

THE AUTHORS SHOW – Authors of Young Adults

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Not that long ago I was sitting by the window in my cubicle, high in the 400 Tower of the Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit, waiting for my professional writing career to begin.

It was a chilly March morning there on the Detroit River, and I had just signed the papers indicating my acceptance of an early retirement offer from General Motors, effective the first of April 2008. In truth, it wasn't the beginning of a career. It felt more like the end of one ... and I was far from certain I was doing the right thing.

Thirty years earlier I'd been hired to produce the GM annual report, and that had been my main responsibility for almost twenty years. It kept me extremely busy from September to March. Days were routinely 12-16 hours long.

The rest of the year I considered peaceful ... I only worked ten-hour days ... producing a host of other material, from news releases to technical journals. For years, I even produced a newspaper GM circulated to all domestic employees (at the time, that was a circulation of about 800,000).

Occasionally, I was allowed to write an article for the paper. When I did, I wove storytelling elements into it. My editor didn't care for that, but our VP liked them, which made all the difference. He didn't allow the articles to be changed. I even got a byline.

In nearly three decades with GM I had many assignments, all dealing with communications and marketing. I wrote a lot. I even got to create and lead an early group that dealt with designing the new communications tool that appeared in the mid-90s ... functional web sites.

But by then I was managing people, not creating a thing.

On my last GM assignment, I wasn't even doing that. As Marketing Operations Manager, I was a group of one ... responsible for measuring and reporting to our VP how well the various brand teams used their advertising budgets.

It was not something guaranteed to make friends among the Brand Teams. In fact, except for the time I had to tell 30+ people they didn't have a job any more, it was the most disheartening work I'd ever had to do. I had become a pariah no one wanted to talk to, because they were all afraid of losing budget, if my report should be the slightest bit negative.

That chilly March day in 2008, there was a lot on my mind, but none of it was actually about writing. I was tired of what I did. I wanted out.

My main concern after deciding to leave boiled down to these few words: What am I going to do with the rest of my life?

Given what's happened since, you might think leaving to write fiction would seem like a natural choice to make. After all, I've enjoyed it and played around with writing and submitting stories since I was seventeen.

But it wasn't. A natural, I mean.

I wanted to keep working in a creative capacity ... but by mid-2008 the U.S. economy faced its most dangerous crisis since the Great Depression, and there was no other work of any kind to be had ... anywhere ... for someone my age.

So, with nothing else to do, I wrote.

I'd written lots of articles and stories, but the decent markets for short stories were becoming smaller by the day. I decided if I was really going to write fiction, I had to write a novel.

I took some of the earlier stories I'd written and reworked them, expanding them to create a novel about kids in a fictional town during the tumultuous Vietnam era. I was trying to capture the essence of what it felt like to grow up back then in a small, working-class community.

That's how my first novel REICHHOLD STREET was born.

In June 2009, right about the time GM filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy (making my decision to leave seem clairvoyant), I took my new novel and began searching for an agent, since none of the main publishing houses would even talk to me without one.

It was a decidedly painful experience.

After more than two years of getting essentially nowhere, I finally decided to produce the book myself. I thought I was getting too old to wait for the publishing gods to smile on me.

It was the right thing to do. People liked it. It won a Readers' Favorite Gold Medal and was reviewed positively by Kirkus Reviews.

For years I had been asked to plainly state facts. You know ... the who, what, when, where and how kind of writing most journalists learn, along with the AP Stylebook. Boring stuff sometimes. Which is why I snuck storytelling elements into as many articles as I could.

Now I get to play all the time with ambiguity and nuance, dialogue and metaphor.

If you're a writer you know what I'm talking about ... making something out of nothing ... the things that make writing fiction interesting.

I've published seven books since 2012, including five award winners. (you can find all my books on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/R.L.-Herron/e/B007P3IADE>). I've won Gold and Silver Readers' Favorite awards. In 2016, my novel, BLOOD LAKE, was named a Bronze Medal Winner in the Readers' Favorite competition (Young Adult Horror), and was also a Foreword INDIE Book-of-the-Year Finalist.

Funny thing is ... the work part of it is a lot like the other writing I used to do ... only harder. I still have to do a lot of research, but it goes far beyond who, what, when, where and how.

I have to investigate local and world history, politics and religion, semantics, period jargon and dress styles, and specific-location weather. Not to mention period music, literature, radio and television shows, period magazines, local attractions and sometimes even plant species, all to help create an accurate sense of place. But I don't feel like I'm wasting anyone's time ... including my own.

That's why it's special. The awards are nice but, more importantly, I like what I do. I'm not making tons of money ... but I'm enjoying myself ... and I've decided, on top of being able to tell a good story, that's what it was always about anyway.