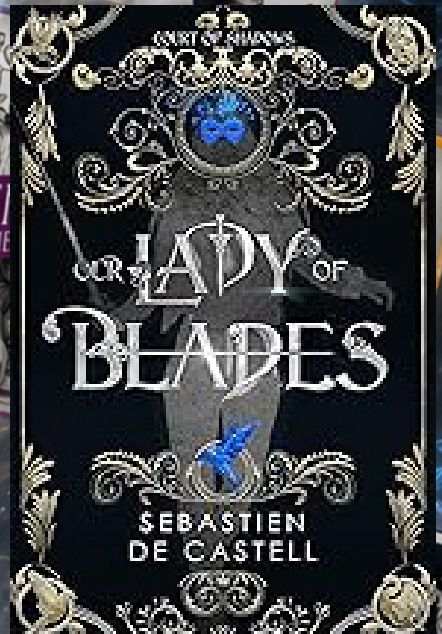


MAY 2026



Featuring: **Sebastien de Castell**

Also • Christopher Johnson • John Blanchard

www.BNPMag.com

May 2026

Special Edition

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Welcome to May 2026, and the year is speeding by. We stopped doing regular issues in February, so it has been a few months. For the most part we stopped because I needed to devote my energies to writing full-time.

So I transitioned the magazine to online only and introduced a new **SELF-PUBLISH** feature which some have used. Essentially, you email your story to an address listed on the website and it is pre-formatted:

The subject line is the title and byline.

The body of the email is your story with bio at the end.

You can also attach a photo of yourself or an image to go with the story.

The email comes to me, I check to ensure it isn't objectionable and send it to the website. Turnaround is usually a day, tops.

Try it. Your story gets exposure and comments and you get a chance to claim a publishing credit.

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An Interview with Sebastien de Castell

John Blanchard-Portrait of Happiness

Christopher Johnson-Two Atoms

Book Review: The Path of Duty and Honor

Guest article: Holly B. Gutwillinger: To Sign or Not to Sign?

We are expecting to have another edition next month featuring award-winning science fiction author [Robert J. Sawyer's](#) newest novel and an interview.

Otherwise I will see you on the website.

Enjoy this issue.

William Gensburger

Publisher

SEBASTIEN DE CASTELL

Sebastien's acclaimed swashbuckling fantasy series, *The Greatcoats*, was shortlisted for both the 2014 Goodreads Choice Award for Best Fantasy, the Gemmell Morningstar Award for Best Debut, the Prix Imaginales for Best Foreign Work, and the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. His YA fantasy series, *Spellslinger*, was nominated for the Carnegie Medal and is published in more than a dozen languages.

Q: Welcome, Sebastian. What are we talking about today?

A: We're talking about *Our Lady of Blades*, a Court of Shadows novel. It's set in the same world as my *Greatcoats* series, but it stands alone. Readers can jump in without having read the earlier books.

Q: How would you describe the book? Is it historical fantasy?

A: I wouldn't call it historical fantasy exactly. It's more of a swashbuckling fantasy inspired by the picaresque tradition—stories like *Don Quixote*, *The Three Musketeers*, and even *Captain Blood*. It has swordplay, hidden identities, intrigue, and a touch of magic layered over a complex legal system built around judicial dueling.

Q: What's the premise of *Our Lady of Blades*?

A: It's set in a duchy where court cases are settled through professional duelists. There are different types of duels—some determine sentencing, others recreate disputed events in combat. It's a deeply corrupt system. Into that world steps a mysterious woman known only as Lady Consequence. She defeats the most celebrated duelist in the city and sets in motion a story about two sisters, family betrayal, revenge, and protecting the brother they both love.

Q: Where did the idea for this world come from?

A: Two places. One was a British legal drama called *Silks*, which showed how intricate and layered the court system can be. I wondered what that would look like in a fantasy world built around swordplay.

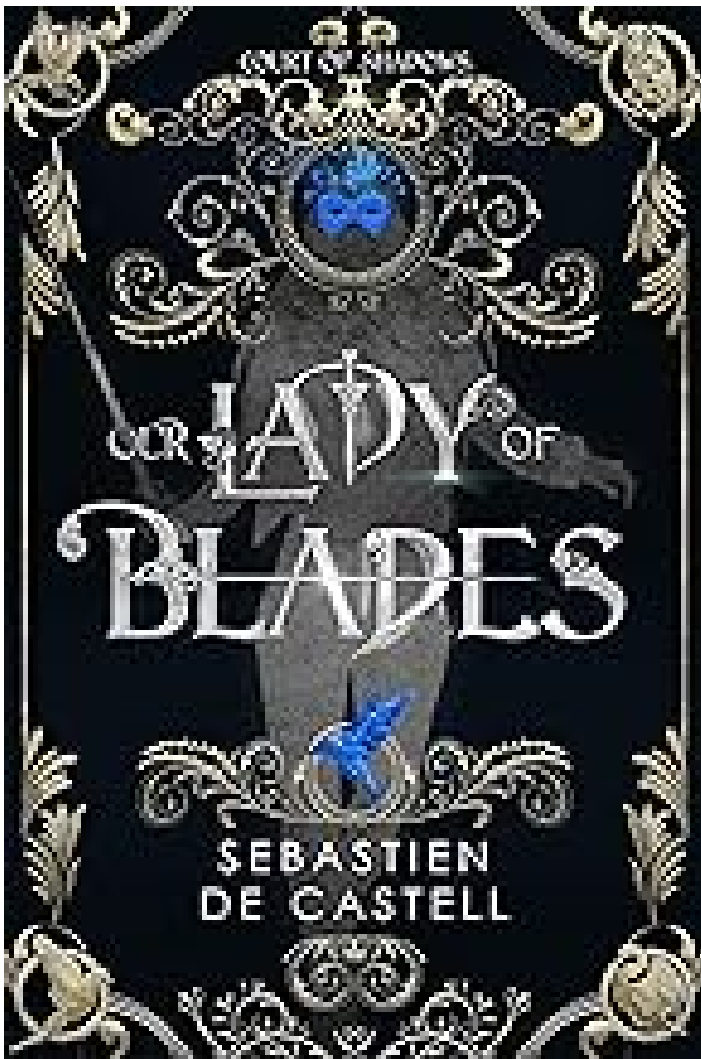
The other inspiration was seeing a sign that said "Our Lady of..." something. I loved that construction. I



started imagining duelists being given public honorifics like celebrities—titles such as "Our Lady of Blades." That linguistic spark helped shape the culture.

Q: How do you build such a detailed culture without getting lost in research?

A: I start with a central idea—like a society that treats duels as courtroom entertainment—and expand



outward. I'll research things like currencies or calendars, but I try not to write an encyclopedia. Most of that background never makes it onto the page. It just informs the texture of the world.

Q: You have a strong background in swordplay. Does that influence the writing?

A: Absolutely. I fenced in college and later choreographed stage combat. That experience helps me tell stories through swordplay. The duels aren't just action scenes—they're character-driven moments.

Q: Lady Consequence is a complex character. How did you approach writing her voice?

A: It was challenging. She's endured trauma and returned to a city that destroyed her family. Her core motivation is protecting her brother, who's physically vulnerable and at risk of being forced into a duel he can't win. Once I understood that emotional center, her voice became clearer.

Everything flows from motivation.

Q: You mentioned being inspired structurally by *The Count of Monte Cristo*. How did that affect the book?

A: I've always loved *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but I wanted to experiment with revealing the mysterious avenger gradually rather than showing the full backstory first. It turned out to be much harder than I expected. That experiment is one reason the book took seven years to complete.

Q: Why do some books take months and others take years?

A: Sometimes a book comes from pure creative impulse and pours out quickly. Other times it's more intricate and requires years of refinement. I wrote *Malevolent Seven* in about a month, and it became one of my fastest-selling books. *Our Lady of Blades* took seven years because I kept pushing it toward the best possible version of the story I wanted to tell.

Q: How much of today's world is reflected in this novel?

A: Probably more than I consciously realize. One theme that crept in is how comfortable we've become in celebrating the downfall of people we dislike. In the book, everyone knows the legal system is corrupt, but they tolerate it because eventually it hurts their enemies. That moral compromise interested me.

Q: Do you want readers to take away a specific message?

A: Not really. If you push too hard on a message, you end up writing a polemic. I prefer to tell a compelling story and let readers interpret the meaning for themselves. Once a book is published, it belongs to the reader.

