

## ***This Multi-Talented Lady Doesn't Let Anything Slow Her Down...***



**Mary Jo Nickum**

**Q:** Wisconsin, Washington, and Oregon. How did you wind up in Arizona?

**A:** I've wanted to live in Arizona since I was 10 years old but my parents just couldn't visualize it.

**Q:** Now retired, how long were you a librarian and what were your duties as a project manager? Was that for the library?

**A:** I was a librarian for 25 years. Then I wanted to be an editor and I spent my sabbatical year from Oregon State University Library at the American Fisheries Society in Bethesda, MD as the Editor of *The Progressive Fish-Culturist*.

**Q:** As a librarian, did you want to try your hand at writing earlier on, or was that something you decided to do after retiring?

**A:** Writing came later, after editing and my sabbatical.

**Q:** In your professional opinion, with the background you have to your credit (quite a list!) what changes in books, authors, writing style and publishing did you see change over your job history?

**A:** I did not see great change, at least from the academic side. The peer-review process has undergone some change.

**Q:** How did you become interested in Science? Something from childhood?

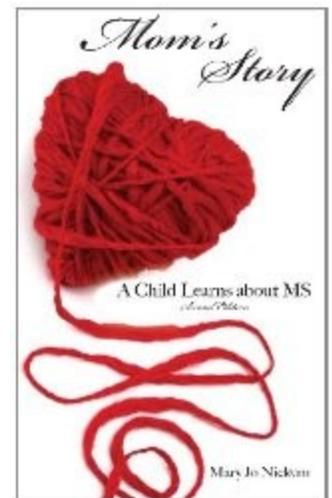
**A:** I was first drawn to forestry but I got into fisheries because my first library job was at the National Water Quality Laboratory (USEPA) in Duluth, MN.

**Q:** Your book, *Mom's Story* – what prompted your desire to write it?

**A:** When I began writing for children in 2006, I was told "Write what you know." I'd had multiple sclerosis since 1979. I knew a lot about MS and what the symptoms and diagnosis was like and also what families are up against.

**Q:** Do you have more books in the works yet?

**A:** I am finishing a historical novel for middle grade/young adults entitled: **A GIRL NAMED MARY**, the first 14 years of the life of Jesus' mother and I've started a middle grade historical novel **WAR FOR HEAVEN**, a story about Lucifer's fall.



**Q:** What would you say is the biggest mistake writers make now, compared to authors from the 50's and 60's?

**A:** I'm not sure about the 50s and 60s, but from a publisher's standpoint, the biggest mistake I see is manuscripts being submitted prematurely to the publisher, rushed to submission.

**Q:** You are also an editor. Do you base the work you take on after a brief reading of some of the manuscript, do you prefer one genre over another, or are you flexible?

**A: I am flexible but historical novels and well-written fantasies are my favorites.**

Q: In my opinion, one of the biggest mistakes an author makes is not getting their manuscript properly edited and critiqued before publishing. Have you noticed this a lot as well?

**A: This is definitely the biggest problem from my experience.**

Q: With the digital age of publish so prominent now, will printed books eventually be a thing of the past or do you think there will still be readers who want to hold a book in their hand?

**A: Probably some will want the book (paper), but, I think electronic will win in the end.**

Q: I've found a lot of authors, new to the publishing business, believe their book will become a best seller overnight and they'll make millions and live life as a famous author forever more. It's sad, but they don't really grasp the concept until years down the publishing road. My opinion is they should be proud they were able to write a book and publish it and no matter how many readers get a chance to read it and enjoy it, they should be proud they were able to do that. It's not as easy as it looks. How do you feel about that subject?

**A: Totally agree—the instant fame and money myth is definitely out there. There just aren't or ever will be a lot of JK Rowlings out there.**

Q: Explain to our readers the advantages of rewrites, solid editing and critiques prior to publishing?

**A: No matter how good it sounds to you, how good your mom and dad say it is, every writer needs an unbiased edit and critique, maybe more than one. Fresh eyes and first time readers are immeasurably helpful. A good editor will catch the wordiness and tighten up the writing.**

Q: Romance & Adventure seem to sell best. Has this always been the trend over the years or have you witnessed the trend changing over the years, in your experience as a librarian?

**A: I've not worked in public libraries where this trend might be more visible, but I think there is definitely a trend away from biography and moving toward romance and adventure. Also, I might add, away from quality reading to many not being much better than the inane television shows.**

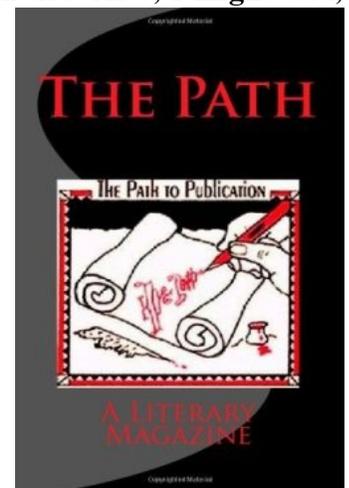
Q: Reading is a great escape and you can learn a lot about English, punctuation, sentence structure, characters, settings, etc. What do you enjoy most about reading?

