

# The Waiting Room

by  
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Anyone who says writing is a lonely business has never spent time with a roomful of hardheaded fictional folk bent on having their way. Unlike boring, predictable humans, —and for the sake of story, conflict and change—characters are inevitably ego-tripping demigods that writers must turn into minions with omnipotent appeal. This is at best a neurotic, symbiotic relationship. However, over the past decade one of my characters helped me find a sane way of working together, discovered during early morning walks. This routine began in September 2001 when my family started homeschooling. That hour or so before our school day began was the only time I had completely to myself, or at least I assumed I was alone. I worked on lesson plans, wrote songs, designed ways to integrate history, science, math, literature, into experiential learning for our only daughter, now sixteen and enrolled in high school. I relished the solitude and creativity of those walks, but it wasn't long before I realized—I was *not* alone. Three years into homeschooling I joined Left Coast Writers, which pushed me happily back into an active writing process. I dusted off stories languishing in computer files. As soon as I started stirring those simmering pots, many idle characters sprang to life, infiltrating my peaceful walks. “*What the %\$#@\* are you waiting for?*” they yelled as I contemplated cool ways to introduce third grade algorithms. “*What good is this immortality you keep promising us if it's spent shut away in a file? You need to get busy...*” On and on they raged,

highjacking my solitude with bratty tirades. It worked. Like the old days when I was single and living in New York, words pushed me out of bed again. In 2005 I began a(nother) new novel adding a host of fresh characters to the fray. Motivated by opportunities to read at Left Coast salons, I split my evenings between lesson plans and fiction. It felt good, but did not stop the noise from my discontented crew. I imagine that they congregate in a Character Waiting Room. The most irate stand in front holding forth, others lounge in chairs, on sofas napping, dipping snuff, smoking, listening to iPods or transistor radios, reading by candle light or from Kindles. The noise from the front is deafening. The veterans infuse the new comers and now they are *all* pissed. So one morning I call them out. “*Dang!...what more do y’all want?*” I ask. “*I’m workin’ again, got a pretty productive schedule going, even had a couple of readings.*” That isn’t enough; the rants escalate. Then *Indicca Bright* speaks softly from the back of the Waiting Room. She’s 23, the demure single mother of 3-year-old “*Cricket*”, and one of my favorite new characters. “*You oughta interview us*”, she suggests, “*that way everybody can have they say AND we can get some peace and quiet ‘round here.*” “*That’s a good idea!*” I reply, “*Why didn’t I think of that?*” I start interviews right away.

For years on my walks I jotted notes in a small pad, before switching to a digital recorder. Over time yard-side chats with neighbors showed that I’d become a neighborhood fixture: the black woman in the red ski jacket, baseball cap, with the ever-present note pad. People are genuinely interested and impressed that I am writing a novel. The middle-aged blond woman with a black, vintage Mercedes in the driveway wants me to find a place for her in my book—even though she’s never asked what *my* story is about. Not worth explaining that there’s no room for her villainess in this family saga

centered around the rediscovered love or a black, 70-something couple separated for 50 years after horrors of the Civil Rights Movement in Albany, a city in southwest Georgia which happens to be my birthplace. As the word count increases, characters line up for interviews, proving *Indicca Bright* to be right, this idea brings order to the chaos and—inadvertently—turns my characters into writers. Even the most mutinous now wait pensively with pads and pens, prepping for interviews; and they—as much as I—look forward to my annual research trek back to Georgia.

Since my parents and sister passed away in the 1990's, going home is bittersweet. Gone are my mom's signature pats on the back, my dad's hearty laugh and my sister's infectious creative zest. Gone is the “home house” with its reminiscent smells, meals and memories. Morning walks in Georgia are now from a hotel room and I'm a stranger in my hometown. The interviews continue, but my characters up the ante on this home turf. They *seem* humbled by place and hungry to know more about the real folk of my life—living and deceased—who populate my research and inform my stories. But I know exactly what those fictional folk are up to. The writer in each of them is ruthlessly pursuing new material, looking for stuff to round out their hedonistic profiles, give their interviews zing to ensure a spot above “minor character”.

With each trip back my (our) research deepens. I stroll the campus of Albany State University remembering the days in the 1960s when it was still a college, and my childhood house—now a parking lot (for real)—stood across the street from the girls' dorm. College Avenue, the single street that leads to the campus, was then called Hazard Drive, one end occupied by the campus, the other end lined with mostly wooden houses filled with folks raising families and renting rooms to college students. The street was a

mélange of those two cultures. The sounds of kids playing pitched against the distant, early morning singing and chanting of sorority and fraternity pledgees as they *cross the burning sands*, enduring the humiliation of initiation rituals. Student teachers, football games and homecoming parades, it was a lively, magical place to grow up. I mentally reenact civil rights marches across the old bridge. I pull my hero couple—*Fletcher Dukes and Altovise Johnson*—from *The Waiting Room* and place them in the pews of historical Shiloh Baptist Church the night Dr. King spoke.

Sure, some of them may never make it out of *The Waiting Room*, but as all of my fussy, irreplaceable characters become more skillful at distinguishing themselves in interviews, together we find new ways to process story. Together we concoct ways to make good on my promise to give them a shot at immortality, a chance to live and breathe on the page.