Q: Which character from *Our Lady of Blades* would survive best in today's world?

A: Honestly, most of them. They're savvy, strategic, and emotionally resilient—though not always noble. Unlike some of my earlier heroes, they understand manipulation and public perception. They'd adapt quickly.

Q: After seven years with this book, what does it feel like to release it finally?

A: There's a moment when the book stops being yours. Once it's published, you can't change it. It becomes the reader's story. That's freeing. For years, it hangs on you while you revise and rethink. When it's finally out, it stands on its own.

Q: When is *Our Lady of Blades* available?

A: It releases May 14 worldwide.

Q: Where can listeners find you?

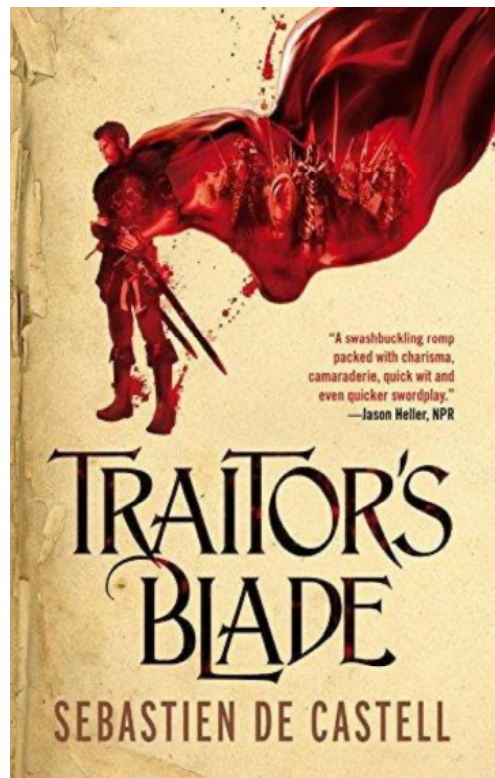
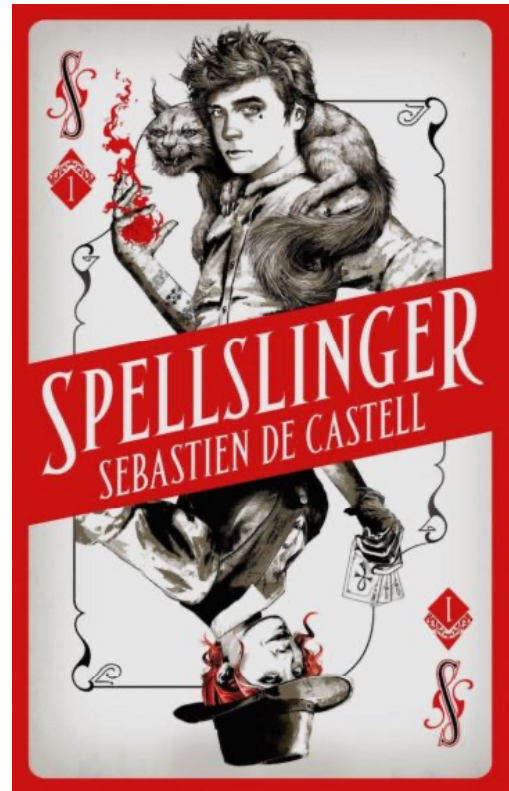
A: My website is DeCastell.com. I'm also on X, Facebook, BlueSky, and Instagram. Readers can contact me through the site—I answer my own emails.

*Interview courtesy of **House of Mystery** is an electrifying weekly radio program hosted by Canadian author and broadcaster Alan R. Warren, airing on the NBC News Talk Radio network and syndicated across the US and Canada. Through insightful interviews with acclaimed authors, experts, and cultural figures. With a rich mix of fiction and non-fiction topics*

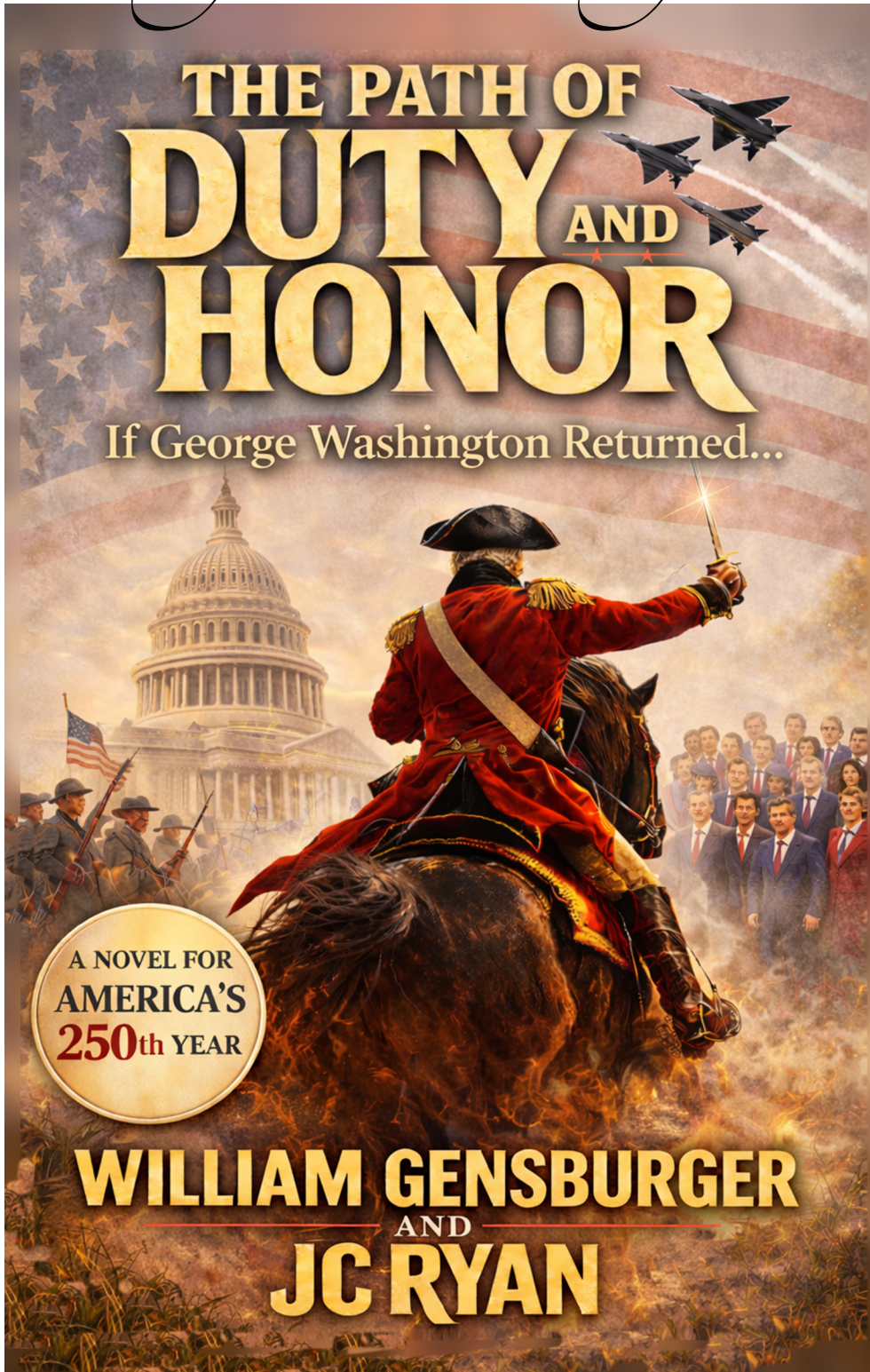
***Alan R. Warren** is an award-winning Canadian true crime author and broadcaster whose work has captivated readers and listeners across North America. With **more than three dozen books published**. He is also the longtime host of the popular *House of Mystery* radio show on the NBC News Talk Radio network.*

***Joe Goldberg** is the award-winning thriller author. He was a government and corporate intelligence officer. Joe is a college instructor in digital communications. He resides near Chicago, most likely cooking and listening to Jimmy Buffett music.*

Listen to the full interview at [Sebastien de Castell - Our Lady of Blades - House of Mystery Radio on NBC | Acast](https://www.houseofmystery.com/shows/sebastien-de-castell-our-lady-of-blades)



George Washington is Back!



