Writing changed my life

When Sue asked me to write something for the village newsletter, my first thought was what do I write about? A slightly ridiculous thought for an author you might think, but to be honest I don't consider myself to be that interesting. My books, on the other hand, are a different matter. I am passionate about them because the military history are about ordinary people who did extraordinary things, and, other than Betrayed, Secret Lives and Secrets, the fiction are either based on, or inspired by, true stories.

To summarise I write and publish military history, historical fiction, spiritual books and memoirs, I also ghost write all of these. In total I have written over 40 books. Some of the military history and *A History of Women's Lives in Scunthorpe* are published by Pen and Sword Books Ltd, others, including *My War and Peace*, *The Fairfield Campbells. Their part in the Rise and Fall of Empire* and *Chasing Terrorists. Denis and the Ghost Squad*, are published by me. The fiction was originally published by another publisher but have all now been republished by me. If you would like to know more about these please visit my website https://carolemctbooks.info or if you are on Facebook you can find me at https://www.facebook.com/CaroleMcTBooks

My parents both loved books, my father read crime, thrillers, and espionage stories while my mother read historical fiction and romance, so I grew up with a passion for reading most genres and this is reflected in my novels which although set in the 20th Century are a mixture of all these. The inspiration behind my writing was my father in law, Ted Taylor.

Ted was conscripted into the Rifle Brigade in September 1939 and fought in the Defence of Calais in May 1940 after which he spent five years as a POW. Although he'd never spoken about it we finally managed to persuade him to talk on tape and received a very sanitised version of the fighting and his subsequent years in a POW camp. In 2008 Ted suffered a crippling stroke and ended up in a nursing home. To cheer him up I suggested writing up his war experiences as a book.

This was quite daunting as I had no background in military history. I began the long process of reading everything I could about the Defence of Calais, which wasn't much. The battle was totally eclipsed by the evacuation from Dunkirk and was rarely mentioned, even on the most recent documentaries. I knew even less about the treatment of the ordinary POW at the hands of their captors or their lives, having grown up on a diet of sanitised POW camp films and even one comedy set in a Stalag, none of which bore any reality to the truth. Like most authors I struggled to find a publisher but eventually, Ted's story, *Surviving the Nazi Onslaught,* was published by Pen & Sword Books Ltd.

I was now hooked on writing military history, but I also wanted to write fiction because I couldn't find anything I wanted to read. I have always been a voracious reader. I'd spend hours in the library as a child and spent all my pocket money on books, progressing quickly from Enid Blyton to Agatha Christie amongst others. I'd rush home with my latest books, disappear up into my bedroom and not come down again until they were finished. My Dad always used to say they were a waste of money because I could get through two or three books in a weekend but they weren't. They were my escape from reality and the more I read the more it fuelled my imagination. As I grew older I read anything I could get my hands on, crime, thrillers, historical fiction, occasionally romance and science fiction and of course chic lit! I liked big books I could lose myself in, probably to escape my disastrous relationships.

Having finally extradited myself from the last bad relationship I spent two years on my own finding myself again and then I met David. I no longer needed to escape my reality so I stopped reading. I found books by authors I'd always loved no longer held my attention, so I decided to write something I wanted to read, and I had the perfect idea.

Whist writing Ted's story I learnt that Brenda, my mother-in-law, had been a nurse throughout the London Blitz, and she and Ted were engaged when he went to war. Five long years later he came home and they were married. Their story fascinated me. They did not have the benefit of hindsight. Brenda waited even though she had no idea how long it would be or even if Ted would ever come home. Ted had somehow held onto the belief that he would come home even though he had no idea how long that might be. I decided to write up Ted and Brenda's story including an element of fiction to cover something Ted did in France after he was captured.

