Much thanks, Debbi, for the opportunity to talk about ‘the writing life’ on your blog. It’s a privilege and a pleasure.

1. Your background was mostly non-fiction writing, for magazines and with your journal based account of U2 tours, and then you ventured into novels with “Power’s Garden”. Do you prefer non-fiction or fiction? Which, in your opinion, is easier to write?

I really have no preference for fiction or non-fiction. I just love words and have always loved to write. Both fiction and non-fiction have their up sides and their down. When I was starting out, I went to a writer’s conference here in Tucson. There were various editors, agents and publishers present and I took in a short workshop to which participants were encouraged to bring along something they were working on. We went through the usual intros including our then current writing experience. I had just begun my career in non-fiction writing for periodicals and having mentioned that though I was currently working in non-fiction, the piece I’d brought along was fiction. The instructor was vastly disappointed. Her ‘write what you know’ was restricted to fiction or non-fiction and, in her view, as I was aspiring to non-fiction, that’s where I should have stayed.

I don’t ascribe to that idea at all. It may have been true at one time, but I don’t believe it applies much anymore. Most fiction, with the possible exception of pure fantasy, uses non-fiction’s research and attention to factual detail. And non-fiction, especially narrative non-fiction, uses fiction techniques like dialogue and anecdote.

My husband and I had the privilege of visiting the far north Scottish islands of the Orkneys and the Shetlands, some years ago. Orkney Islanders are closest to the mainland and describe themselves as farmers who fish. Shetlanders, who live further out to sea toward Scandinavia, think of themselves as fishermen who farm. (Neither of them consider themselves Scottish, but that’s a whole other subject!) I think that’s a fair analogy for fiction and non-fiction these days.

As to which is easier, that usually depends on what I’m writing at the time. Fiction has a creative openness that I find liberating. You can tear down the walls and constraints that come with writing non-fiction and just let your mind go. You can generate characters that take on a life of their own, sometimes even refusing to follow through with whatever you had planned for them. At the best of times, you’re a director. You set the stage; you put your characters in their places and call for action. Then you listen and watch and take down what they say and do. Some writer a lot better than I am, called this ‘riding the golden horse.’ It doesn’t happen often, but sometimes, as fiction writers, we do get to ride the golden horse.

On the other hand, I’ve found that non-fiction’s factual parameters, those walls and constraints, often make for more ‘comfortable’ writing. I always learned a lot from researching the backgrounds to stories and that was one of the most enjoyable parts of the work, along with interviewing some extraordinary people. I would often find a subject that I was interested in, and then search for the right magazine fit.
Unfortunately for me, I’m not one of those ‘natural’ writers who would consider either fiction or non-fiction writing easy. I think it takes courage to write just about anything.

2. Your love of travel has obviously given you lots of inspiration. Where are your favourite places to visit?

I do love to travel, experiencing new places and people, though the getting there is becoming more and more tedious and exhausting. Very few places call me back repeatedly however. It’s not technically travel, I guess, but I would have to say that spending the summer at cottages my dad built way back in the 1950s is probably my favourite place of all to visit these days. Next year will be the fourth summer spent there since my husband and I renovated them. They are on fifteen acres of cedar woods along the Conestogo River in Southern Ontario in Eastern Canada. It’s a sublime place filled with a peaceful serenity, a deep pastoral beauty, and lots of wild critters which we consider our tenants. It’s also a great place to write! We’ve had some fabulous road trips to and fro as well.

Outside of the cottage, the Outer Hebrides are special to me. The Isle of Harris is one of the most magical, other-worldly places I’ve ever been. There are white machair beaches and mist-shrouded mountains and we sat on sea-cliff ledges with sea-birds soaring by just a foot in front of us. And, of course, the Stones of Calanais are just to the north, on the connected Isle of Lewis. Iceland’s remote primordial beauty, which is at once both fearsome and magnificent, is another place that haunts me. .

I’m not a big city person in general, though I love becoming acquainted with the personalities of the world’s great cities — at least for a few days. Of all the cities I’ve managed to visit, I’m not particularly drawn to any, though I did especially love Rome, Venice, Dublin, London, Salzburg, Prague, Quebec City and Victoria. Some more than others.