“The Path of Duty and Honor” by William Gensburger and JC Ryan, is a bold, high-concept political thriller that imagines George Washington inexplicably arriving in 2026 America and being drawn into a conspiracy that reaches from cartel warehouses on the border to the halls of Congress and the Oval Office. It blends character-driven domestic drama with escalating national stakes, and at its best, it’s both emotionally satisfying and disturbingly plausible.

At the center of the story is Nathan Scott, a controversial author whose obsession with Washington’s legacy suddenly becomes far more personal than he ever intended. Alongside him, journalist Sarah James navigates the thin line between reporting truth and becoming part of it, as events accelerate

beyond explanation. Around them, political figures, operatives, and power brokers—each with their own agendas—move to protect influence, suppress change, or exploit the moment. Buy it today: www.President1.com

Two Atoms

A story by Christopher Johnson

It started inconspicuously—the relationship. It was . . . how to put it? Two atoms, swirling through the universe and then colliding, crashing together accidentally, bumping together anonymously, setting off near-sparks. He was at a dance—specifically, 1968, when all this took place—a mixer in Chicago, with the young women wearing solid-colored sweaters and plaid skirts, and the young gentlemen wearing sports jackets and beige pleated trousers and ties that they purchased at one of the shops on State Street—the kind of shop that sold suits and sport coats to young men supposedly “on the way up,” the “way up” being in quotation marks because who knew what “way” meant, and “up” was even more uncertain.

A riot of people was going crazy out on the dance floor, and the band was Jackie Broadway and the Soulsters from Gary, Indiana, Jackie being big but agile as hell, catapulting around on the stage like a cannonball and belting out James Brown and Marvin Gaye and all the great soul stuff from the late Sixties, and everybody dancing and jumping and jiving and cavorting and drinking and doing the bugaloo and the mashed potato and the jerk and the wah-watusi and all those fantastic dances from the Sixties.

He saw her. She was fifteen feet away from him, separated from him by dozens of cavorting, swishing, swaying,

jumping, inebriated dancers. She was by herself, a calm in the middle of the storm, wearing a leprechaun green sweater and a skirt dipped in the colors of some ancient Irish fiefdom. He saw her standing there. His heart went bumpety-bump like a horse rider in a loose saddle as he began a slow walk toward her, a delicate walk, a nervous walk, a hesitant walk, an absurd existential walk, a walk right up to her, and she looked at him, and her eyes whispered hello. Her hair was short and black and tightly curled, her eyes as blue as the heavens that one hopes to attain after passing into the next world.

She smiled, and they melted wordlessly into a dance, a fast dance, a hectic dance, in unison with the other writhing bodies on the dance floor in that vast ballroom, and they watusied and jerked and bugalooed and twisted to “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” and “Please Please Please.” She danced smoothly and elegantly and effortlessly but with a weary, empty look worn deeply into her face and her eyes as if she were half there and half not there.

Amidst the chaos and the hubbub and the craziness, he shouted, “What’s your name?”

She smiled like the Cheshire Cat and shouted, “Guess! You have to guess!”

His mind went blank. A slow dance interrupted his blankness. Percy Sledge singing “When a Man Loves a Woman.”

He reached out for her, and she closed up the sacred space between them. Jackie Broadway did his best Percy Sledge imitation, and her arms importuned themselves around his neck like snakes, and they floated along to the rhythm of the song like two boats in the calm of a besieged sea. Memory receded. Consciousness receded. They buoyed each other up as they danced, almost unconsciously, without speaking or even looking at each other, strangers bound together for an instant in time, atoms meeting and colliding and finding a moment of synchronicity in this crazy mixed-up universe. The song ended, and they parted from each other but looked at each other with shy embarrassment. "Wine?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. They walked together, but not hand in hand, to the table where the stewards dressed in white vests and black trousers stood behind a legion of alcohol and awaited their pleasure. On their journey to the table, he leaned toward her and said, "We shall get wine, and then I shall guess your name."

She nodded and smiled at him like a Sphinx frozen in time. Drinks in hand, they stepped away from Jackie Broadway and the Soulsters so that they could hear ourselves think and hear each other utter whatever they thought to say. Drinks in hand, they stared at each other with the embarrassment that hangs between two people who are 20 or 21 and shy and unsure how much to reveal of themselves to each other. They stared at each other like strangers in a lost land. "Now, your name," he shouted.

"And, as I said, you must guess it,"

she shouted back over the music. "You look very intelligent. Sooner or later, I am sure you will guess it."

He thought for a moment.

"Winifred."

"No," she laughed.

"Edith."

"No!" she laughed again.

"Brunhilda."

"God, no!"

"Mabel."

"No! No! No!"

"Maybelline," he said.

"No, silly! You are not even close.

Those are old-fashioned names, and I'm a modern young woman. You're teasing me. I know you are."

"I'm sorry! I am hopelessly stupid. I cannot begin to think what your name is. I really can't. I have no idea." He looked at her, and he felt out of tune with himself. She looked him starkly in the eyes, and her blue eyes emblazoned themselves upon him. He longed to touch her shoulder, her arm, but something held him back. What? He did not know. She stared at him with a look that said, "I know you. I know you are shy."

She leaned toward him, her lips only a quarter of an inch from my ear. Her lips were generous and forgiving. She whispered in a voice that harkened back to the Egyptians, in a voice that blended satin with fog. "Kathy," she whispered. "Kathy Armbruster." Her whisper was like fine whiskey. The sound of her whisper aroused something long dormant in him. She placed her left hand delicately, chastely on his right knee. "Kathy Armbruster," she whispered once again. Her fingers burned his knee. Every pore

of his skin screamed.

She whispered, "And what is your name?" Her fingers on his knee felt like a crisis of inexperience. He pulled slightly away from her. He looked at her and drowned in her blue eyes. "Paul," he said.

"Paul," she whispered, in a voice coated in lavender. Still her fingers burned themselves into his knee. He felt the pathos of desire. He did not know what to say. Words would not suffice. Jackie Broadway and the Soulsters faded into oblivion. It was only the two of them, atoms floating through the universe and then colliding. She finished her wine. She asked for another wine. He pulled himself up and found the bar with the stewards dressed in black trousers and white vests and ordered another wine for her and another one for himself. He sat back down, and she tossed the wine back. The music pulsed like a heartbeat.

She pressed herself against him. They kissed. The kiss was chaste and knowing. Even as they kissed, he felt shy, embarrassed, flushed, lost. He felt the misery of desire and of ensuing aloneness. Her kiss was pillow soft and sensuous and invited him into new worlds. Her fingers rested on his knee and snaked their way into his bones. Every pore of his skin screamed. He pressed himself against her, and she held herself as firmly as a wall against him. Jackie Broadway disappeared. The other dancers disappeared. He felt desirous and shy and adrift in a vast and delicious moment of time. Something was alive

between them. He felt it, and he felt that she felt it. The atoms had converged, creating their own space between the stars. The moment of the kiss lasted forever. He touched her cheek with his right hand, and her cheek felt like a mask--cool to the touch, as smooth as glass. Still they kissed. They parted. They bent their eyes downward, both sheepish, both shy, both embarrassed that they had given up their puritan selves to the fog of desire. The moment was pure, clean, when two souls open themselves to each other by accident. He looked down into his lap, too diffident to say anything, abashed that pure feeling had captured him so completely and brazenly.

The kiss. That kiss, which had lingered into infinity. He floated on that kiss back to his dormitory room at St. Anthony's College in Terre Haute, Indiana. She had told him that she was a sophomore at St. Anne's College in Oak Park, west of Chicago. Desire wrapped itself around him like a hot blanket. He could barely concentrate on his studies. He lay in his bed beneath his prickly blanket and broke out into sweats. He took cold showers to settle himself down. He itched with desire. He fantasized: naked skin against naked skin. He played Roy Orbison on his record player and mouthed the words to "In Dreams."

He wanted to see her again, but he hesitated to call her. Something held him back. She was a mystery, and he didn't want to break the mystery. Finally, though, he did call her. A young woman

answered the phone—not Kathy Armbruster. Their phone setup was like his in the dormitory—one pay phone serving the entire floor. The young woman who answered the phone screamed, “Kathy Armbruster—ya got a call from some guy! Get a move on before he hangs up!” She picked up the phone, said, “Hello?” Sounded a million miles away.

“This is Paul,” he croaked. “Paul Pendergast. We met at that dance in Chicago last week—the one with Jackie Broadway and the Soulsters. We danced, and we talked. You gave me your phone number. Now I’m calling you.”

