

FAQ

Q. Did you always want to be a writer?

A. No! As a child, I dreamed of being an artist (or maybe a nun). I have a B. A. in English with an art minor, but didn't take any creative writing classes as I worked toward my degree. Becoming a published writer wasn't a place I envisioned myself going, though I've always enjoyed reading. I had no idea what I'd do with an English major and considered teaching until I did some substituting just out of college and realized it was as much about discipline as teaching. I have great respect for teachers.

I've had a variety of jobs including working in a meat packing plant, waiting tables, managing a car rental agency, and serving the public as a tax specialist. As a stay-at-home mom (with that English degree tucked in my apron), I took some me-time for a creative writing class at Boise State University and realized that making up stories was fun, though it took me some time to decide I could actually do it. My first book was published well after I turned fifty.

Q. Where do you get your ideas?

A. My ideas usually begin with an object or place, and then the characters make their appearances. Inspiration for my first novel, *THE SEVENTH UNICORN*, was a replica of a medieval tapestry received as a birthday gift. *THE LOST MADONNA* came from a love for the city of Florence, Italy, and Renaissance art. A number of things moved me toward writing *THE WOMAN WHO HEARD COLOR*, including a desire to learn more about the modern art movements in Europe, and an interest in the condition known as synesthesia. Most of my ideas arise from a desire to know more about a particular subject; I've never adhered to the advice to write what you know. I love doing research, visiting the settings of my stories, picking up ideas and inspiration along the way.

Q. Do you always visit the places you write about?

A. My husband Jim and I love to travel and, yes, we visit the cities in which my stories take place. In doing research for *THE SEVENTH UNICORN* we went to Paris and Lyon. I've been to Florence, Italy, the setting of *THE LOST MADONNA*, several times, both before and during the writing of the novel. I lived in Florence for a year as a student and it is one of my favorite places.

I visited both Munich and Berlin while writing *THE WOMAN WHO HEARD COLOR*.

Q. What is your writing schedule?

A. I'm a morning person—after I have my coffee and read the newspaper. I'm now working on a laptop as well as my desktop computer, so I move around a bit as I write—kitchen counter, dining room table, patio or deck when the weather is nice. I usually work at home and my schedule always includes a break here or there for laundry, scrubbing bathrooms, dusting furniture. I usually run errands—bank, post office—midday, then often get back to writing in the afternoon. These later blocks of time are usually dedicated to rewriting, as I've discovered my good, creative, best brain-functioning time is morning. After about 4 p.m., I'm pretty worthless.

Q. Do you outline?

A. I've tried that, but it doesn't seem to work for me. My first draft might be equivalent to other writers' outlines, as it's fairly basic, and I do lots of reworking, expanding scenes, fleshing out characters.

Q. How long does it take you to write a book?

A. Difficult question, because I do so much rewriting. From inspiration to publication, my first book took seven years, but a good portion of that time was spent looking for an agent. *THE WOMAN WHO HEARD COLOR* went through at least seven or eight drafts, five of which my agent Julie Barer (bless her heart) actually read. This one took an exceptionally long time, mostly because I just couldn't get the story right. And because it covered a period of over 100 years. Lots of history involved, and I've never been much of a student of history. I now find it a fascinating subject—having realized that history is people, not dates or events.

Q. What is your advice to aspiring writers wishing to publish?

A. Don't give up! I spent years just trying to find an agent, and yes, if you want to publish fiction traditionally, you really do need an agent. I'd also advise writers to enjoy the process of writing. Believe in yourself, but be open to suggestions and advice. I've belonged to several writers' critique groups and have found this especially helpful. I've learned so much from other writers and feel fortunate to have made good friends in the process of sharing work. I also have several non-writer readers for whom I'm very grateful. They are all listed in the acknowledgments of my books.

Q. What are you working on now?

A. I'm working on a story set in Prague. This is more of a traditional mystery—yes, there is a murder. As I struggle with this story, I sometimes feel as if I'm starting all over as a writer. I'm also learning how to kill someone.