3. Your artwork is spectacular. My next project is about a famous sketch artist and I am interested to find out what influences you to draw and how you select your subjects —aside from your commissions, of course. Does something “call out” to you or do you have a definite thing in mind ahead of time? Do you draw as much as you write? Which do you prefer?

Thanks for the great comment on my artwork, Debbi! Your sketch artist project sounds very exciting. I look forward to reading it! I started out in art with oil painting, doing work just for family and friends. Then, about thirty years ago I took my first trip to Great Britain – a country I have always loved – with my brother. Shortly after that, I took a graphite art class with a local artist at Tucson Parks and Recreation, though I don’t now recall what prompted me to do that. I still find it a challenge to interpret color in terms of tones of grey. Pencil work is full of light, it’s emphasis on strong contrast gives a crisp and clear delineation of shape, while still allowing for shadow tones and subtle textures.
I was ‘moved’ to write a collection of poems about that British adventure and at the same
time I worked on 11x14 pencil drawings to illustrate some of them. This eventually became a
self-published book of poetry called *Homecoming*. So I was definitely ‘called’ to do that
work. Afterwards, I participated in gallery showings and solo shows, mostly in-State, doing
original work, selling graphite and water-color lithograph prints and note-cards, and doing
commissions. So I worked for many years in the field, while still doing free-lance writing.

I don’t draw much at present. My style is fairly photo-realistic and I find that my patience
isn’t as good as it used to be, nor are my eyes! I still do small animal portraits which I really
enjoy and still find very relaxing. At present, I prefer to write, but the small portraits are a
nice break and I occasionally think about working in colored pencil. But the urge passes!

4. How busy is your writing/drawing schedule? Do you take time out? What do you do to
relax and recharge the creative batteries?

My schedule for both writing and art is fairly light at present. I have a couple of books in
the works and an occasional portrait commission, but I rather make my own schedule for
both. When I was writing for periodicals, deadlines kept me in line, as did commissions,
gallery sittings, and art shows. I was often working a full-time job, so writing usually had to
wait until late at night. I have two children, so writing time could be hard to come. I used to
work on a manual typewriter (!) and I usually had a small table in the corner of our bedroom
through the years. I remember hammering away on that old blue Remington more than once,
while Dustin was playing under the table. Every now and again, his small baby hand would
reach up and punch a key! I also remember procrastinating by cleaning the oven or some
other such loathsome chore, rather than getting to work. I’m still pretty good at that, though
the oven now cleans itself.

Now that I’m working primarily on books, I try to at least get *something* done every day,
however short or small. I work best in the morning, but when I’m on a roll I don’t get much
else done at all.

There are many, many perks to being a writer, one of which is sitting in my office with
my feet up, sipping a cup of tea – and still getting work done. When I’m blocked, which is
more often than I’d like, I don’t fight it anymore. I leave it all behind for a while. Something
usually clicks given time. Overcoming writer’s block is a subject I’m always interested in!

5. Can you describe your initial journey to being published – both your non-fiction and your
novel? How difficult was it to find a publisher? Do you have an agent? Many people
these days self-publish as well as going the traditional route. What is your
opinion/experience of either or both?

My personal journey goes back a long, long way. I’ve written stories of one sort or
another since I was about seven years old. In third grade, I’d trundle over to the bookmobile
– my grade school didn’t have a library – and on one such trip, I found a book about Marion
Anderson called *Deep River Girl*, Marion’s life story. I loved that book; the challenges this
woman faced. I think I must have seen even then that everything has a story; people have stories; things have stories; faces have stories. And I wanted to tell some of those stories.

But my first publication was a poem in the Canadian magazine *Chatelaine*, when I was about eighteen. I subsequently went to college for one year, majoring in Honors English, and shortly after that I moved to Arizona, got married, and had two children. I did not get back to writing again for some years, and when I did, I jumped in blindly, so to speak. As an Anglophile, I worked up an article on Anglo-Saxon personal names and just shot it out to the English magazine, *History Today*. No query letter, so marketing review. Nothing. To my everlasting good fortune, it was accepted! It took about a year to finally see it in print, but I’m still chuffed to see that article come up on-line. I wrote steadily from then on for a variety of publications and enjoyed every minute of it.