Silence. “Oh, hi,” she finally said. Paul’s hands grew damp. In a warmer voice, she said, “Oh. I remember you. You’re the one who guessed my name was Hilda and Mabel and all those crazy old-fashioned names.”

“Yeah, that’s right. But I finally guessed that your name’s Brunhilda.”

“You’re goofy,” she laughed.

“Gee, thanks,” he said. He was unsure what to say next, but the memory of the kiss arose like an antidote to his usual timidity. They made a date. He would take the Greyhound Bus from Terre Haute to Chicago and stay with his parents in LaGrange and borrow their car and pick up Kathy Armbruster at 5:30 at St. Anne’s College, and they would have dinner in Oak Park and go to a movie at the Lake Theater. Her distance on the phone gave

him pause, but the memory of the kiss pursued him like a moment of bliss in a dream that one hopes will never end.

He entered the lobby of her dormitory, and she was waiting for him. Her face was as perfect—every hair in place, nose, eyes, mouth like a kabuki mask. She smiled vaguely. He looked at her and said, “Kathy Armbruster! Not Clara! Not Brunhilda!” She laughed. The smile was almost instantaneous . . . but not quite. They were two atoms floating through the universe, and they had come together by accident, catapulted toward each other by the random forces of the universe.

They drove to a restaurant he knew in Oak Park. The movie was at 7:30—Gone with the Wind, which had been rereleased for the umpteenth time. She’d said she wanted to see it when he’d mentioned that it was playing at the theater. Gone with the Wind. Rhett and Scarlett. Melanie and Ashley. To Paul, it seemed weird to be seeing it in this day of Bonnie and Clyde. But that was what she wanted to see.

At the restaurant, he ordered drinks for both of them. They looked at each other. Awkwardness floated between them like a pestilence. They had danced, they had kissed, there had been magic in the air. Now the magic was gone, like a mirage. He felt the weight of his shyness. Their drinks came. “How’s the wine?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said. She tossed it down, and he ordered another. She bent down,

reached into her purse, pulled out a pack of Kents, tipped one into her fingers, lit it. She looked at him. "Oh, I'm sorry. Do you want one?"

"Nope," he said. "I quit when I was born."

She didn't laugh or even smile. They were two atoms catapulting through the universe, and they had converged briefly but now they had floated apart. He felt trapped by his tongue-tiedness. "So, how's school?" he finally asked. He wanted to sink under the table under the weight of the obviousness of his question.

"Oh, it's okay," she shrugged. "It's fine. It is what it is." While he searched desperately for something else to say, she inhaled smoke from the Kent and blew elegant rings that floated toward the muted lights of the restaurant. They were strangers, but not in paradise. He looked down at his hands. "What are you majoring in?" he murmured.

"English."

"Do you like it?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's all right." She lifted the burning Kent to her lips and inhaled and exhaled more elegant smoke rings that rose like dreams toward heaven. The kiss between them was a distant memory, floating toward nothingness.

He said, "Those are the most elegant smoke rings I've ever seen."

"It's the only thing I do well. Smoke rings. They'll put me into the Smoke Ring Hall of Fame."

His heart bent. "Well, you are a good dancer."

She looked at him. "Really?"

He leaned toward her. "Absolutely! A fantastic dancer!" She looked away from him, embarrassed.

Their dinners came. They ate slowly and carefully and displayed perfect manners as they dove into their burgers and fries. He felt an undercurrent of . . . something. He wanted to talk, to connect with her in some way, but he did not know how. He looked at her and said, "Please excuse me if I'm out of place here, but you have the bluest eyes I have ever seen."

She looked at him. In her perfect blue eyes, he detected . . . something . . . a speck of imperfection, a spot of unhappiness. "Thank you," she said, a smidgen of warmth in her voice.

He leaned closer to her. "So, have you ever seen *Gone with the Wind* before?"

"Many times," she said. "I love *Gone with the Wind*. It's my favorite movie. I get completely swept up by it. When Scarlett says, 'I'll always have Tara,' it . . . I don't know how to describe it . . . how it makes me feel. Like home. Like I'm at home again."

They walked to the Lake Theater and

purchased tickets and bought popcorn and took their seats, and the grand beautiful monstrosity of *Gone with the Wind* unrolled with all of its melodrama and histrionics and humor and tragedy and turns and twists and confusions between Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara.

But . . . but . . . during the last half-hour of the movie, Paul noticed something. Something that he ignored at first. Something about Kathy Armbruster. As he sat next to her, he heard her . . . sniffing. He turned toward her, and in the brilliant reflection of Rhett and Scarlett on the enormous glowing screen, he saw tears form like tiny gleaming stars in the corners of Kathy Armbruster's eyes. And . . . and he could see in the reflection of those images from the screen that her eyebrows were curled in the most intense projection of sadness that he had ever seen. He looked at her more closely and felt his heart sink. He was bereft of words and actions. She grasped a tissue from her purse and dabbed at the corners of her eyes, where the gleaming tears had appeared like tiny moon-drops. She wiped the tears, but she could not wipe away the forlornness that curled her eyes. He had no idea what to do, what action to take. He was bereft of instinct. He felt profoundly useless. The two atoms were floating randomly, uselessly, through the universe, she, alone with her sudden sadness, him, alone with his feeling of uselessness, spinning separately through the enormous universe. Paul tentatively reached his left arm to put around her.

She pulled away. She wiped away the tears once again but could not wipe away the underlying feeling of . . . something. Paul felt emotionally useless--completely inadequate to the moment. Rhett said, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." Scarlett said, "I'll always have Tara." The music swelled like a wound, bringing the whole spectacle to a grand crashing finale. Kathy dabbed desperately at the tears clouding her eyes.

They left the theater, walked to the car. Silence screamed between them. Kathy Armbruster slid into the passenger's seat. She dipped into her purse and withdrew a Kent and, with trembling fingers, lit it, and the sweet fragrance of smoke filled the inside of the car. Paul's heart rattled like a trapped squirrel. She smoked her Kent, and as he drove her back to her dormitory at St. Anne's college, tears continued to sprout like ugly vegetables from the corners of her eyes, and she wiped them with a tissue that she grasped tightly in her hand. They were miles apart in the automobile. Hesitantly, he said, "Are you all right?"

She looked at him. "No," she said, in a voice cracked with forlornness. That was all she said. Nothing more. Her fingers quivered as she brought the Kent to her lips. They reached the parking lot of her dormitory, and he walked her to the front door. They faced each other. Her face was devoid of expression, and she avoided his eyes. The night of their kiss was a distant memory between two different people. They stood awkwardly in front of the

door leading into her dormitory. A profound sorrow had stolen into her eyes like a dead child. Afloat in embarrassment, they looked away from each other. Then, instantaneously, she placed her hand lightly on his forearm, as if she suddenly remembered that he was there. Even though it was dark, she managed to find his forearm. Finally, she looked him in the eyes, looking for something. She turned abruptly and opened the door into the dormitory and rushed into the lobby and disappeared.

He returned to Terre Haute, to St. Anthony's, to the narcolepsy of the daily ritual of going to class, reading, drinking, hanging out with friends. But . . . but . . . he could not erase the thought of Kathy Armbruster. And . . . and he blamed himself for the disastrous evening. Was it something he had said? He could not think of anything. He told his roommate, Billy Bartholomew, what had happened. Billy shrugged and said, "Don't worry about it. She's just screwed up. Forget about her. It was nothing you said or did."

But . . . but . . . he could not forget her. How could he ever, ever know what was going on in the dark recesses of another person? Two atoms, separated by thousands of light-years. How could they ever converge, meet, merge?

One night, Billy dragged a chair over to Paul's bed, where he lay prone. Billy said, "It's worrying you, isn't it? This whole thing. This girl. It's eating you up,

isn't it? Well, I have an idea. Maybe it's a stupid idea. Maybe it's not. But at least it's an idea." Billy stared at Paul. "Write her a letter. Be honest. Do it, because otherwise this is grinding you up. Write her a letter. Be honest."

The more Paul thought about it, the more he thought Billy had a good idea. Why not try it? Maybe it was a way. A way to span the ineffable distance between people. It was a struggle, but he wrote the letter. He wrote it out by hand, in his miserable distinctive scrawl. As he wrote, he felt vaguely as if he were in some Jane Austen novel. He finished the letter and sent it off:

Dear Kathy,

I felt like I needed to write to you. I hope you don't mind. You know that night when we had dinner and went to *Gone with the Wind*? It's just that you seemed very upset after the movie and even during the movie. Ever since then, I've been wondering if I said or did something wrong that night. Because you seemed upset with me or maybe something else. Well, if I said something wrong, I'm really sorry. I hope you're okay. I hope you'll write back to me.

