' I had written an article about Mozelle Medley and how she helped save the depot from the wrecking ball. So Charles called me and said, 'I want to run your piece about Mozelle Medley in the Herald-Citizen.'

"I said, 'How much are you gonna pay me for this stuff? If you want to keep running my pieces, you need to pay me,' and he said, 'Well, I'm sorry. I can't pay you.' And I said, 'Well, I'm sorry but I can't write for you.' And in the next breath he said, 'O.K. -- I'll pay you.'



(Pictured: At Leigh and Matt's wedding on St. Simons Island, FA. Pictured from left, are Jennie Ivey, Andrew Yon, Meg Ivey, Matt Cocanougher, Leigh Cocanougher, James Ivey, Natalie Ivey and George Ivey).

"This happened because I took a writing class in extended education at TTU in the early '90s with Cookeville writer, Gail Damerow (author of the best-seller, 'Ice Cream! The Whole

Scoop,' 1991, and numerous books about raising livestock, chickens, etc.), and she asked if I were making any money from my writing. I told her, 'no,' and she said, 'Stop giving it away.'

"I don't make a living from my writing but I seldom write for free anymore -- it's validation and at least pays for my expenses and gives me a little pocket money.

"In the late 90s, I took Dr. Calvin Dickinson's Tennessee history class at TTU. He's a wonderful teacher and storyteller and when the class was over, I said, 'Calvin, let's write a book for kids together.' And that's how we (Jennie Ivey, W. Calvin Dickinson and Lisa W. Rand) came to write our first book, 'Tennessee Tales the Textbooks Don't Tell,' The Overmountain Press in 2002. Then we wrote a book called 'E Is for Elvis,' Rutledge Hill Press, 2006, that we thought was gonna make us gazillionaires, but that book bombed. Then Calvin and I wrote the book that came out last year called 'Soldiers, Spies and Spartans: Civil War Stories from Tennessee.'

"Right now I'm enrolled in an intensive fiction course called, "A Novel in Progress Workshop" where I go to Sweetwater, Tenn., every three months for 18 months. At the end of the course I'm supposed to have the first draft of the novel finished."

Jennie has also sold 25 stories to the 'Chicken Soup for the Soul' series and writes stories for new books every time they announce a new title. She is also a 'Guideposts' magazine staffer. 'Guideposts' is among the top 30 largest magazines in the U.S. with a circulation of 2.3 million.

"I entered the 'Guideposts' writing contest in 2008," Jennie said, "and out of 5,000 entries, I was one of 15 invited to Rye, N.Y., for their week-long, all-expense-paid workshop, and I became a 'Guideposts' contributor. That means that whenever I see a story I think might inspire their readers, I pitch it to their editors. They don't always accept the story but sometimes they buy it. My mother read 'Guideposts' all my life and I regret she's not alive to read my stories. She'd be so thrilled."

All stories in "Guideposts" are written in first person but Jennie said, "Many of them are ghost-written. My first published story with them was about a man in Knoxville who used his private plane to rescue dogs that would be euthanized, but my byline isn't on it. His name is in the magazine as author, but I do get the paycheck."

Jennie will have a story with her byline on it in the June issue of "Guideposts" about fireflies in the Smoky Mountains, titled, "They Blink in Sync in the Great Smoky Mountains."

"The photographer has been here to the house, and we sat in the lawn chairs in front of a hemlock tree and pretended we were in the Smokies," Jennie said. "But my biggest news is that I was invited back to Rye, N.Y., for a refresher workshop that's held once a year. You submit a story to try for an invitation and they pay your way. Last year I got to go to Portland, Ore.; one year I went to Atlanta. This is a story I wrote about my friend, Julie Burns, here in Cookeville, sewing dresses for little girls in Haiti."

So, why does this writer write?

"Mostly I write because I hope my writing makes a difference to people. A writer writes for other people's eyes to read and that's the number one lesson I've learned from Guideposts -- write with your reader in mind. I try to do that -- I don't write to a desk drawer."

"How does George react to your writing?" I asked.

"Well, he reads my column every Sunday but he hasn't read any of my books in their entirety -- which is OK. If he wrote an article about taking out a gall bladder, I wouldn't read it, but he's very supportive of my writing.

"As soon as he learned I'd been invited back to 'Guideposts,' he got online and bought me an airline ticket -- especially since Guideposts was paying for it!"

LITERARY LOSSES

By Jennie Ivey

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: Sunday, 20 May 2012, Section C.

The world of literary fiction took a hit in the early months of 2012 with the deaths of three prominent Southern writers – William Gay, Harry Crews and Lewis Nordan. Never heard of them? Neither had I until I began to take writing classes and attended writers' conferences.



That's when I began to understand the difference between literary fiction and other kinds of novels and short stories. Just what is the difference? It's easier to explain what literary fiction isn't than what it is.

If a book is one you'd absentmindedly pick up to take to the beach or on an airplane trip or to read after a long day at work, chances are it's not literary fiction.

Think Danielle Steele, James Patterson, Janet Evanovich, Tom Clancy. Popular, mainstream, commercial fiction that tends to be plot-driven and that's written primarily to entertain. It's relaxing. Quick. Fun. If a book can be classified as spy fiction, romance, mystery, chick lit, horror, or thriller, chances are it's not literary.

On the flip side, fiction that is critically acclaimed, complex, serious, thought-provoking, and multi-layered is generally considered literary. The focus is less on plot than on character. The pacing is often slow and the writing lyrical. The subject matter of literary fiction is usually dark and frequently depressing. Its intent is to uncover for the reader universal life truths through exploration of internal rather than external conflicts. Heavy stuff, in other words.

Three of its best practitioners have left us.

William Gay, who died in February was a native of Hohenwald, TN, an the only one of these writers I ever met in person. He walked into a Cookeville Creative Writers Association conference several years ago looking more like a person who lived in his car than a keynote speaker. Unshaved. Uncombed. Rumped.

Which more or less characterized his entire life. "I've always worked under cover," he said. "Until I was almost 50 years old, I was an intellectual passing as a construction worker. Now (after publication of two novels and numerous short stories), I'm a construction worker passing as an academic,"

Gay's fiction includes "The Long Home," "Provinces of Night," "I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down," and "Twilight," not to be confused with the vampire novel of the same name. Please.

Harry Crews, who died in March, was born into grinding poverty in south GA and suffered a childhood that's the stuff nightmares are made of. The Sears and Roebuck catalog was his only escape. "When I was a boy, things were so awful in my house that I'd fantasize about people in the catalog because they all looked so good and clean and perfect," he said. "Those are the people I first wrote stories about."

Crews taught writing at the University of FL for 30 years. Largely unknown outside literary circles, his bewildering and often brutal body of work earned him a near-cultish following among certain cadre of readers. Most recommend his 1978 memoir "A Childhood: The Biography of a Place" as a good way to jump in.

Last but certainly not least is Lewis Nordan, who died in April. Like Faulkner, Nordan set most of his stories in a fictional town in his native MS. His works tend to be comic tales of country boys coming of age in a world where the grotesque lurks around every corner. Nordan lived not far from where Wmmett Till, the African-American teenager who allegedly made a pass at a white woman, was murdered in 1955. That tragedy is the basis for "Wolf Whistle," perhaps his most well-known novel.

So there you have it. A few places to start if you want to dive into the world of literary fiction, by some of its finest writers, on your trip to the beach this summer.

*Read more about Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>