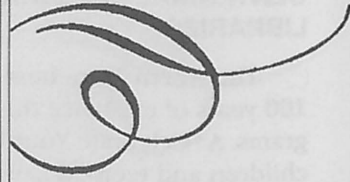


IN STEP WITH INDIANA AUTHORS...
FEATURING AN INTERVIEW WITH
SARA HOSKINSON FROMMER

by Jacob Eubanks



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ara Hoskinson Frommer is the author of six mystery novels including: *Murder & Sullivan*, *Murder in C Major*, and *The Vanishing Violinist*. Her most recent work was 2005's *Death Climbs a Tree*. She lives in Bloomington, Indiana, with her husband, a retired professor of psychology at Indiana University. She was a writer and later senior editor at the Agency for Instructional Technology in Bloomington, but these days she writes full time and volunteers at Monroe County Public Library, teaching adults how to read. Currently, she is working on her seventh mystery novel.

Sara was born in Chicago to Hoosier parents. Her father grew up in Evansville, Indiana, and her mother grew up in Wadesville. Her earliest years were spent in Chicago and Oak Park, Illinois. She has little memory of those early days but can recall weekly visits to the Oak Park Public Library with her parents. In her pre-teen years, Sara's minister father uprooted the family and moved them to Honolulu. The family spent a total of three years in Hawaii. Today, Sara remarks that her time in Hawaii was exciting, but she missed things about the Midwest and missed the people. But mainly she missed things like apples. At that time, if it didn't grow in Hawaii, you couldn't get it, so she didn't get to eat apples for three years. Although Sara's mother really loved Hawaii, her father grew homesick, and after the third year, he wanted to move back to the Midwest. Sara's high school years were lived out in Kewanee, Illinois. She played the viola in the small high school orchestra, a talent she continues to pursue with the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra. Sara studied German in college, earning a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College and a master's degree from Brown University.

I recently visited with Sara at her Bloomington home. The following is a transcript from that interview. The questions I posed are in bold-faced type and are followed by her responses.

WHEN DID YOU KNOW YOU WANTED TO BE A WRITER?

I told stories when I was a little girl. There was a radio program we used to listen to in Chicago. A children's radio program. It was called the story lady. Children were invited to send in three things they thought it would be hard to write or make up a story about. And then the story lady would pick three things a child would send in, and make up a story and read it in on the radio. Well we just thought that was a wonderful program. We listened to it and loved it. And then my little sister, a couple years younger than I am, used to tell me three things: an elephant, a thimble, and I forget what the third one was, a butterfly or something. And she'd tell me, make up a story. So I'd be making up a story. We'd be lying in bed, suppose to be going to sleep, and here I am telling stories. I remember one night, my father came in our room, and he said "girls it's time to go to sleep now," and I said "I can't, I'm telling Martha a story, and I don't know how it comes out!" So does that make me a writer? I don't know.

I wrote a story. I wrote a book. When it was typed, it came to be thirty-two double spaced pages. So a little teeny book. It was a horse story. By the time I was eleven, that's what I was reading. So I wrote a horse story. I've always written what I enjoy reading. My father was so impressed, he typed it for me. And I illustrated it. I still have it, and I'm never going to show it to a human soul. But that's my first book. I didn't think of myself as a writer. I just told stories.



Sara Hoskinson Frommer



WAS THERE A POINT WHERE YOU DECIDED TO WRITE A BOOK?

By that time I was a writer. I was working at a job here in Bloomington. This is now in the 80's. I started that job in 78-79. I was hired as a writer for the Agency for Instructional Television, which put out stuff for schools to use, which also distributed tools that other agencies put out. Now they do computer stuff as well. Nobody's working there that worked there back then. It's been too long ago. I worked for their publications department which did teachers' guides, and also did a newsletter, and also did whatever publicity, promotion brochures that we put out. So I was doing all kinds of diverse non-fiction, straight forward, plain writing. And gradually I learned how to edit. I learned from a really nice man whom I really loved named Fritz Jauch. He died before he could retire. He'd been a classmate of Gene Shallot. Fritz was a journalist by training at the University of Illinois, and he was a wonderful editor. He was just a kind, gentle human being. He kind of took me under his wing after he hired me, and just taught me things. He taught me clean writing. And I learned a lot on that job. How not to waste words; because lots of times, I was writing with a very short word count. I'd have to write something with fifty words and have to say something really big, about whatever it was I was publicizing. It was a wonderful training.

While I was working at that job, I was reading mysteries. I'd been reading mysteries since our first child was on his way. And I was playing in the orchestra here in the Bloomington symphony, and I got really annoyed at an oboe player. I remember saying out loud to my husband, if I ever write a mystery, I'm going to kill off an oboe player. So I did. So that was the beginning of my first book. I wrote that while I was still working. And that oboe player's nothing like the person I was annoyed at. Nothing in common. I just killed off an oboe player with great satisfaction.