Yours truly,

Paul Pendergast

He read the letter over and thought it

sounded corny and stupid. But Billy read it, and he said it was just right. Paul sent it off. He doubted that he would hear back from Kathy Armbruster. Life went on—going to classes, reading, writing, drinking with buddies, going to football games—all the normal stuff, the stereotypical stuff that you do in college—the stuff everyone does—the stuff that you’re expected to do. But . . . but a hole had emerged . . . a lacuna in Paul’s spirit.

The holidays came. He returned to his parents’ home in LaGrange. The first semester of his junior year ended, and the second semester started. It was February. One day, he checked Bill’s and his mailbox. A letter. From Kathy Armbruster. Postmarked Rockford, Illinois. He ran upstairs to their room and tore open the letter and read it:

Dear Paul,

Thank you for the letter you sent me last fall. My roommate, Marcia, forwarded it to me, and I read it. I have to tell you something. Something important. I’m not at St. Anne’s College right now. I left school. I just up and left. Just like that. I had to, for reasons I won’t go into. I’m at home now, with my parents, in Rockford. Honestly, I don’t know if I’ll go back to school. I have stuff to work out, and I’m working it out. Stuff I can’t tell you about in a letter.

I’m sorry about that night when we

saw *Gone with the Wind*. I was a mess that night. I just suddenly felt this overwhelming sadness. It had to come out. My sadness, I mean. You just happened to be there. It wasn’t you. It wasn’t anything you said or anything like that. But it had to come out. My sadness, I mean. There’s just stuff. The movie made me so sad. I don’t know why. It just did. It made me dream of a home that never was. Anyway, I’m learning about my stuff. Slowly. It’s not easy.

I’ve had time to think about things. I’m feeling a little better these days. So, if you’re ever in Rockford, it would be nice to have coffee or dinner or something like that. Well, it’s just that it would be nice to talk to you.

Sincerely,

Kathy

He was stunned. She had said it was nothing he had said. That. . . that at least was something. But there was this other . . . thing . . . this feeling. He felt something tighten in his chest. She had scrawled her phone number—her parents’ number—on the letter. He called. She answered. She sounded . . . different. He said he wanted to see her. To talk to her. She said that she wanted to see him . . . to talk to him.

They made a date for dinner. It was going to be complicated, but he had to do

it. He'd take the Greyhound Bus from Terre Haute to Chicago, take a train to LaGrange, borrow his parents' car, drive to Rockford.

He rang the bell at Kathy Armbruster's parents' house. She answered the door, invited him in, introduced him to her parents. He stared at her. Her mask was gone. She wore no makeup. She wore baggy blue jeans and a loose-fitting black blouse. Her eyes were still stark blue but more naked than before. Her skin was rougher, more honest, more revealing than it had been before. The jeans hung loosely on her, as did the black-as-night blouse. She grabbed a coat from her parents' closet. She moved differently, more loosely from the way she had when he had picked her up for the date in Oak Park. She moved to the rhythm of a silent song.

They walked out to his parents' car. She slid into the passenger's seat, and they drove to the restaurant—a Chinese place. On the way, all she said was, “Thank you for driving all the way out here. Thank you for driving all the way out to beautiful Rockford, Illinois.”

“The heartland of America,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “Indeed. Rockford—the center of the universe.” They both laughed. They reached the restaurant, walked inside, took a booth, ordered wine. Silence blanketed the table. He looked at her. She wore no mascara, no eyeliner, no lipstick. Her skin was rough, the pores and wrinkles undisguised. She

returned his look unblinkingly. The blue of her eyes reminded him of a sacred jewel. She stared at me unabashedly, unashamedly.

“Well,” he finally said, “here we are.” He was relying on instinct, on intuition. “It's good to see you.”

“Thank you. It's nice to see you.” She paused. “As I said in my letter, I apologize for that night—the night of *Gone with the Wind*.”

“There's no need to apologize.”

She took a deep breath. “You know, I don't really know you very well. But I want to tell you things. I feel that I can tell you things. I want to tell you what happened. It seems important to tell you. But I have no idea how to even start.”

“Maybe just start talking,” he said. “See what comes out.”

She laughed. “Okay. That's a good idea.” She took another deep breath. “Well, to begin with, that night . . . the night of *Gone with the Wind* . . . I was just really . . . well, you probably guessed this . . . it was kind of obvious, I guess . . . but I was just really . . . well, I don't. . . .” She paused, breathed deeply. “I was going through this whole . . . thing, and it just kind of reached its lowest point that night. At school, I'd been feeling so down and empty that I could barely even function.” She paused and looked down at her hands and shook her head slowly. She looked back up at him. “I couldn't

study. I couldn't read. I couldn't do a damn thing at school. I felt so guilty about that night . . . somehow . . . that damn movie just set something off in me. Like the way things are supposed to be but aren't. I felt desperate and really down. That's a fact. I couldn't do anything at school. I was gonna flunk out. That's God's honest truth. I felt totally alone there, at St. Anne's. I was out of place there. So, I just went home. I had to go home. I felt so . . . empty. It's impossible to describe.

"My parents were very worried. You can imagine. They connected me to someone. This woman. This psychologist. This shrink. In Rockford. I started talking to her. I started going to her twice a week. That was what? Three months ago. Twice a week. Trudging to the shrink twice a week." She paused. "Fun, fun, fun! Digging into the deepest parts of me. Have you ever gone?"

"No. Honestly, I'd be kind of scared to, in a weird way."

"I know. I know what you mean. I was scared. I really was. I was scared to be going to a shrink. Like what would people say? It's weird, like you say. They're supposed to help you, but you're scared to go. The first time I went, my heart was thumping like it was gonna jump out of my skin. But I went. You talk, and somehow stuff comes up, just by talking. It was strange how it worked." She stared at me. "I learned something. I learned things."

She paused and looked down and stared at her hands for a long time. "I hated myself. That's what I learned."

She stared at Paul. He stared back at her. She was totally naked to him. "I was never good enough. I wanted to please everyone. That's all I wanted to do. I never measured up to what they wanted. Whoever they were." She laughed. "They. They are very bad. They really suck." She laughed.

He laughed. "Yeah. They are really shitty." He thought for a moment. "Do you know why . . . like, why you felt that way?"

She looked down at her hands folded in front of her. "I'm working on that. Parents. Teachers. My parents are good people. I love them. But it was like . . . like I just couldn't ever measure up, if you know what I mean."

Paul said, "I have felt that way."

"Really?"

He nodded. He couldn't think what else to say. Finally, he said, "I've never had anyone talk to me like this before."

"That's because we don't. I've learned a lot about that. How we hide from each other. We're taught to put on this act like we're all perfect and everything and have got our shit together. But we don't. We don't have our shit together at all."

Kathy Armbruster reflected for a moment and said, "There's something

else, too. There's this tension here at home because I'm learning to say what I think. My parents don't like it. They're kind of shocked by some of the stuff I say. I'm making them uncomfortable. But I give them credit. They're putting up with me. I'm learning to say so what."

A silence crept between them. "So," he finally said, "what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. School seems stupid. I was thinking maybe I'd learn how to be a plumber or an electrician—something useful. My parents—they're taken aback by my honesty, but they're not putting pressure on me. I appreciate that."

Paul thought of something. "Why me?" he asked.

"I know. Why you? That's a good question. You know, at that dance that night, there was something. Then when we went out that night, and I started crying my eyeballs out and making a complete spectacle of myself. You know, you could have just said get me the hell out of here, but you didn't. You could've run the other way. But you didn't. And then . . . that letter . . . that was"

Their plates of chop suey had arrived, but they hadn't taken one bite. They looked at the chop suey and at each other and laughed. Paul said, "Our food has arrived." They both laughed. They ate in silence. After a few moments, Paul looked at her and said, "Kathy Armbruster, you have guts."

They finished their meals in silence. There was no need to talk.