I soon realised it was impossible to fictionalise my in laws because they were real people. I couldn't have them doing things that weren't in character nor did I want to alienate the family and have my husband not talking to me because I had made his mum do something she wouldn't have! So I changed their names and although the story is inspired by them and based on something that did happen, all the characters are now 100% fiction. *Lives Apart. A WW2 Chronicle* was followed by *Betrayed*, a novel about a serial killer in Berlin during the 1930s and 1940s, and then *Obsession,* inspired by the thousands of POWs who disappeared from Eastern Europe at the end of WW2 and were believed to have been captured by the Soviets and taken to Gulags, never to return. I am still in the process of republishing *Obsession* so keep an eye on my website or follow me on Facebook to find out when its available to buy. Just like life, all my novels contain some adult content😊

It was because of the books that David and I moved to Garthorpe in January 2016. David had reached retirement age and I was still working full time at the Military Corrective Training Centre in Colchester, a job I loved, but we decided it was time for a change. My research library was growing rapidly and we were running out of space in Essex. I have always considered myself a spiritual northerner. I hated travelling south and only ever felt at peace when I was heading north! We decided the west would be too wet so east it was, but we couldn't make up our minds whether to go to Yorkshire or North Lincolnshire. Ironically, we ended up on the old border of the two which is quite amusing. It's the best thing we ever did. We both love it up here. People actually talk to you, even in shops! I finished writing *Obsession* up here which is why I have based my characters on the Isle of Axholme, and then started writing *Secret Lives* which is set in various locations in Hull and in Yorkshire.

My latest fiction series, *A One Way Ticket*, started off as nonfiction project after Bob Young contacted me about his father, Seaman Bill Young, who served throughout the war in the Royal Navy. Unfortunately, there weren't enough personal letters or diaries about Bill's time during the war to write a nonfiction book so we decided I would write it as historical fiction instead, in the same way I had written the war story of Ted and Brenda. Writing up Bill's story as a mixture of fact and fiction would allow me to bring Bill to life in a way that would not be possible in a purely nonfiction book.

Like many people who lived through WW2, Bill's war was traumatic. He was sunk three times and watched many of his friends die. His son Bob summarises his father's experience better than I can:

Dad's service record gave up a lot. Sunk on HMS Khartoum in the Red Sea, five months bombing the Italians in North Africa on HMS Ladybird and sunk in Tobruk harbour, sixty days in a Jerusalem detention centre, part of the evacuation of Greece and Crete, eight months on a Greek schooner back

and forth Bomb Alley to and from Tobruk from Alexandria, on a minesweeper drifter for months that was sunk and two years on HMS Keats where the ship was credited with two U-Boat kills as well as the failed Operation Goodwood. The internet and the service record won't tell me about the very many near misses he must have had in his life. Also, the ships nearby that were blown up and friends lost. Other ships in the 5th Escort group were sunk and many lives lost in the Normandy landings operation. HMS Keats was on duty in the Channel to keep the U- boats away from the landings.

Bill survived the war but suffered badly from PTSD, a condition that wasn't really recognised then. At the end of the war, no one wanted to talk about their experiences, everyone had a war story, and all anyone wanted to do was to get on with their lives and look to the future, a future that should have been peaceful. Sadly, for Bill that wasn't the case.

If you would like to know more about Bill's story you can meet his son at the **Garthorpe and District RBL VE/VJ Commemoration on 14 May** as Bob is flying over from Jersey to attend the event. You can also see more about Bill by visiting https://www.facebook.com/SeamanBillYoung.

All my books, including *A One Way Ticket,* are available from good online book retailers and shops. If the shops don't have the books in stock they can order for you, or you can order them from the library. The fiction are also available as kindles for only 99p each and in other eBook formats online. If you decide to buy *A One Way Ticket* in paperback, bring the book/s to St Mary's church on 14 May and Bob and I will sign them for you, a rare opportunity to get both our signatures! Or you can just knock on the door and I'll be happy to sign any of my books. I keep a stock of nonfiction, including *A History of Women's Lives in Scunthorpe*, so you can always buy from me direct, but I don't have many copies of the fiction books so you would need to buy them online.

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