Author Profile Wanda St.Hilaire

The Cuban Chronicles: A True Tale of Rascals, Rogues, and Romance

Why did you decide to write this book?

As a true Sagittarian wanderer, I have had many adventures in different parts of the world. While in Cuba, I was outlining a travel memoir about a love affair with a Frenchman I'd met in Portugal. At the same time, I was chronicling my adventures, thoughts and observations in a letter.

After meeting a charming Cuban journalist on the streets of Havana, the letter grew. I dubbed it *The Cuban Chronicles*. Other friends wanted to read the letter and begged for more.

"Turn it into a book!" they'd implore.

"If my second trip holds enough material, I'll do it," I promised. And it did.

• How did you develop your idea for this book?

For fourteen years, I have had a rich weekly correspondence with a cherished friend living in Paris. For the first eight years, we painstakingly handwrote our letters, sometimes up to thirty pages each. Writing in a journal or diary format, we have shared—without self-censorship—our thoughts, experiences, sexual ecstasies, agonies, doubts, fears, findings, failures, insights, and advice. I developed the book based on the letters I wrote to my friend on the first trip to Cuba, the three months that followed, and the second trip.

What excites you most about your book's topic? Why did you choose it?

Travel is my number one passion. Men are a close second. Actually, the two are intertwined; I adore handsome, foreign men. For many years I wanted to write my travel memoirs, but I wanted to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I finally got the courage to do so.

• How long did the book take you from start to finish?

I began writing the book directly upon my return from Cuba in January 2007. I submitted the book to the publisher for editorial review in September 2008. The editorial and design process was completed end of May 2009.

Do you have any secret writing tips you'd like to share?

I can procrastinate with the best of them. For many years, I had the excuse of my busy sales position. How could I possibly switch every day from left brain to right brain under the pressures of a hectic job that took me all over the province?

A couple of tips that worked well for me were firstly, to set aside the time each day, no excuses. I go to my local coffee shop each morning for my latte and I write, no matter my mood, my schedule, or my inspiration level.

The second tip is to use holiday time to go away and get into "The Zone." I am fortunate that I can and like to travel alone. This affords me the luxury of clearing my mind and easing the monkey mind (the incessant chatter). I utilize my vacations in places I love for the really creative part of my writing.

Have you ever battled writer's block? How do you deal with it?

Even if I feel like hell, I can always work on some part of the book. Maybe I do a little online research, maybe organize the structure, or maybe just put pen to paper and jot random ideas down in a journal.

What aspect of writing the book did you find particularly challenging?

When I received the hard copy of my manuscript from the editor, I nearly fell into a depression. It looked like a teacher's grading with marks, circles and comments throughout. I had to put it in a cupboard for a number of days before I had the guts to tackle the work and face the grueling task ahead of me.

I liken the editorial, design and layout process with the publisher to a difficult pregnancy. The process (gestation period) took exactly nine months, complete with morning sickness, varicose veins and hemorrhoids.

• What surprised you the most about the book writing process?

The first surprise was my dogged determination and diligence to keep going in light of all obstacles. The second was how many errors the human eye can miss.

Did you have any favorite experiences when writing your book?

Creating and planning the cover photo shot was a blast. I serendipitously found a fabulous New York photographer in Bucerias, Mexico to shoot exactly what I'd planned in my mind's eye.

Also, while writing the book in Oaxaca, Mexico, I had a real-life epiphany that offered a perfect ending to *The Cuban Chronicles*. Sitting and writing in the *zocalo* (central square) was inspiring beyond measure. The *zocalo* was filled daily with amorous lovers of all ages, and I love love. *Oaxaquenos* are a friendly and warm people and I reveled in the many conversations I had and the friends I made there.

What do you hope your readers will gain from reading your book?

Some may gain a better understanding of Cuban life and what communism and a dictatorial government (such as ours is becoming) does to gradually erode personal liberty. One of my intentions was to convey what people are compelled to do in order to survive under, or escape such a regime. The book is an irreverent cautionary tale from both a political and personal perspective; the second being, "buyer beware" when engaging in a foreign dalliance.

I share insights and observations with themes feminine in nature. I hope that my honesty and self-discovery about (romantic) relationships will inspire women who've accepted too little to have their own ah-ha moment reading the book.

I think the book offers female readers a sense of camaraderie and male readers a glimpse into the feminine psyche.

What projects are you currently working on?

I am currently working on my second travel memoir about another foreign love affair, which begins in Portugal with a quixotic Frenchman and ends in Mexico.

I'm also loosely outlining a book about my experiences of the past year through a diagnosis of breast cancer after a 20-year triumph over it.

Is writing your sole career? If not, what else do you do?

After a soul-searching year, I decided that life is too short not to do what you love where you love. I am healing, writing, living and reinventing my life in Mexico this winter. I am developing a sideline career of writing travel articles.

Did you do any research for your books, or did you write from experience?

I wrote the book from my personal experiences but I did a lot of research on facts to ensure everything depicted in the book was accurate and to create a correct glossary of Spanish and French words. I've also done a heap of research on the book industry.

• How did you come up with your title?

I had a lot of fun with this. I'd dubbed the first of the letters the book is based on, *The Cuban Chronicles*. My original subtitle was, *Memoir of a Wanton Woman*. Both my local editor and the publisher's editor didn't feel I should use it for fear of offending potential readers. I created two other suitable titles and, because I was still attached to my original subtitle, I decided to take a poll. I sent an email survey to my contacts, asked people in coffee shops, bookstores and malls which subtitle grabbed them.

A True Tale of Rascals, Rogues, and Romance won by a landslide. The amusing part was that I didn't offend anyone with the word "wanton." I confused the heck out of them. People wanted to know what *The Cuban Chronicles* had to do with Chinese food and wonton soup. Some said they got hungry when they read it! I let go of my attachment to the original subtitle in a big hurry.

What books have influenced you the most?

The English Patient (Michael Ondaatje) incited me to write a book of poetry, Like Water for Chocolate (Laura Esquivel) is a book of Latin sensuality and passion, Spending (Mary Gordon) captured my imagination, and all of Erica Jong's irreverent books told me there were other women in the world like me. I was told by four different people to read Eat, Pray, Love while I was finishing my book. It gave me "permission" to stay honest and true to myself.

- What's your favorite quote?
 - "Well-behaved women seldom make history."
 - Laurel Thatcher Ulrich
- Who inspires you the most?

Ernest Hemingway is my hero, a master gypsy-rogue. In spite of harsh criticism, he lived life on his own terms. His life, more than his books, have influenced me.