He drove Kathy Armbruster back to her parents' house. The night was cold and dark, but the stars glistened in the bitter winter sky. Paul walked her up to the door of her parents' house. She turned toward him, and in the reflection of the moon, he studied her face, which was naked and raw and transparent. "Bertha," he said, "it's been a wonderful evening." She laughed at length. Then she looked at him. "Thank you," she said. She reached her arms around him like an octopus's tentacles and surrounded him and gathered him in, and they stood on her parents' stoop, frozen in time. //

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I'm a writer based in the Chicago area. I've done a lot of different stuff in my life. I've been a merchant seaman, a high school English teacher, a corporate communications writer, a textbook editor, an educational consultant, and a free-lance writer. I've published short stories, articles, and essays in *The Progressive*, *Snowy Egret*, *Earth Island Journal*, *Chicago Wilderness*, *American Forests*, and other journals and magazines. In 2006, the University of New Hampshire Press published my first book, *This Grand and Magnificent Place: The Wilderness Heritage of the White Mountains*. My second book, which I co-authored with a prominent New Hampshire forester named David Govatski, was *Forests for the People: The Story of America's Eastern National Forests*, published by Island Press in 2013.

To Sign or Not to Sign

by Holly B. Gutwillinger

In preparation for my debut novel launch, many questions surfaced, but one persisted right up until the big day—whether or not to sign copies upon request. The mere idea of signing the front page, let alone bending the spine, overwhelmed my thoughts and toppled the teetering pile of to-dos.

Would anyone even want my signature? It took me ages to write, shaping each letter as if I were still in grade five.

Should I sign in cursive? Forming each letter was slow, especially since my twelve-letter married last name made it even trickier. Printing was an option, but it might look outdated.

Then there was the question of a personalized message. See my dilemma? People also asked if I would do a reading. I opted out, partly because we were in a café attached to a retail store, and it might have gotten a little strange if customers wandered in to find a circle of people listening to someone read about a talking dog.

I googled the fascination with signatures, wanting to understand it. Personally, I'd rather spend a few minutes in a real conversation with an author. I wasn't dismissing the value of a signature. Rather, I wanted to explore its meaning. Doing so might help me connect with

readers, and with myself.

When launch day finally arrived, the most unexpected thing occurred.

The first few signed books made me nervous. By the sixth, I was confidently and carefully creasing each spine to deliver my best signature. I'm left-handed—the struggle is real.

The moment I stepped into creating a calligraphy dedication, I fell into a kind of trance. The room buzzed with people, coffee machines, footsteps, doors opening—and yet each time I focused on forming the letters. I was fully immersed.

Each swoop and loop-de-loop became intentional and meaningful, aimed at the person standing in front of me. I felt the weight of placing my signature on a piece of work I had finished. I ended the ritual with my signature letter B, which snapped me back to reality each time, and I looked up into the smile of the reader waiting in front of me.

I had assumed people would grow impatient at how long it took. But when my brush pen glided across the front page, I stopped seeing who was in line. I was entirely focused on the person in front of me and the message I was attaching to that first page.

Applying the skills developed from taking numerous self-taught calligraphy lessons

years back, went no further than addressing envelopes. All those hours of printing on 28lb bond paper were quietly building toward these moments.

For any emerging writer or seasoned one who doubts that a reader would want their signature, they do. What I once dreaded became something else entirely. A signature isn't a formality. It's a small private passage between writer and reader, a way of saying the book belongs to them now.

I've embraced this practice. Readers want to connect with the author, and the signing gives them a moment of dedication, of being seen. I've shifted to making the experience as wonderful as possible for the person in front of me, recognizing this is their way of honoring my work too.

It eases the jitters and creates space to be fully present. And after all, that's what this is about, isn't it? Being present through the discomfort and the triumphs of an experience I'll never take for granted.

Two weeks on, I've attended two more author events. Sometimes I have quick out-of-body moments when I hear myself say, "Who would you like that made out to?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

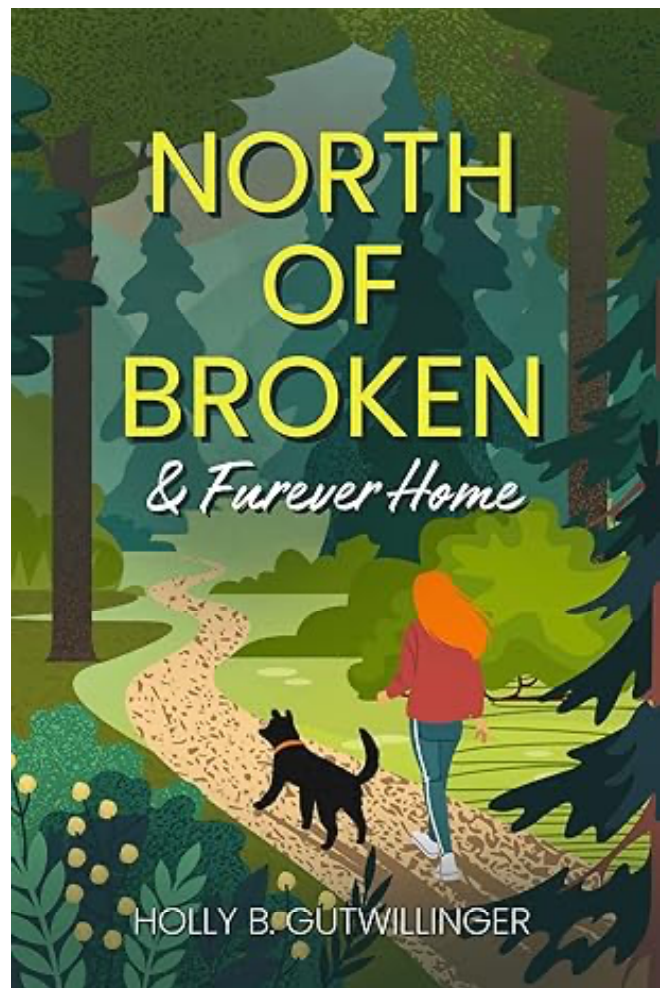
Holly B. Gutwillinger is an author and podcaster from a small northern Ontario town. Her debut novel, *North of Broken & Furever Home*, launches February 14, 2026, exploring a woman's complex relationship with her rescue dogs.

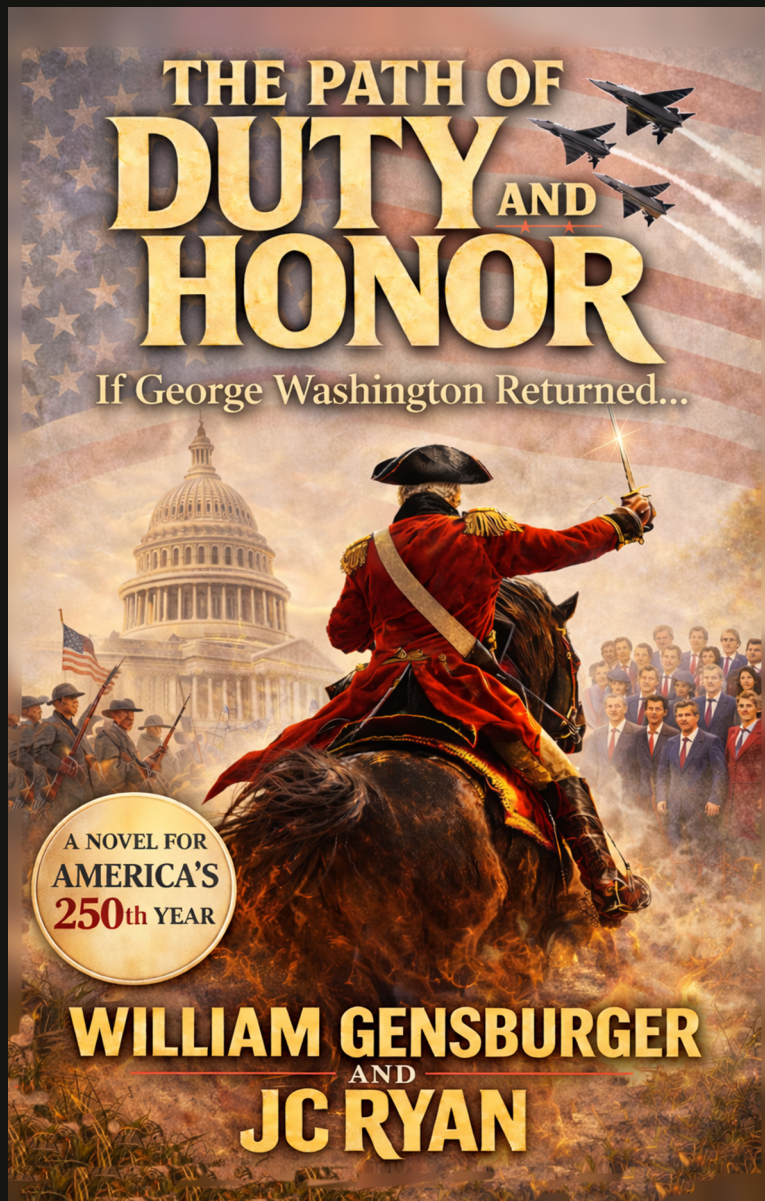


Holly's writing is shaped by her deep love of family—she is the proud mother of two adult sons—and her commitment to the animals who enrich our lives.

