

Inside Story



Writer makes time for what matters

Denyse O'Leary analyzes the world through the lens of faith

Eight-year-old Denyse O'Leary climbed to the top of a hill near Whitehorse, looked at the jagged rocks and mountains and decided to become a writer. And become a writer she did, beginning with an essay published in the London Free Press when she was 13.

It was a logical step. In her family, "the ability to express oneself easily and well was highly valued." Her first attempts to write began shortly after she learned to speak.

In the years since, she has written for a variety of publications including the Globe and Mail, Canadian Living and a magazine for truckers. She has written about automotive issues for the Toronto Star and about cats for a magazine called Hi-Rise.

She writes a regular column for ChristianWeek, and her second book on science and faith issues has just been published.

Although Denyse was born in Saskatchewan and has spent most of her life in Toronto, the three years her family lived in the Yukon left the biggest impression.

"The Yukon affected me more than any other place. A short way out of the community, wilderness begins. You learn what people are and what nature is."

Life in the Yukon also impacted her in another way. "In those days, we did not have TV, so I learned to read, a habit that has stayed with me."

Denyse married in 1970 and the following year graduated from Waterloo Lutheran University with an honours degree in English. She considered journalism, but was soon busy with daughters Sheila and Cindy.

Denyse continued to write—fiction, poetry and non-fiction. "I was always working and always writing. I got paid for some of the things I wrote. I also wrote a lot of free literature—for the pro-life movement, for example," she says.

When her younger daughter was slightly injured after being hit by a car in 1978, Denyse became a Christian. Her marriage, however, began to unravel and she divorced in the mid '80s.

Denyse needed a steady income and realized she had valuable skills.

"I was one of the last generation of students who were taught grammar. I knew for sure whether a given sentence was correct. The reading skills I learned as a child also helped me to perfect the craft of book editing. I became, in time, a senior development editor and project manager."

But the desire to write was still strong. Denyse's sister Judy, also a writer, introduced her to trade magazines such as The Canadian Bookseller, distributed to booksellers and publishers in Canada. She was soon



working on assignments and learning a lot about a variety of topics.

Denyse had always been interested in nature and science issues. In 1996, a Toronto professor suggested they co-author a book on cloning. Denyse began gathering information. When the project was scrapped, she wrote a few articles for ChristianWeek, which turned into a regular column, "Faith and Science."

Denyse also wrote articles on science and bioethics for Christianity Today and other publications.

She explored the possibility of a book, but nothing panned out. Then one of the publishers Denyse worked for got involved.

"I write indexes for Gord Shillingforth. One day he asked me if I ever wrote anything else," Denyse says. "I told him I did, and sent him some samples. Faith@Science (Winnipeg: Shillingforth) came out in 2001. Who would have guessed that the publisher I wrote indexes for would offer to publish a book of my writing?"

Faith@Science was followed by another, much more demanding project, *By Design or By Chance: The Growing Controversy on the Origins of Life in the Universe*.

It takes a huge leap of faith for a writer who lives on her income to spend massive amount of time on a book with a small advance and no guaranteed royalties. According to Denyse, the book "took me two years, exhausted my savings and took a toll on my health, but it's been the most satisfying project I have worked on."

As for the money, Denyse says, "I don't want to get too caught up in that. The reckless pursuit of money at any age is foolish, but at my age it would be inexcusable. Time is the critical capital, and life is about making time for what matters, not about making money for what doesn't matter."

The little girl who looked at the Yukon landscape and searched for words to express her feelings has successfully made the transition to the woman who analyzes the world through the lens of her faith and reaches for a keyboard to record her impressions.

Visit Denyse's Web sites, www.denyseoleary.ca and www.designorchance.com

N. J. Lindquist is the executive director of The Word Guild (www.thewordguild.com). Her latest book, More Than Friends, is coming out this spring.

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