Sometime in the mid ‘90s, a number of writing snafus conspired to move my attention from article writing further into art. The straw that broke the camel’s back was a contract I’d signed with *Arizona Highways* for two articles. I’d written for them previously, but at the last minute they changed editors and my articles were dropped. I’d already been paid, but still . . . . At about the same time, I began to think more seriously about getting a book out. About ten years earlier, I had spent three long months in the library researching the Power’s Garden shootout, which would eventually be the background to my first novel. However, it was only when I’d taken that trip to Great Britain that I determined to take a break from non-fiction and put together a book.

To tell the truth, I never even considered trying to find a publisher for a book of poetry. I think it’s one of the hardest genres to sell and I didn’t want the hassle. So I set up a company and did the thing myself, with the help of a singularly talented book designer. At about the same time I’d begun my pencil work, I discovered, thanks to my daughter, the extraordinary talent that was the Irish band, U2. I’ve kept a journal most of my life, so after the poetry book, and again without ever considering a publisher, I put out, again under my own company, Hawkmoon Publications, *A Grand Madness, Ten Years on the Road with U2*, a ‘memoir’ of sorts.

Following on the modest success of *A Grand Madness* – it was a best-seller on Amazon for a while and went into two printings – I dug back into my Power’s Garden research and wrote the novel of the same name. I have never had an agent for any of my work and, while I did try to find one, briefly, for *Power’s Garden*, I never stuck with it after I found my current publisher, which was a stroke of good luck.

As I’ve said, my first two books were entirely self-published. I really enjoyed the freedom and complete control involved in self-publishing. Moreover, profits are all yours beyond the 20% royalties customary with traditional publishing, so, frankly, I made a lot more money with *A Grand Madness* than I did with any of my other books. It undoubtedly helped that I had a fantastically popular and wildly appreciated subject! Moreover, I got a review and recommendation from one of the big guys, *Library Journal*. But setting up a company, writing, publishing, and fulfilling orders makes for a lot of work, which is one of
the reasons I sought out a publisher for both *Power’s Garden*, and my subsequent non-fiction book, *Spirit Stones, Unravelling the Megalithic Mysteries of Western Europe’s Prehistoric Monuments*.

I, personally, have nothing whatsoever against self-publishing as long as the physical work, the layout, cover, interior design and so forth, is top-notch. I think it evens the publishing playing field a lot, especially at a time when traditional publishing is in such a state of flux. Publishing hybrids like crime writer, Mel Sherratt, who was recently featured here at *My Way by Moonlight*, are perhaps publishing’s future.

I agree with Annie Lamott when she says of writers that you have to write because you need to write. It sort of validates who you are in some sense. I think people who write and need to write, whether or not they become published are, and always will be, true and real writers.

6. *My Way by Moonlight* is all about advice and resources for writers trying to break into the writing world. What is the one piece of advice you would give if you could only give one?

I’ve gotten a lot of good – and bad – advice about writing and the writing life over the years. One of the best things I ever heard from anyone – and I don’t now remember the where, the when or the who of it – but it would be the optimum importance of The Three Ps in writing. Patience. Practice. And Persistence. In equal measure.

7. And finally, can you describe a typical writing day for you.

I’ve never really had a ‘typical’, consistent writing day. It’s very much depended on where I was in my life and what area of writing I was working in. While ‘gainfully employed’ at ‘mundane’ jobs, I wrote in the evenings and when the kids were little, I wrote whenever I could catch a free moment, which was often quite a struggle.

What usually happens no matter what I’m working on, is that I do a lot of ‘thinking’ about a project and a lot of research – which in the old days meant lengthy and sporadic library visits. I’d get new queries out while I was working on a contracted piece. I’d schedule or conduct interviews; get in all the leg work, so to speak. I still tend to over-research everything, which, I suppose, is a form of procrastination.

But when I sit down to actually write, I’m totally focused. If I have the freedom to do so, I can work steadily, writing and re-writing, hour after hour, because so much of the work has already been done in my head. I can block it out by scene or by section and just have at it. It’s getting to that point that’s the hard part.