She holds a certificate in creative writing from the University of Toronto's School

of Continuing Studies and is currently completing her MFA in fiction at the University of King's College. Holly serves on the board of her local writers' guild and volunteers with the Women's Fiction Writers Association.





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George Washington was so realistic that I believed every word." ~Peter J. Weston

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Portrait of Happiness

by John Blanchard

The bus traveled south down a straight road through the Sonoran Desert. Saguaro cactus on either side raised their spiny arms, like soldiers surrendering in battle.

When Alberto wasn't too sick, he and Luis listened to the radio, a portable that ran on batteries. Alberto, who had spent a lot of money to get one, cradled the device in his arms, like a little boy with a teddy bear.

A station on the border somewhere broadcast advertisements in Spanish for sheep's glands to cure male impotence and, "for a limited time only," portraits of Jesus Christ, personally autographed by the Savior Himself.

Luis, who accompanied his sick friend on the long bus ride back home to Mexico, had seen a few of these likenesses in California—one on the wall of a *cantina*, and the other above a migrant worker's bunk in a camp in Visalia. Luis couldn't read Spanish very well, but the worker, a man named Jesús like his namesake, told him that the autograph read, "Best wishes, JESÚS, and good luck, from Your Lord and Savior, Jesucristo."

To Luis, the autograph appeared to be a form into which someone could have inserted anyone's name in the space after "best wishes." But people bought and treasured the portraits anyway.

The man on the radio sold so many things that pretty soon Luis lost interest and looked out the window for a while at the monotonous landscape— at the crumbling black and olive and magenta hillsides, at the beige desert sands, the cholla and ocotillo and barrel cactus, and in the dry washes, mesquite and screwbean and willow. But Luis was not a

tourist, and so the landscape did not interest him much. In it, he had encountered the rattlesnake and the scorpion and the corpses of men, and of women and children, too. He did not go there to visit and admire its beauties and its palette of colors at sunset. Instead, he had traveled through it, in the other direction, because he had to, on his way to find employment in a foreign country.

After a few minutes, the advertisements came to an end and the music started up again— rhythmic and brassy *charro* music and swelling love ballads. A pair of comedians interrupted at times and told amusing and off-color anecdotes. People in the surrounding seats who didn't have radios leaned over to listen. Some came back or forward to listen to the comedy. In this and other ways, they passed the time on the long bus ride, along a route with infrequent stops and few towns.

"When we get to Durango, you must stay as long as you want," said Alberto. Even though the air inside the old third-class bus was warm and stuffy, Alberto had begun shivering, so that he stuttered out some of his words.

"Are you all right, *amigo*?" said Luis.

Alberto nodded and tried to say something, but his lower jaw quivered too much. He had long ago given up trying to sit straight in his seat, which was next to the window, and so he leaned against the side of the bus with his head against the glass. Every minute or so a hacking cough wracked his body. Sometimes a cough started a series of other coughs, one after the other in shorter and shorter intervals, until they became blended into one overpowering spasm. Sometimes Alberto

struggled to catch his breath between the spasms.

At a layover in Hermosillo, Luis bought a bottle of cough medicine at a pharmacy. The medicine subdued the cough for a while, so Alberto could sleep. Overnight, it seemed, he had become a wasted man. The bones in his face stood out like those of a corpse and his eyes sank into their sockets and stared back at Luis, as if from the grave. When he spoke at all, he took hold of Alberto's arm with a skinny hand and implored him in strange, strangulated words. Luis spoke back to him in soothing tones. "We will be there soon," he would say. "Your family longs for you."

Alberto was one of the fortunate ones. Usually, when a *bracero* got sick in California in those days, the company he worked for loaded him onto a bus and transported him across the border and left him there, so as to avoid the cost of hospitalization, and also the cost of paying for a bus ticket all the way home. But Alberto had a friend, a man he had met in one of the camps during his latest contract. Alberto and Luis, people said, could've been twin brothers. Not identical twins, but in a rough kind of way, they resembled one another—same height and build, same way of talking and walking. Luis, however, was a wisecracker, and in this respect, he was unlike Alberto, who was more serious at all times. The two "brothers" spent all their spare time together and traded stories about their families back home. Alberto, from Durango, was married and Luis, who came from Tepatitlán, was not. Alberto liked to show Luis the family photo his wife had sent him and tell him about his three children. In this way, he relieved some of the loneliness he felt, and Luis liked to listen because he had always wanted a family, too, and had come from a small one and wanted to get

married someday.

Both men had broad faces. Luis had a gap between his front teeth and a wandering eye. He used his eyes to make humorous expressions when he made wisecracks.

When Alberto became sick, Luis offered to help him get back home. At first Alberto refused to go because his family depended upon the income he derived from working in the fields. But as he got sicker and sicker, eventually he couldn't go out into the fields at all; and at this point the company discharged him, so he had no choice but to go home. He was still in the middle of his contract, and Luis was, too. But Luis insisted on accompanying his friend back home, because he feared that Alberto could not make it alone.

Later on, people stopped coming around to listen to the radio. The harsh sound of coughing interrupted the music. Some people took hold of their children and moved to seats farther away.

Alberto woke up and clutched Luis by the arm with sharp, bony fingers. At the same time, with great effort, he turned toward his friend and with burning eyes said, "If anything should happen to me . . ."

The sound that came out of his throat was more like the hissing, hollow voice of a demon or an animal. Hacking coughs interrupted his speech until he almost suffocated for lack of air, but still, he tried to speak. "If anything, . . . if anything . . ."

"Calm yourself, my friend," said Luis, whose soothing words belied his growing alarm at his friend's deterioration. "Soon we will be in Durango, and you will be in the arms of your family. They will take care of you."

Luis just shook his head in despair and coughed and coughed.

"Here," said Luis, taking up the bottle of

medicine again. “Take another drink.”

Luis held the bottle to Alberto’s lips and guided the thick purple liquid into his mouth and helped him sit up as far as he could, so he could swallow it. Still, half the medicine spilled out of the corner of his mouth and ran down the side of his cheek. Nevertheless, in a few moments the hacking subsided again, and Alberto completed his thought. “If anything should happen to me, will you take care of my family? Will you?” Luis started to answer, but before he could finish, Alberto had fallen into a feverish sleep.

To Luis, the question seemed almost superfluous. Of course, he would take care of the family, forgetting he had never met them. Weren’t he and Alberto twin brothers? He especially liked to think about Eva, the little one, Alberto’s favorite (although he would never admit that he had a favorite). She was the one for whom Alberto had once made a family of rag dolls, when, between contracts, he had spent a few months at home. Of course, the family misses me terribly when I am away, thought Luis, forgetting once again that he was Luis and not Alberto, getting things all mixed up again. Alberto used to say, “It is because you have no family of your own.” But Luis would just make a joke of it and say, “I must be getting old,” even though he was younger than Alberto. Then he would hobble around on one leg with a stick for a crutch under his arm, like an old man, and make fun of old people.

Luis understood perfectly. Of course, the family misses a man when he goes away for long periods of time. Alberto said that his wife had become depressed over the years whenever he left. She had consulted a doctor about it, first a *curandero* and then a medical doctor in Durango. The children, too, had suffered. Alberto had made a doll family out of rags, including one which represented

himself, so that when he went away, Eva still had a family to play with—a family that had not become a cripple with a missing part, a sort of hunchback family.

Eva was the prettiest one. How pretty she looked in the photo, in her brand-new store-bought dress. Alberto had told him how his wife, Isabel, had bought Eva a new pink dress for the occasion of the photo and how excited the girl had been on the day when Isabel took her and the other children—Bernabé, the son, and Margarita, the older girl—to the department store in town to buy a new suit of clothes for the photo—new dresses for the girls and a new suit for the boy but nothing for herself. For the photo, the girls held bouquets of flowers in their hands. Isabel had carefully combed, oiled and parted Bernabé’s hair and tied his tie and had polished his shoes. The girls smiled radiantly, and even Isabel managed to smile, although her heart must have been aching. This photo—so carefully preserved yet wrinkled now from handling and faded from hanging on walls in shafts of sunlight—was the one that Luis had become so familiar with, the one he took out again as Alberto slept.

