

From novel to texts, writing interesting career

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Herald staff writer

Halton Hills has dozens, even hundreds of artists, artisans, photographers, crafts people, entertainers, athletes and hobbyists. But only a handful of these are writers and most of the writers work in the research and local histories category.

Jim Henderson of R.R.4, Acton is the exception to that group in that among his many published books and articles is included one novel, Copperhead.

Copperhead appeared in British, American and Canadian bookstores in hardcover in 1971. It is out of print now and Mr. Henderson doesn't expect it to be re-printed but that doesn't alter the fact that he cracked the popular fiction market and produced a type of writing very few people ever seriously attempt.

ABOUT ESPIONAGE

Copperhead is about espionage and the wrong-doings of Canadian counter-intelligence agents, Mr. Henderson says. While it isn't what might be termed a murder mystery it does contain at least one dead body and a lot of unanswered questions. The title refers to the head side of the Canadian penny and is a part of the plot.

When asked how he went about preparing his plot Mr. Henderson just laughs. "It would have been a decent novel if I'd plotted it," he says, "but I didn't. I started with a scene that intrigued me. When I got that done I began thinking about what would have caused the scene. I wound up working in concentric circles almost. When I got to a part that bored me I'd leave it and go on to another scene I wanted to do and trust to luck that I'd figure out a way to hook them up later."

Mr. Henderson feels that everyone has one novel in them, usually about themselves.

"Then they run out of raw material and have to quit," he says.

For Copperhead he tried hard to avoid dipping into his own psyche or that of his friends or relatives. While some authors are extremely exacting plotters and write out sketches of their characters so

they know what sort of reaction to expect from the character in a given situation, that isn't his way. He relies on instinct to guide him.

He agrees with the advice handed out to would-be authors to choose a setting they know well for their book and write about what they feel.

"Otherwise you're just making things more difficult for yourself," he says. "If you have to make it all up it's going to sound made up and that will destroy the credibility."

Since espionage isn't the sort of job or hobby the average person gets involved with The Herald asked how Mr. Henderson felt sufficiently at home with it to write about it. He says he knew a college principal during his days at a British university who was apparently up to ears in the espionage game and was instrumental in aiding a couple of well-known British defectors in getting to Russia.

PERFECTLY CHARMING

"He was a perfectly charming fellow," he recalls. "There was nothing about him to indicate what he was doing. No one suspected anything until after the pair got to Russia and then it all came out what he'd been doing. It was obvious that agents are just normal people like you and me."

That doesn't mean he didn't have to do a certain amount of research.

"I did quite a bit of research in odd places," he says, "because most of what I wanted to know wasn't easy to come by. For instance, I had to find out something about methods of interrogation used in totalitarian societies in order to be authentic. I looked up torture in the subject file at the Toronto library but I found what I wanted in an old issue of Look magazine I'd picked up by accident."

Although writing a novel was a new field for Mr. Henderson there was nothing new in the idea of writing. He wrote for and edited university papers in his student days. He wrote a newspaper column in Britain and when he emigrated to Canada and began working as a CBC television producer in British Columbia he found he was still writing a lot, if not whole scripts, then at least

continuity bits to go between film clips.

He now works for the Toronto Board of Education as an administrator and is heavily involved in educational publishing.

"I tried plumbing and wiring and driving a cab and I wasn't any good at any of them," he jokes. "Writing was a last resort, I guess."

He says writing text books is much more satisfying than writing a novel.

"You know you're going to write 500 words a day," he explains. "You know you'll work to a schedule. You'll start on October 1 at 9 a.m. and you'll finish on June 3 at 4 p.m. and you'll collect 'x' dollars and it's all very neat and well-ordered."

Writing a novel, on the other hand, is nothing like that. He casually mentioned to his wife, Judy, that he'd like to try his hand at a novel and she "very naively" encouraged him. Although he never doubted that he'd get the novel finished he did doubt that it would sell, he says.

SENT STORY

He got a portion of it written and then sent a story outline to a Canadian publisher. He believes devoutly in the Canadian publishing industry so he chose a Canadian firm deliberately. They, however, don't believe so devoutly in Canadian writers. He is pleased they took the trouble to make their refusal by way of a personal letter rather than a form letter, but the reason was annoying. Nobody is interested in a novel set in Canada, they told him.

He completed his story anyway, then wondered how to get it published. Mrs. Henderson suggested they compile a list of American publishers and start at the top.

The top New York publishing house in those days was Alfred Knopf, he says, but getting a telephone call asking him to cut his manuscript to about 90,000 words because it was too long as it stood came as quite a shock. If he could cut it down they would seriously consider publishing it, they told him.

Mr. Henderson says that while some writers get so attached to their work that cutting it would be like ampu-

tating part of themselves, he had no such feelings about Copperhead. It was strictly a commercial venture and the only problem was the technical one of whether he could cut it

without destroying the story line.

Mrs. Henderson says she read the chapters as her husband finished them but they never discussed the book dur-

ing the writing nor did they discuss ways to solve problems he was having with the plot.

"It's an experience, living with someone who eats and sleeps and breathes a novel,"

she admits. "You know when you're talking to them and they aren't listening. You can see it when they're some place else. It's interesting to see the process."

Mr. Henderson says it took about a year to write Copperhead. Since he had no plot outline he created such a mess

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Halton author Jim Henderson has tried his hand at all types of writing and claims to prefer writing school texts. His only novel, Copperhead, was released in three countries by three different publishers in 1971. He sees writing as a compulsion rather than just a hobby for most writers thus the number who pursue it are fewer than with other forms of recreation. (Herald photo)



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