

article from *Mystery Readers Journal*, Winter 2005

Sally Wright Tries To Learn What Ben Reese Would Know About Art

It might've been a lack of imagination (or ignorance, it could've been that), but I used to just glance at botanical prints and wildlife illustrations with bored, blind eyes.

Then I stumbled on an article on Mark Catesby who spent eleven years between 1712 and 1726 tromping, hacking, slashing his way across the swamps, jungles and woodlands of what's now South Carolina, Georgia, Florida and the Bahamas, painting and collecting plants and animals to take home to collectors in England.

Doug Stewart wrote in *Smithsonian* that, "Catesby hiked hundreds of miles, mostly alone, fighting off illness and infection, and eluding warring Indians, all the while producing delicate and brilliantly colored watercolors of wildlife unknown to Europeans." (To put Catesby's work in perspective, Audubon, a hundred years later, traveled with an "entourage that included a full-time background painter.")

Catesby used many of his watercolors in what became his masterpiece -- the first illustrated book on the flora and fauna of North America -- *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*.

As a kid, I lived through encounters with large alligators and small striped coral snakes, and I, for one, was impressed with more than his science and his artistry. Catesby hung himself by a proverbial thread in really dangerous malarial wilderness for more years than I can imagine.

And then he helped *me*, three hundred years later. For he gave Ben Reese, my archivist-exWWII Scout sleuth (who appraises and conserves artifacts for a university in the early 1960s) a new object of obsession in the fourth Ben Reese book, *Out Of The Ruins* (Ballantine 2004).

But Catesby's difficulties didn't end in the wilds. He preserved his animals in rum, which sailors drank on his voyage home to London, turning profits into offal, when he had to face the production costs of his huge, hand-colored, two volume tome.

Catesby had spent his inheritance on his expeditions, so he was forced to learn to etch the plates himself, then work as a nursery gardener, "peddling his books on the side." When he died at sixty-seven (having married for the first time two years before), he left his wife and two toddler sons in all but absolute penury.

And this was not an unimportant book. In 1747, Cromwell Mortimer, the prestigious Royal Society's secretary, called it, "The most magnificent work I know since the Art of printing has been discovered." It became a primary source used by Linnaeus in classifying species; a work deeply admired by

Thomas Jefferson; a substantial help to Lewis and Clark in approaching their own collecting.

Fortunately, George III bought the original 263 watercolors and preserved them in the library at Windsor Castle (where Ben got to see them in 1961).

That's one of the pleasures of writing the Ben Reese books (aside from the appeal of making-up characters and figuring out how they'd deal with each other) -- learning stuff that attacks my prejudices and teaches me something I'm glad to know once I open my eyes. I'm forced to investigate all sorts of things I wouldn't study otherwise. And I get to interview amazing people I couldn't meet any other way.

It makes me learn what real soldiers lived through during WWII in Europe, and what it was like for their families waiting and worrying at home. I get to pick the extraordinary brain of the real-life archivist and former scout on whom I've based Ben, and also visit the places each book is set (Kentucky, upstate New York, and much of Tuscany in the fifth Ben Reese book, *Watches Of The Night*, which I finished early this winter.) I get to ponder the strange experiences that an archivist like Ben would stumble upon, or have thrust upon him by the work itself.

Because Catesby led me to others like him, whom Ben Reese would've studied. To Constantine Rafinesque, the "Odd Fish," as he called himself when he first met John James Audubon, who "felt confounded and blushed" because he hadn't recognized "that renowned naturalist," who was far better thought of than he. By the time the Frenchman was fifty-two, according to Bill Gilbert (writing too in *Smithsonian*), Rafinesque had been "a botanist, geologist, historian, poet ... philologist, economist, merchant ... professor, surveyor, architect," as well as an author and editor. He'd "founded a bank, designed military and agricultural devices, been a commercial brandy maker," become an "authoritative investigator of Kentucky's mammoth cave, phrenology, Hebrew grammar, and, before Charles Darwin, evolution."

Ben has eclectic enthusiasms too. So he's interested in "Chinese" Wilson, the plant hunter who traveled across Asia from 1899 to 1911 -- who survived malaria, an outbreak of bubonic plague, the Boxer rebellion, and a mountainside avalanche that crushed his leg (catapulting the chair he'd been sitting in to the bottom of a mountain gorge) -- in order to bring Asian plants (butterfly bush, kousa dogwood, regal lilies, to name three among many) from mountain crevices and death defying precipices to modern American and English gardeners who've never even heard his name.

Ben finds books by all three naturalists on Cumberland Island, while he's tracking a sick and self-deluded killer on the southeast coast in *Out Of The Ruins* (fighting too the destruction of the island by Right of Eminent Domain). And yet, that's not the only art Ben Reese has to study.

