

Answers to Questions About *Loon Point*

1. What inspired you to write this book?

I wrote this book because I got really pissed off with a Facebook post. A friend of mine, Wally, wrote a nasty post about how people like me—the optimists, the “idealists,” he said—ignore tragedy and human suffering in favor of seeking out reasons to be happy. The hurt and anger I felt after reading that post got me wondering why Wally felt optimism was bogus and what it would take for someone like him to change his mind.

So, in *Loon Point*, I created a fictional Wally, a 72-year-old named Wendall, living in northern Minnesota, who says he has the worst luck in the world. I let Wendell believe that life was nothing but one lousy disappointment after another and all the people who thought otherwise were morons. And I waited to see what would happen that might cause Wendell to change his mind.

2. Can you tell us a bit about your writing process?

I am not a person who has any idea what I will write about before I start writing. I wrote *Loon Point* because my agent, Annie Romano, asked me to. We were working to sell a series and one day Annie called me up and said, “I hope this won’t offend you, but would you ever consider writing a stand-alone novel in the spirit of your column?”

I wasn’t offended in the least. I let the idea simmer for 48 hours and then I started writing. I had a fairly clean draft of *Loon Point* ready to send back to her in 50 days. I honestly believe the story had been living within me ever since I read Wally’s post. I think most of our stories are already written in our subconscious before we begin the process of remembering them and putting them into words.

3. What advice would you give to aspiring authors?

Everyone has a different process, and writers can waste a lot of time trying to follow someone else’s formula. I know I did. I felt irresponsible, not having any idea where the story was going when I first began. I later learned that most of the writers I admire simply write with no idea where the story will take them.

But there is also no shortcut for writing. Planning a book is not writing. Researching a book is not writing. Reading books on writing craft and watching YouTube videos is not writing. I went back to school for a late-in-life MFA in writing because of some wonderful advice I got from the writer, Kyoko Mori. I asked her if getting an MFA was worth it. She told me that an MFA would not teach me how to write, but it would save me time. Since I was getting a late start, I figured I needed to save all the time I could!

4. When did you first realize you wanted to be a writer?

I did not write a word of fiction between the ages of eight and 58. I started writing in earnest at age 50, writing a weekly column for the local newspaper and working on my memoir, *Blue Yarn*. But it never occurred to me that I could make up stories from scratch until I started to do it, unexpectedly, during the pandemic. I hear many stories of writers who knew they wanted to write novels from the time they were small children. I was not one of them.

5. What themes or messages do you hope readers take away from this book?

I want to share this story because I believe in the power of optimism to change lives. I believe we need to look for and find hope and reasons to be happy now more than ever. And I believe the key to finding hope is to find a community with whom we can share our dreams.

6. How do you create believable and relatable characters?

I think the whole point of both writing and reading is that we get to find out how it feels to think and believe as another person does. Nearly every character I've written is a part of me, just emphasized so that it becomes a dominant part of their personality. I was picked on as an eight-year-old, like Lizzie, and took refuge in books. Like Norry, I can get stuck in my ways and allow inertia to prevent me from experiencing new things.

But the character of Wendell was different because he really was not me at all but based on a friend—and a friend I did not agree with! So my challenge in writing Wendell was really the challenge Wendell himself faces, and that was to extend empathy to others—in my case to Wendell/Wally. Wendell learns in this book that others have to face misfortunes as great or greater than his own. I learned, in writing Wendell, that not everyone faces situations with the same resilience and that pain, even if it seems to arise over a trivial matter, is still pain. I think he is very funny, and I wanted to find and explore that humor. But I also wanted to convey that his hurt was real—even if it was not always justified.

7. What did you learn about yourself while writing this book?

This book was very important to me in my journey as a writer because I discovered what a lot of what I'd been writing was about. I realized that in my memoir and in more than 350 columns I'd written under "The Postscript" banner, I'd been trying to make the case that it was worth taking a chance on optimism—especially later in life, especially after things go wrong.

I think this is the throughline in my column, this novel, and my live show. Change is only possible if I believe it is.