

Conversation With Author

Trisha Howell

Q. Were there any early events in your life that prepared you to be a writer?

A. Yes, I think the many books my mother read to me and the stories I made up for myself as a child helped prepare me. From the earliest age, I was fascinated by the joy and wonder of storytelling. My Mom says that I began speaking in short sentences at ten months, and by the time I was 2 years old I would spend hours playing by myself with my several dozen stuffed animals. Each animal had its own name, distinctive voice, and personality. I would put them together in some situation I'd imagine (usually with props) and let them create stories for me, speaking as each of the characters. I remember this as a source of great entertainment and satisfaction, especially since I was an only child and often didn't have other children available to play with.

Q. Was there any incident that made you start writing these stories down or that showed you clearly that you were destined to be a writer?

A. I don't think that there is any one incident that led me to become a writer or showed me that writing was my vocation. I've been a writer my whole life, writing short stories and poems from the time I first learned to write (the first week of first grade). I just didn't realize that I was a career writer until I was an adult and wrote a screenplay called "Eliduc" (based on a romance in the Lais, a series of short stories by medieval author Marie de France) during my last year in the PhD program in philosophy at Stanford (1990). I was really surprised at the great fun and sense of adventure I got from developing the short story "Eliduc" into a dramatic screenplay! Up until the year before, I had been so busy and had gotten so much pleasure from researching and teaching (I helped teach philosophy courses at Stanford while studying there) that I didn't notice that a part of me was unfulfilled inside. It wasn't until I took a sabbatical from Stanford (January-August 1989) that I realized that something very vital was missing from my life.

Q. What happened in that year that changed your life?

A. I went to live in Heidelberg, Germany in order to study with a very famous philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer. He met with me two afternoons a week and gave me no reading (only thinking) assignments, so for the first time in my life, I had loads of free time on my hands. I walked all around the city and the forest meditating and letting my imagination run wild. I went to the movies almost every day, relishing living in those fictional stories. I read a lot of fiction as well, which I hadn't done for many years (I'd been too busy studying philosophy, psychology, the classics, and languages to read for pleasure since high school). I really enjoyed my life—especially since it was quite fun to enter into a completely different mind set as

I spoke and thought almost exclusively in German. Each language brings its own world view and way of thinking into your consciousness as you immerse yourself in it, and I think this was very good for developing more flexibility in my imagination. I spent the last month before my return to the US in Italy, a country of unsurpassed natural and artistic beauty that would stimulate even the most dormant imagination. By the end of those seven months, my imagination and its accompanying thirst for adventure had grown beyond anything I could have dreamed of at the beginning.

Q. What did you do about your new active imagination?

A. Nothing at first. I returned to my old routine at Stanford University the Fall of 1989. But it immediately became apparent to me that I couldn't spend my life as a philosophy professor. Though I was in the middle of writing my dissertation and close to getting a double PhD in philosophy and humanities, I couldn't spend yet another year sitting in a library researching all possible interpretations of the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato's views of love and friendship. Not sure what the right direction for me was, I asked myself what I was passionate about. One thing I was really passionate about was movies, especially those few that had moved me to the core and essentially changed my life. I wanted to be able to create that deep emotional insight for myself and other people.

Q. So what did you do?

A. I quit Stanford June of 1990 after being accepted into film school at USC starting that fall. But when I got there, I was disappointed that the film school made me stay mostly in critical studies (film history, theory, and critique), since that was the division that had admitted me. I'd wanted to take a lot of production classes. But I was permitted to take some screenwriting classes. Unfortunately, these were very poor, and I learned almost nothing. However, I did learn quite a bit attending film festivals (free on press passes), where I interviewed famous actors and directors and then wrote 60+ articles about them for 2 local newspapers and a monthly magazine.

Q. What did you do after you finished film school?

A. When I graduated with my third MA, I went to work for a film production company called Cineville, reading endless submitted screenplays and writing summaries of those I thought had potential. Everyone at Cineville called me The Poet because my short summaries and evaluations were so evocative. This was where I really started to learn about story construction (from all the shockingly poor screenplays I read—I learned what not to do!). But I disliked many of the people I met in the film industry, finding an overwhelming number to be dishonest, unreliable, amazingly artificial, and out of touch with basic human values. So I decided to get out.