Because I'd been reading about philanthropists -- Mellon, Carnegie, James J. Hill, and others -- partly because of Pablo Casals, the virtuoso cellist. He'd been impressed by the philanthropy he'd found across America as he traveled the country, performing and conducting in cities large and small.

Everywhere he went, he saw churches, libraries, hospitals, museums, concert halls and parkland donated to the public. He compared that to his native Europe, and saw a distinct difference.

Maybe it's the melting pot phenomenon. The fact that most of our families came here for some form of freedom -- religious freedom, political freedom, a chance to own property of their own, to take control of their own lives in ways they couldn't at home, where class and long owned limited land and what their ancestors had been before them had determined more than they'd liked.

Which might mean, that maybe, when a poor kid got good at something here, and worked hard at it, and made more than enough money, the urge was there to bring comfort and culture to others who hungered after both.

Anyway, it was that interest of mine in private benevolence (that comes too from being the daughter of an orphanage-raised orphan who made it through college during the Depression because a high school teacher took time to encourage him) that made me decide in *Out Of The Ruins* to re-frame a story that had struck me when I'd heard it told. It might've been true, or just an illustration -- but it led to an unexpected philanthropist who tells Ben to look through his paintings and pick five or six for his school.

I've been keeping files for fifteen years (People, Places, Things) that I use for ideas when I start a new Ben Reese book. And I found what I needed on painters there.

I decided first on Abbott Thayer, a once famous wildlife painter (who, after his wife and two children died was known for painting angels), who later became the father of modern military camouflage. He'd long painted half-invisible animals hidden by camouflage in their natural habitats, and when World War I broke-out, he was able to teach the army how to hide men and machines. His principles are still used today in countries around the world.

I read about Vermeer then, and Twatchman; about Thomas Moran, the Bucks County Impressionists, Raeburn's recently discovered first two works, the Peale family, and more (including Gendron Jensen, a living American artist, who draws, incredibly beautifully, odd compositions of bones). Then I picked the paintings Ben would get to choose from.

It's a great gift to get to write fiction -- to give Ben Reese pleasures and pain and watch to see how he does. And that's the heart of the books. Not the art, and the illustrators, and the things to be learned. It's greed. It's violence. It's goodness. It's how the human heart hurts and heals and got to be the way it is, in general, in the greater scheme, as well as in one small handful of people caught in each others' lives. The art and the illustrators, the rare books and the coins -- those are part of the edging carved into the frame.

But I did love sitting safe and warm reading about Catesby and Rafinesque, and pondering the obsessions that made the sacrifice worthwhile to them.

And then, one day, *Out of the Ruins* was published. And I was traveling up the southeast coast giving a rash of writing talks to benefit local charities, when I stepped into a shop in Charleston -- and got to hold history in my hands.

It was south of Broad Street in a tiny, white, antebellum building filled with old maps and botanical prints, where it soon became abundantly obvious that the woman who ran it knew more than I could *ever* learn about the flora and fauna painters who worked when there was a wilderness.

I told her about the book I'd just finished. And she smiled slyly and got up from behind her desk. "We have pieces you really should see."

She led me to a long wooden cabinet, and handed me, slowly, carefully, five pages, one at a time, that had once been bound in Catesby's great book -- his original book, hand colored by him -- one plant, one bug, two birds and a snake living in their natural settings. "He was the first illustrator to do that, you know, place insects and animals in their own surroundings, showing what they ate, and how they actually lived."

She pulled out originals by Audobon too -- the real ones, the rare ones, the ones so beautiful you can't believe it -- as well as one long strange looking bug painted by Rafinesque.

I was speechless. (Which thousands might find hard to believe). But I recognized it. I'd felt it at Culloden -- a mist covered battlefield in Scotland where too many of my husband's family died in the 1700s. I felt it on the stairs of the house in London where Samuel Johnson had slaved at his dictionary, when I looked at my hand sliding up the handrail Johnson had touched everyday for years.

In Charleston, I held what Catesby had crafted with sweat and sinew, and a life's work by Audubon, and handmade art by Rafinesque too -- who'd all risked *everything* to do what they'd cared about most.

I like people like that. Men like Ben Reese. Who work, and suffer, and care about more than making money or watching time fly on TV. Who think about what's important in life, and what they ought to do with what they've got, and choose to fill their days with that, even when the world around them thinks it's highly peculiar.

I know I'm a dork. I can't help it. I stood there in that shop, staring at the woman who was beaming at me. "Is it okay if I go get my husband and we spend the afternoon, even if we can't buy anything?"

"Certainly, stay as long as you'd like. Do you know about early maps?"

"No."

"Well, wait till we talk about those!"

We did. But I don't remember much.