The sun was going down over the flat sandy desert and over the dark shapes of mesquite and cholla and ocotillo and saguaros, over the black crumbling volcanic hills and distant turquoise mountain ranges. Darkness began to obscure the photo, leaving weltering images in Luis’ tired mind. Here and there in the dim interior of the bus, someone lit a cigarette. People settled down in their seats and tried to sleep. But Luis, filled with anxiety and anticipation, couldn’t sleep.

After all, I am only human, he thought. Luis was trying to push down thoughts that increasingly troubled his mind, at the same

time as they comforted him. What was the harm, anyway? Alberto, after all (well, perhaps not in so many words but in many small ways) had encouraged Luis to think of himself as part of the family; and now, in his distress— perhaps in delirium— he had even said that if anything should happen to him (he had even begged him)— that he, Luis, should take care of his family, especially of little Eva, but of course, of Bernabé, too, and Margarita, and even, perhaps— even most especially— of his wife Isabel.

Even in the manner in which Alberto had become ill, the two might as well have been brothers. People said (people such as inspectors and scientific people and labor organizers) that sometimes the work itself made men ill. Hadn't Luis and Alberto worked in the orange groves side by side? Hadn't he and Alberto mixed the pesticide together, mixing the components together in the barrels, with their bare hands, plunging their hands deep into the barrels of the orange and green liquids, in the barrels with the labels they couldn't read? One time, after spraying the liquids in a fine mist over the green buds and the new shoots to kill the rust and the insects, he and Alberto had become ill and vomited and had to travel to Visalia to a hospital to get a checkup. But the fit had passed. Well, it was just another thing that brothers shared, because they shared everything; and if one man died, the other took his place, even sometimes becoming the head of the household if that man had no family of his own. After all, a man becomes lonely in a faraway place ...

Still, Luis tried to push down certain thoughts a man ought not to have, hoping he should not allow himself to feel. Hope was such a funny thing; he could never admit to himself that he might actually hope that . . . No, he mustn't allow himself to think such thoughts, to covet another man's wife. Still—

out here in the desert among the tall thin cactuses that raised their arms to heaven, perhaps in supplication, or in surrender to thoughts and desires a man can no longer control, that push their way into the mind— he wondered if a man might actually become a devil— if a man might bring about the very thing he wished for and in this way obtain happiness.

In the early morning, they arrived at the bus station in Durango. Luis tried to wake Alberto. He shook him and waited for him to open his eyes and sit up so they could get off the bus. But Alberto never woke up. He had become a corpse wrapped in a dirty blanket. The hair of his head was still damp with sweat. His open eyes stared upwards; his lower jaw hung like a broken hinge. Luis covered the face of his friend and waited for the other passengers to get off. Then he told the bus driver what had happened.

Luis sat down again and waited. In the meantime, he searched the station platform for anyone who might have been expecting them.

An hour passed before two men in white uniforms came and took away the corpse.

After getting off the bus, Luis made a telephone call. "Telephone Bernabé," Alberto had said, in case he couldn't do it himself. He had given Luis the telephone number.

A woman answered and took the message, then hung up.

Luis waited a long time, pacing back and forth on the station platform. Eventually, he saw a man standing among a crowd of travelers, looking from side to side and puffing nervously on a cigarette. The man wore a business suit and a pair of worn, dirty shoes. In his other hand, he held up a hand-painted sign with Luis's full name on it— , the name Luis had given to the woman on the phone when he explained the circumstances

of his arrival. Luis didn't recognize this man. Perhaps he had come in place of the family; perhaps the family had not been expecting Alberto's arrival. Perhaps Alberto, in his illness, had neglected to contact them ahead of time.

"Alberto was my father," said the man, when they met. "My name is Bernabé."

Luis stared at him. He still did not recognize Bernabé— no longer a boy— as it turned out. He was now a balding and portly man, a salesman for the Goodyear Tire Co., he said. He traveled continually and found himself recently unemployed.

"I asked them to buy me a god damn radio," he said, wiping his sweaty brow with a soiled white handkerchief.

His suit was rumpled; a tie hung loosely around his throat. The shirt was open at the collar. The cigarette dangled from his lips.

"Ten years and they fired me, like that," he said, snapping his fingers. "Like road kill, they got rid of me. Just because I asked for a radio. It gets pretty lonely on those roads, by yourself all the time."

He had a way of talking under his breath with his head down and stroking his thin, oily hair with one hand, babbling through his lips like a baby and occasionally glancing upward at his listener from under his eyebrows. At times, a slight smile broke through the cloud of his five o'clock shadow and his dark eyes. He coughed, covering his mouth with a clenched fist and excusing himself — *perdone, perdone*.

He offered Luis a cigarette. Luis took one from the pack and cupped his hands around it as Bernabé lit it with a lighter.

"I got your message," said Bernabé, looking around. "We didn't see much of him over the years. I grew up without a father, you might say. He came home from time to time, got his wife with child, left a little money on the table, and went back."

Bernabé paused and paced a little back and forth, glancing up at the cloudless sky.

"Mother finally gave up," he said. "In spirit, too. Became mentally ill. I'm not saying it was his fault. She died a few years ago..."

Luis couldn't find any words at first. He didn't understand.

"I don't suppose he had any money?" said Bernabé, looking fully at Luis for the first time.

Luis shook his head.

"Still working in the fields?" said Bernabé. "At his age? Someone should pay an indemnity. I swear I'll sue those bastards."

"He talked about you," said Luis. "About his wife, and Margarita and little Eva. Somehow, I thought ..."

Bernabé exhaled smoke through his nose and mouth. He had a withered rose in his lapel, like a man who has just come from a wedding.

"Eva?" he said when Luis asked. "She works for Mary Kay. Lives in Texas. You should look her up. Give her a call sometime. She'd love to hear about Dad ... She was too young to be bitter ..."

Of course, Bernabé had grown up, and the rest of them, too, and one had died. The photo was an old one. It all seemed so obvious now in the harsh desert light in front of the bus station. The heat made ripples over the blacktop, wavy lines that blurred the landscape out of which the bus had come to this isolated place.

Luis started to take out the photograph. It didn't lie. It couldn't lie. It was an indelible, an infallible record of a family, the way it had been at one time, a long time ago, the one Alberto had told him about. Luis still believed in it. Bernabé was the liar, not the photo. He wanted to show the photo to Bernabé, to contradict him emphatically, once and for all, to stop the foul lies that

came out of his mouth like poison. He wanted to tear it up and stuff it into his foul mouth to cleanse the sink of lies, with a caustic soap of Truth. The photo was a bridge of truth from the past to the present, connecting and healing, and Luis would walk over it and take the place of his friend in the Portrait of Happiness.

Luis left the photograph in his pocket.

“Alberto was my friend,” he said. “Maybe he wasn’t a good father after all. I don’t know. But it meant something to him, having a family. It kept him going somehow. Here, take this radio. It was the only thing he had. I’m sure he would have wanted you to have it.”

“I don’t need it anymore,” said Bernabé, flipping the stub of his cigarette into the road with disdain. “I’m going to work in an office now. Lots of folks around... Can I give you a lift anywhere? Can you stay for the funeral?”

Luis shook his head. “I’ll wait for the next bus,” he said.

On the way back to the border, Luis took out the photo one more time. Little Eva beamed from it like a lamp in the darkness. He tried to fill in the years, and despite his bitterness, he wondered if she were married and if she led a happy life with children of her own. Or maybe she wasn’t. He wondered if she still had the doll family her father had made for her, and if sometimes, when she felt lonely, she went to sleep with her rag father and cried, just as she used to do.//

About the Author

John Blanchard is a published poet, essayist and short story writer. His work had appeared in *The Lyric*, *Southwestern American Literature* and elsewhere. He writes primarily historical fiction set in California and the American West and is currently at work on an historical mystery novel that takes places in Los Angeles in



the 1910s. John has two grown children, divides his time between Oakland and Borrego Springs, Calif. and is a member of the California Writers Club. Before retiring, John worked in the SF Bay Area as a park ranger.