Q. Then what did you do?

A. I drifted for a few years, doing odd jobs. Some involved writing—like I established a small business editing dissertations and novels, which continued developing my writing and storytelling skills. Some didn't involve writing—like pet sitting for the rich and famous in LA, an idea that occurred to me because I adore animals so much. Even this indirectly helped my writing: I could generate lots of stories from those experiences! These were also the years when I assiduously studied alternative medicine and wrote a long book by hand (that was destroyed when my apartment flooded) called *Killers of the Cure: The Medical Monopoly's War Against Your Health*. I also attended many personal growth and self-help seminars and trainings, including studying Tensegrity with Carlos Castaneda and his fellow shamanic practitioners. Also, I combined my interest in health and spirituality by studying Plant Spirit Medicine with Eliot Cowan in Tepoztlan, Mexico. Finally, I went to massage school (while living in San Diego with my mother) because a friend of mine was opening an upscale elderly care facility in San Francisco, and he had asked me to work there part-time while I wrote. I thought this would be fun—another adventure. But right after finishing massage school, I happened to meet my future husband Dean while on vacation in Seattle. To make a long story short, I never moved to San Francisco but instead to Seattle after he and I got engaged. By this time, it was the Fall of 1997.

Q. Sounds like a big change in your life.

A. Yes. I went to work full-time in Dean's office—he's a naturopathic physician—performing massage on patients, doing secretarial work, taking patient before and after photos, running errands, etc.—whatever needed to be done. It was during this time that I started editing all of Dean's promotional writings and conceived the outline for a book that he then wrote about his work. I edited the book and contributed several articles to it. I also started writing my own books during my few free hours.

Q. Where did your writing ideas come from?

A. My life and the “what ifs” that my imagination created from it. When I wished that my Mom's snooty Yorkshire Terrier Lillian would accept my affectionate Pekingese Addison, I wondered what kind of extreme experience would have to happen to Lillian to make her appreciate Addison's love. The answer became my first children's picture book, *The Princess and the Pekinese*. When someone told me they sensed that Addison wanted to write a book—and he literally stared at me constantly for weeks while I wrote it down for him—I created a humorous social satire in his voice, *The Pekinese Who Saved Civilization*. When friends of mine needed a play for the Fringe (Theater) Festival here in Seattle, I wrote them one, based on all the humorous golf expressions I had heard while learning to play golf. It was really fun to see my comedy performed on stage and to hear everyone laughing! But then I felt a little stuck. I knew I loved to write, but I wasn't sure what to write next.

Q. How did you get unstuck?

A. In a completely unanticipated way. My husband and I had bought wilderness property in Eastern Washington and built a retreat center there. In July of 2000, a woman named Gwilda Wiyaka came to our center and gave a workshop on shamanic journeying. I'd learned this remarkable technique in 1996 while studying Plant Spirit Medicine in Mexico. When I resumed practicing shamanic journeying that summer, I was flooded with so many story ideas that I couldn't even begin to write them all down. I tried, however, for about 3 years, and wrote sixteen books and synopses for many others during this time. The first book I wrote was *The Journeying Book: Adventuring to Unleash Your Inner Power*. It came to me fully formed during one of my journeys, and I worked nonstop for several days writing it down.

Q. Wow! What did you do with all those books?

A. In early 2003, I started Howell Canyon Press, with my first title—*The Princess and the Pekinese*—coming out in July. *The Pekinese Who Saved Civilization* followed in September, and my dog Addison and I found ourselves on book tour promoting these two titles. During readings, signings, and other presentations in bookstores, schools, and libraries opened up a whole new world to us. We both enjoyed very much meeting new people and positively touching their lives. *Living In A Glowing World*, a collection of my poetry, followed in April, 2004, and this was followed by my second children's picture book, *The Adventures of Melon and Turnip*, which will be released in the fall of 2004. *The Journeying Workbook* will come out January, 2005.

Q. Have you enjoyed becoming a publisher?

A. Yes, overall I have. I've learned so much in the past year about publishing that my mind is still reeling, and it's been fascinating to see this very complex business from the inside. However, it has turned out to be more time-consuming than I could ever have imagined. I've been so busy with publishing the past almost two years that I've barely written anything new, which is horribly frustrating, since my writing ideas continue to multiply. That's why I want to get out of publishing and really get into writing full-time. In February, 2004 I retired from working with my husband Dean. So now, for the first time, I will be able to write full-time, if I stop publishing my own books.

Q. Where do you see your writing future?

A. I continue to be interested in all genres and still have many, many short stories that I'd like to see become children's picture books. Many of these are animal-themed, including my new chapter books series about the antics of my twin Pekinese puppies, Addie (named for Addison, who passed away late 2003) and

Rocky. But my current writing love—where my heart truly is—runs in two directions. One is a series of juvenile fantasy adventure novels following three children over seven books. I was going to publish the first, *Talia and the Tower*, this summer (2004), but I decided not to when a friend who’s an award-winning novelist told me she thinks it’s better than the Harry Potter series. While I would never say this (I adore the Harry Potter books and think they are about impossible to beat!), this made me realize that I should seek a larger publisher for the Talia Adventure Series. The other direction that draws me is finally focusing on my historical and contemporary romantic adventure novels. One recently finaled in a contest, and so I’m rewriting it to submit to an agent and large publisher. I am very passionate about writing books that entertain, uplift, enlighten, and deeply move people. I hope that my work will do this for everyone who encounters my books.