COULD YOU DISCUSS YOUR METHOD AND APPROACH TO WRITING?

It's not the same every time. I always try to write clean prose, that's a sort of given. That came from Fritz. In the first book, I knew I wanted to kill off an oboe player, so I thought, well okay, I have to have an orchestra. And since I played in one, I thought, all right. You know you just sort of cobble things together. I said all right, I need an orchestra, and I need an oboe player that you'll be glad to see get killed. My point of view character would be a viola player, for two reasons. One is I know what it looks like from the viola section, and two, if you sit in the right row of the viola section, you sit right next to the oboes. And so my viola player could be right on the spot when the oboe player kills over. Now that's the bare bones I started out with for

that story. How do you go from there? Well you just kind of think, "Okay, how come?" That's the one I knew: I wanted a method that would be particularly appropriate to killing off an oboe player, and hard to detect, but not impossible. I really wanted to poison my oboe player. So I talked about how I wanted to go about it, and I consulted a pathologist friend of mine, and he said, well you got to do your homework. And I thought, oh phooey, I thought that's what I was doing. He told me none of the main poisons would be strong enough, to be that effective in that situation. Not cyanide. So I just gave up on that idea. Then one day my husband came home waving a copy of *Scientific America*, and said, guess what? You can finish your mystery. I found out how you can kill your oboe player.

Well in it, there was a picture of the Fugu fish. It's a Japanese puffer fish. Nowadays everyone knows, but that was the first we knew about it, that it had a poison in it. Japanese chefs have to have a license to get the poison out of it before they serve it. It was certainly strong enough to kill my oboe player, so I used it. Since I was using the Fugu fish, I had to have a Japanese character who could figure it out. So is there a method? Not really. You just cobble things together, you pull in this, and I need this, and you use this to make things work. And while I want someone that's this kind of person, I need characters that play off each other. It's a story. I don't know. And then you sit down, you put your bottom on the chair, and you write the thing. Once I get going I promise myself I will write a page a day. And that's a book a year. That's enough.

HAVE YOU WRITTEN ANYTHING OUTSIDE THE REALM OF MYSTERIES?

Yes, I wrote a bunch of books. They were these itty bitty books, Kaleidoscope. They were books intended for adult literacy programs. Some were mysteries, but most were not. I wrote them in between mysteries. I did two series, sixteen books total. There's one. There are woods all over our property, and we have no hunting signs posted. But we found a hunter's tree stand, where he was setting out a salt lick to lure in the deer, and so he could sit up in the stand and shoot the deer as they came. It's dirty pool. So there's a story about catching the hunter. I used to get my hair cut downtown, across the street from the city bank. You could look out the window and look right down into the bank. One day I mentioned that you could spit out the window and hit the bank, and the man doing my hair said, "Yeah, my customers and I are always discussing how we'd rob it. I'd go for the armored car. I don't think they watch it too well." Originally I thought it'd be a good short story, and then I thought, I could tell this with easy words. That was the first one. That's how

I got the idea to do the two series. At that time, the publishers were still interested in publishing little books. Later on, they got different editors, and weren't as interested in the short books.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING?

I don't know how we could live without it. It's an ancient art, storytelling out loud is ancient. What little I know about anthropology is that it's just everywhere. Lots of pre-literate societies tell stories. And a lot of them keep their history that way. Me, I just make it up and lie. But it's for fun.

WHAT HAVE LIBRARIES MEANT TO YOU IN YOUR LIFE?

I started going to the library when I was seven and learning how to read. That was in Oak Park. I don't remember other than my parents took me. When we came back from Honolulu, we lived in Evansville for six months. I'd take the bus to the downtown Evansville public library, a couple times a week. And read and read. That year, they had a program going on called "Books bring Adventure." I don't know if any libraries do it now, I haven't seen it in years, but it was a program with an annual award for the child who could read the most books on an approved reading list, 'cause the librarians didn't want you reading just junk books. They had junk too. But just the good and medium good books were on the list. And I'd go to the library, and I'd check out ten books from the list, and I'd check out some for me. They knew me at that library. Technically they were supposed to quiz me, but after a few weeks, the librarians quit quizzing me, because it was obvious I was reading the books. The night before the contest ended, I had read ninety-nine books; I couldn't stand it. So I borrowed *The White Stag*, which I think is one of Margret Henry's books. And I took it home and read it, so I'd have an even hundred. And I won. I was interviewed on the radio. A reader! A child got a prize, and got interviewed for being a reader. Children get prizes for football. Not for reading.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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