Q. What do you do when you're not writing?

A. I love to read, go to the movies, and spend time with my family. I've got three children, and seven grandchildren, all living close by, and my parents, brothers, and sisters and their families are mostly still here in Idaho. I genuinely like every one of my five siblings and have to give my parents credit for that.

Although I'm kind of the sit-curl-up-with-a-good-book type, I attempt to get in some exercise now and then. My husband and I enjoy walking and get out at least 4 or 5 times a week. My son has recently reintroduced me to bike riding, something I loved as a child and still do. Boise is a great place for both walking and biking.

Q & A ABOUT THE WOMAN WHO HEARD COLOR

Q. What inspired you to write THE WOMAN WHO HEARD COLOR?

A. I'd like to say the idea started with a desire to write about artistic freedom, but that's not really how the story developed. Ideas usually come to me in bits and pieces, and then somehow these pieces begin to fit together to form a story. I set out to learn more about the "modern art" movements at the turn of the twentieth century in Europe and became intrigued with the artist Wassily Kandinsky. He was Russian, but got his early art education in Munich, a place I never thought of as being a cultural hub of art. When Hitler came to power, he condemned artists such as Kandinsky. I was aware of horrible things that had gone on in Nazi Germany in the art trade—thefts from Jews, forced sales of paintings, but I didn't know about Hitler's banning certain work labeled "degenerate." That's how this story got started—with a curiosity to learn more.

Q. Why did you decide to tell the historical portion of the story from Hanna's point of view?

A. I think that was really Hanna's idea. When I first imagined how I might turn these ideas into a book, it was to be about Kandinsky and his artist friends, particularly Gabriele Münter and other Germans such as Franz Marc, members of the Blue Rider. But then this ambitious woman art dealer named Hanna stepped into the story.

Q. Historical characters such as Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, and various artists including Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Cézanne, and Chagall, either appear or are mentioned in the book. Is Hanna a real person, too?

A. No. Inspiration for Hanna came from many sources. Several years ago, I read an article about a woman who had been a model for Picasso and was now offering to sell these very valuable drawings of a beautiful, young nude. The woman pictured with the article was, of course, very old, but it made me think about what a history she'd had, what a life she must have lived.

When I wrote about young Hanna leaving the farm in Bavaria to seek a new life, I was thinking of my own grandmother who came to America from Slovenia when she was nineteen. She traveled alone and knew only a few words of English. She set out on this journey because her mother had died, and she didn't like her stepmother (Just like my Hanna). As a child, I didn't know any of this. I saw my grandmother as a kind, overly cautious old woman with a heavy accent and a simple life centered on nothing more than church and family. After she died I found a tiny, well-used Slovenian-English grammar book in her things, and it has become a powerful reminder of her sense of adventure, and my realization that she might have been a completely different person than the one I knew.

Q. What is the meaning of the title, THE WOMAN WHO HEARD COLOR?

A. I'm a reader and clipper, always coming across ideas or facts I want to explore. I'd read about synesthesia, a neurological condition in which the senses are blended, in a newspaper article and then later in the SMITHSONIAN magazine. I filed them both away for later. In reading about Kandinsky, I learned that he was believed to be a synesthete, his senses of sight and sound overlapping. Later I realized that Hanna could be, too, and wouldn't that be an

interesting talent for one whose life revolved around art? Hanna hears sound in color and sees color in sound. Doing further research I learned that the condition often runs in families, but a sound that creates a particular color for one person might produce a completely different color for another. I knew I could write about this condition and no one could say, “No, that doesn’t sound blue!”

Q. The story is told as two, the one the reader sees through Hanna’s eyes, and another as Isabella, Hanna’s daughter as an old woman, gradually reveals her mother’s story to Lauren, “the art detective.” Why did you choose this split point of view?

A. I wanted Hanna’s story to have a present day connection and poignancy. What is history if we learn nothing from it? Hanna was born in 1884, so I knew this part of the story would have to be told from someone else’s point of view. As readers will learn, there are some differences in what Isabella knows and remembers and what really happened.

Q. What is it you want your reader to take away after reading the story?

A. I’d like them to think about history as a learning tool, and to ask the question, who is to judge what is good or bad art? I’d like them to consider the value of personal creativity and self expression.