**A: I love to read for learning, for entertainment and for professional development. The best advice to writers is to READ.**

Q: Your magazine, The Path: what can one find in the magazine in general, how often is it published and how did the idea for it come about?

**A: It is published twice per year. It has a smattering of short stories, essays, poetry, cartoons, interviews and book reviews. It is a brainchild of a colleague of mine, who envisioned it but lacked the time to carry it forward.**

Q: Does anyone else in your family have an interest in writing, reading or teaching?



**A: My husband, John, is a retired university professor (zoologist) who has written many academic papers and now writes a column for Aquaculture North America. We have a huge personal collection of books in our home. In my living room, as well as other rooms, we decorate with books.**

Q: Mary Jo (love the middle name – same as mine!) what else would you like to cover today that I may not have touched base on? Feel free to get lengthy if needed. You are so well educated and have such a broad spectrum of unusual interests and talents in writing & publishing that I feel others can learn a lot from you.

**A: Here are two brief articles (Blogs) I've written:**

### **Don't Get Rejected Before You Submit**

To give yourself a head start you need to make your book stand out. Why does the publisher have to read it? Why do you believe in what you are doing? What is it about this book that warrants the attention of the book-buying public? If you are able to provide a publisher with this kind of information before they look at it, then – as long as they are enthusiastic, of course – you're a step ahead.

First and foremost, you need to stop thinking like a writer and start thinking like a marketer. Can you condense your story down into one or two awesome sentences? If you can, you've developed a pitch and, depending on the policy of the publisher in question, you can use this to get people interested – either on the phone or via cover letters/emails.

Do you know which market you're aiming for? Have you thought about how your book will compete with others on the shelves? Why is it different? Why will readers pick up your travel book on Rome rather than the Lonely Planet's? If you can give a publisher answers to these kinds of questions (without them having to ask), you will pique their interest. Otherwise, if such questions come up and you have no reply, you will look naïve.

Look at submissions policies very carefully and use them to your advantage. A script that comes in clean, tidy, correctly formatted according to guidelines and with a concise cover letter will get more attention than the dog-eared, single-spaced tome with a rambling two-page explanation.

Are there small embellishments you can use to draw people's attention – artwork, for example? Be careful on this, if you make the presentation too much of a challenge for a publisher, you're shooting yourself in the foot before you've begun.

Can you do anything else differently to get people's attention? Your ploys need to be subtle, because at this stage a busy publisher is doing you a favor by reading your work.

The submissions stage is one where books and dreams are made or broken. Success is a combination of skill, perseverance, patience and good fortune (and much more besides) – but the only way the final line is ever drawn is the moment you give up. Good luck!

### **So you want to write historical fiction?**

Well, here are some clues for you to consider *before* beginning to write historical fiction.

Historical fiction has always been popular, with people gravitating toward novels set in time-periods in which they have an interest. But writing historical fiction is a lot more work than writing a contemporary fiction piece. Why?

These tips for beginning to write historical fiction will explain:

**1. Choose a time-period.** When writing historical fiction, the time period should be very specific, not a vague decade within a century. Clothing styles, customs and social mores change from decade to decade and, often, even more frequently.

Choose the exact years in which your book will take place.

Popular broad time periods in historical fiction include the Regency period in England, the Civil War period in the U.S., the medieval period in Europe, and the late 19th century in either America or Europe. With the rise in Christian fiction, stories of biblical characters are becoming popular.

These historical periods have a large number of devoted readers, but any time period and any place may be the setting for your work. If you cannot think of a time period that you are familiar with, think of a historical person or character that appeals to you and see if that time period is one you want to write about.

**2. Research, research, and more research.** The moment in history that you choose should be very familiar to you by the time you have finished your research. You should know the common customs, the class system, the monetary system, the common living arrangements and anything else that may come up in your work.

One or two wrong details will cause you to lose your credibility fast. If there are obvious anachronistic errors in your historical fiction, you can also be prepared for bags of letters being sent to you, admonishing you for those errors.

What are anachronistic errors? Basically, these errors involve the use of some item from another time period. For instance, the Roman roads were not called “highways”. The highway was a term adapted with the use of automobiles.

Do as much research as possible before you begin to write. Writing a story and then trying to adapt it to a certain time-period will come out sounding artificial and forced. The information you uncover will guide the story you write and take it to places you hadn’t considered before.

**3. Give the characters an appropriate perspective.** The best part of writing a novel is the characters and making them come to life. The characters of a historical fiction novel should have the mindset of people from that time-period. Characters are shaped by their experiences, family life and culture, which includes the time and place in which they are born.

Naming your characters is an important early task. Be sure that the names you chose are common for the time-period you’ve chosen.

A character’s general perspective on the world will be obvious in books written in the first person. If the book is written in the third person, a character’s values as defined by the time-period can be demonstrated through the character’s dialogue and actions, or through the narrative voice recounting the thoughts and feelings of the character. However, the character’s viewpoint is demonstrated, it should be apparent that the character is not simply a modern person dropped into a different time-period.

A good example of well-researched and well-written historical fiction is: Byrd, Elizabeth. *The Immortal Queen*. Random House, New York, 1972.

A helpful book for writing historical fiction is the prize winning: Martin, Rhona. *Writing Historical Fiction*. St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988.