

How did you start writing?

I had always been an avid reader, but never thought I would write. I owe it to the Santa Fe Public Schools, where I worked for twenty-five years as an occupational therapist. After a particularly bad day at work I picked up a Harlequin romance novel from the paperback book exchange and innocently thought to myself “Why, I could do this”. At that point I started writing, little dreaming how difficult it can be. My first effort was a wild historical romance now reposing in a cardboard box in my garage.

Why do you write historical mysteries?

When I first began writing I wrote a historical romance, and then a couple of Regency set romantic novels. My first published fiction was a short story, “An Unusual Correspondence”, set in the Regency era, with mystery elements. At a certain point I came to the realization that the old adage “write what you love to read” holds true. I don’t read a lot of romance but I love historical mysteries. The core concept of mysteries, restoring justice after a crime, appeals. And of course I have always loved historical fiction; as a child I used to pick books to read depending on what era they are set in—often I still do.

How did you pick the era and setting for your Scottish mysteries?

I’ve always been a bit of a Scottish nut, and the Lordship of the Isles is an interesting era, a Celtic lordship tied to the more feudal Norman influenced monarchy of Scotland. It also has not been written about much. And there was the family connection. My great uncle started the MacDuffie Clan association and I heard lots of stories about the early history of the MacDuffies, who were tied to the MacDonalds, the Lords of the Isles. I still treasure some of my great-uncle’s research books he picked up on his travels many years ago.

How did Muirteach MacPhee, your sleuth, evolve?

Muirteach is the bastard son of the prior of Oronsay. I first visited Colonsay and the Oronsay Priory ruins many years ago. The beautifully carved grave slabs there impressed me, dating from the period of the Lordship of the Isles. Many were grave slabs of the Priors of Oronsay, who were often succeeded by their sons. This realization that the priors of that era were not terribly celibate became one of the sparks that grew into Muirteach, my sleuth, the bastard son of the prior of Oronsay. A little booklet about Colonsay, written by Sheila Duffy, provided a list of names of the priors of Oronsay, including Muirteach’s fictional father, Crispinus, and his uncle Gillespic, the chief of the MacDuffie clan at the time.

What do you enjoy most about writing?

I love creating a world, and trying to accurately put myself into the mindsets of people who lived so many years ago. For example, what were their ideas of the stars? We look at the sky and see planets, stars, galaxies, sputniks, planes, and satellites. Medieval people however might have viewed the stars as lights shining through the celestial sphere from the heavenly realms beyond that sphere.

How do you get ideas for your books?

For each book I tend to have a theme, some aspect of history that inspires my plot. A MASS FOR THE DEAD focused on my fictional story of how the MacDuffies or MacPhies may have become the record keepers of the Lords of the Isles. THE FAERIE HILLS was inspired by stories of fairy changelings and the Bridget Cleary murder case in 1890s Ireland. THE STUDY OF MURDER revolves around a mysterious manuscript similar to the Voynich manuscript. DEATH OF A FALCON, began with research on the Knights Templar and Henry Sinclair’s possible voyage to America in the 1390s. My research led me far afield, to the Norse in Greenland and America, although the book takes place in Edinburgh.

What about the New Mexico mysteries?

My longtime partner of thirty years grew up and still lives on the Cochiti Pueblo. He’s the kind of guy who can tell you who he sat next to for lunch in junior high school and what they ate, and he tells wonderful stories. He was raised by his grandparents at Cochiti. I extrapolated a bit from the 1950s to the wartime 1940s, and thought it best to set my mystery on a fictitious pueblo, San Antonito. The story is told from the viewpoint of an Anglo schoolteacher, Emily Schwarz, and my twenty-five years working in the public schools of Santa Fe definitely play into her character.