

WRITERS ON WRITING

FEATURING MARGARET DALEY

BY EILEEN PUTMAN

She weathered an eight-year dry spell and grappled with a learning disability, but Margaret Daley kept the faith—and found inspirational romance.

Eileen Putman: How did you move from secular to inspirational romances? At what point did you realize that faith-based fiction was where you needed to be?

Margaret Daley: God gave me a story I had to tell with a faith message. It was the only way to do justice with it. Writing that story hooked me on writing inspirational romances. I derived so much from it. When I came up with other stories, they were inspirational romances.

Putman: Inspirational romances weave plot and character with the faith element. How does an author do this so that it seems natural to the story, not forced or preachy?

Daley: I try to show a person living their faith—through actions and thoughts. Yes, sometimes they will talk with another person about their faith...not as a sermon, but a natural part of the conversation.

Putman: Your stories don't have sex scenes.

How do you show the physical side of romance as the attraction grows?

Daley: A touch, an embrace, a kiss can show a lot, but mostly I show the emotional bonding between two people. If two people don't have an emotional attraction, their relationship will not last.

Putman: That's true, of course. Love is deeper than sex. And, yet, sex is such a ubiquitous part of popular culture that not including it in a love story makes a statement in itself. Do you think there is too much emphasis on sex in the romance genre?

Daley: I prefer to show the emotions developing in a relationship. I think that is more important. I leave the other to the reader's imagination.

Putman: What is the state of the inspirational market at the moment? How would you advise writers looking to break in?

Daley: I think the inspirational market in the past five years has grown a lot. I would tell a writer who wants to break in to read what she wants to write. The writer needs to get a feel for what is being published. That is true in any genre a person wants to write.

Putman: You collaborated on a project with other fiction writers about overcoming your

disabilities—in your case, auditory processing. How has this difficulty affected your writing, and how do you overcome it or compensate?

Daley: I never learned to read by the phonetic method—I don't hear the sounds like other people do. That has made it difficult with spelling. I learned to spell by memorizing the words (that is also how I learned to read). I am a very visual learner, which has helped me overcome my auditory disability.

Putman: Does this challenge you when you write? Is it difficult to achieve the flow and rhythm of working with words that is second nature for many authors?

Daley: Actually, it doesn't challenge me in writing a story. Auditory processing makes it difficult to learn a foreign language because I can't distinguish sounds like others. When someone talks fast, I can have a hard time following what the person is saying. Listening to a long speech can be hard because I have to really concentrate on each word being said.

Putman: In your teaching career, you taught students with special needs. How have you incorporated this experience into your fiction?

Daley: I often write about a person with special needs. In 2009, I had a book with an autistic child—the son of the hero. It took me a long time to write about autism. I worked with many students who were autistic and none of them were similar, which made it harder to capture on the written page. In one of my romantic suspense books for Love Inspired Suspense, my heroine was temporarily blind. I've worked with children who were blind, and that helped me portray my heroine in a realistic way.

Putman: Why did it take so long for you to write about autism? Were you concerned about

portraying the condition accurately? Or worried that readers wouldn't want to read about an autistic child? Which brings up another point: Ours is an escape genre. Readers are looking to us to lift them out of the ordinary issues they face in their lives. Can too much realism work against that dynamic?

Daley: I wanted to portray autism correctly—there can be so many differences between two people with autism. What inspirational romance offers is hope...in a difficult situation. A reader walks away uplifted by the story, even if it deals with realism.

Putman: Was it a challenge to come up with a series on home schooling? Many students are home-schooled, of course, but they are a distinct minority. What's the key to making this series resonate with readers who don't home-school?

Daley: Ultimately, the books in the series were romances, so that would be what would capture the readers. Also, each story was about family; problems with children resonate with readers.

Putman: You've talked about how talent is only part of being published (the rest of it involves persistence, networking and being in the right place at the right time). How have those other factors played a part in your writing career?

Daley: I sold 20 books and then went through an eight-year dry spell where I didn't sell a book. If I had given up writing, I would not have gone on to sell 55 more books. I'm not going to say it was easy to keep writing. There were several times I tried to stop writing, but I couldn't. Stories still kept coming.

Networking was the way I got my first agent years ago. Being in the right place at the right time was how I began selling again after eight years. I still network; I belong to RWA and American Christian Fiction Writers. Both of these organizations inform me about what is going on in

the publishing industry. I think that is important for a writer to know.

Putman: What about your first manuscript (from the late 1970s) wasn't worthy of publication, and how did you learn your craft so that your work was accepted?

Daley: My first book was in first person—the only one I wrote that way. It was a romantic suspense, which I still love to write, but I made a lot of mistakes. That's why it will never see the light of day. After that book, I joined a writer's roundtable and went to several conferences. I learned the craft of writing and kept working at it. I still am doing that.

Putman: The long dry spell you had between books—what happened? How did you get back on the publishing track?

Daley: Dell shut down their category romance lines and left me orphaned. I tried selling but couldn't quite do it. I kept learning and networking. I went to the RWA Conference in Dallas and heard about the Precious Gems line starting for Kensington. I went home and submitted a story to them. They bought it, and that began my comeback to selling.

Putman: How does a writer know when to give up on a project and move on to something else? And how can we trust our voice when something just isn't working?

Daley: Some of it is instinct—a gut feeling. I have learned to listen to an inner voice about my characters and my story. If you keep working on the same story over and over and can't quite get it the way you want, I would set it aside and do something new. That doesn't mean you can't go back to it later. But I have found certain stories need to be written at certain times.

Putman: You describe yourself as a seat-of-the-pants writer because when you plot too much ahead of time, you lose enthusiasm for the story. But, in fact, you do very detailed character studies and preparation—spreadsheets, outlines, and color-coded index cards. How is that seat-of-the-pants-ish?

Daley: Character studies help me know the people I'm writing about. The more I know the characters, the easier it is for me to write their story. My spreadsheets and color-coded markers I use are in my editing stage, so as I write I can make sure I cover everything I need. They help me to tie up loose ends and story threads.

Also, I'm not a true seat-of-the-pants writer. I know who my characters are and the framework within which I will tell my story, but I don't have it down chapter by chapter. That comes as I write.

Putman: You appear to be a disciplined writer, setting precise goals and ruthlessly excising material that doesn't further your characters' goals, motivation, and conflict. What part of writing is hardest for you? How have you learned to muscle through it?

Daley: Editing is the hardest part for me. After reading my story over and over, it is hard to tell if I have over explained something or not.

Putman: Do you have someone else read it for you, or do you rely on the spreadsheets and cards to see you through?

Daley: I usually rely on myself and my editor's input. Sometimes, I have a friend read some of my story, but usually not all of it.

Putman: Book videos are a promotion strategy more and more authors are using. How involved were you in the ones on your website? What other promotion do you do? Do you use an outside publicist or do the promo yourself?

Daley: I do all my own promotion. I am part of several blogs and I have a website; I am on Twitter, Goodreads, eHarlequin, and Facebook. I have a quarterly e-mail newsletter I send out, and I do one mailing a year. I include a bookmark with my upcoming releases in that mailing, as well as the letters I respond to during the year.

Putman: What's next for you?

Daley: I have a historical romance from Summerside Press coming out in September called *From This Day Forward*. I have two more romantic suspense books coming out with Love Inspired Suspense in June (*Protecting Her Own*) and September (*Hidden in the Everglades*). I have an

April Love Inspired Suspense out called *A Trail of Lies*.

My first book in a new Love Inspired series (out in December) is called *His Holiday Family*. It revolves around a hurricane that devastates a small town on the Gulf Coast in Mississippi and how the townspeople come together to rebuild their town. Then, next February, my first in the Men of the Texas Rangers Series will be out with Abingdon Press. It is a romantic suspense called *Shattered Hope*.

Editor's note: Margaret Daley's website is <http://www.margaretdaley.com>.



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