I got caught up in Tuscany right after that. In *Watches Of The Night*. In Ben Reese's hatred of what a Tech Team colonel did in World War II. In Ben catching that same kind of killer in 1962.

article from Mystery Readers Journal, Winter 2006

Dreams Of Academe by Sally Wright

I never really intended to write academic mysteries. I'd gone to five universities and put my husband through graduate school, and I'd had enough of academia, at least then, in 1973 when the idea for Ben Reese struck.

It came out of a conversation with a self-effacing university archivist, who conserved and evaluated paintings, coins, rare books and documents (about which I knew nothing).

We were standing on a dock on the edge of a large wild lake in Northern Ontario, listening to the reedy eerie lonesome call of a loon echo across in the twilight, while the scent of the fir forests wrapped around us mixed with every fresh water smell I'd loved since I was a child. I was smiling at all of it, watching the wind where it ruffled the water, when I surprised myself as much as I did the archivist by asking what he'd done in World War II.

"Materials evaluation," came out planned and practiced, and meant absolutely nothing to me, just as he'd intended.

I pressed him again (as I'm wont to do), and other evasions followed -- before he finally gave-in and told me he'd been a behind-the-lines-scout in Europe working for Army Intelligence.

He didn't tell me that night that he'd found the bodies at Malmedy, the hundreds of American POWs machine-gunned by the SS; that he'd scouted the whole Battle of the Bulge; that his bread-and-butter night assignment (with another scout, or another three) was to find German Command posts, kill the guards silently, photograph their documents and take the film to Army Intelligence.

He also didn't mention that when he was wounded he wouldn't have made it if they hadn't strapped his stretcher under a Piper Cub that flew him across Germany below the ack-ack fire to a train that took him to Paris. A doctor there got him home to a hospital in the States within twenty-four hours, where he worked on him for a year-and-a-half, inventing surgeries and nerve stimulation that made him reasonably whole.

I knew this man as a kind, gentle, quiet sort of fiftyish academic, not tall, or muscle-y, but healthy looking (except for a reconstructed finger and scars that ran up that arm), who knew about things like prehistoric pots and how to identify a Gutenberg. There was no intellectual snobbery going-on. He has a deep-seated respect for the craftsmen who make what we take for granted. And he was born curious about everything (mechanical objects, engineering feats, wildlife and wilderness, fine art and herbals, the history behind all of it).

For me, standing on that dock, hearing the words “behind-the-lines-scout,” was one of those moments you never get over. The kind that touch some primeval place that’s the real self inside you, the voice in your head you’ve heard all your life telling you what you really love, regardless of what anyone thinks, or what’s going to make you money. (I suspect that means it was God talking too, saying, “Pay attention for once, Sally, this message is for you.”)

It wasn’t that World War II meant a lot to me. I knew nothing about it (except that Churchill had been right; England should’ve rearmed years earlier, and Baldwin’s and Chamberlain’s self-willed self-delusion cost too many lives). But I told the archivist, “If I ever decide to write a mystery novel, that’s the character I want to write about -- a fictional version of someone like you. A man of intellect, who’s a man of action. Who came back, carrying scars, and built a serious life.”

I’d like to say I started writing right away. Typically, I ignored the message. I wanted to be Jane Austen (if I couldn’t be Tolstoy), and I was terribly afraid to start and fail, because words were that important to me. And I didn’t know where to begin.

Five years later (when the kids were toddlers), I was finally ready to sit down and try, and I wrote two “serious” novels that still haven’t been published. I learned things in the process, and was fortunate enough to be given good advice by Robert Giroux (of Farrar, Straus and Giroux), who rejected my first novel (a first person monologue, written in blank verse, cleverly eliminating any hope of attracting an actual audience). He said complimentary things first, then told me what would’ve been obvious to all but the most esoteric: “You have to say what it is you want to say in a way that appeals to a large market.”

I’m paraphrasing, but that’s close. And as I wrote interview-biographies for magazines (while raising kids, and numerous animals), Ben Reese moved-in and took-over.

I saw how to do it, finally -- how to write about an archivist in academia, in a specialized confined community, and talk about human nature with universal implications. I could still discuss the big things (death, suffering, loss, love, goodness-and-evil, the origin and meaning behind life) -- Tolstoy’s issues, Jane Austen’s underpinnings, C.S Lewis’ *raison d’être* -- I could pick those apart in a mystery novel and still try to entertain the millions who like mysteries a lot.

I started with a question: “What kind of pressures exist in academia that would actually lead to murder in the real world?” I’d seen plenty of stress and applied pressure in my universities. And then my husband transplanted me to a world-renowned scientific community where would-be Nobel Prize winners twitched and stuttered on the edge of their chairs, dying to dissect every speaker and look brilliant themselves. I remember gazing out at the Atlantic, through a wall of windows beyond them, imagining other circling sharks closing in on prey.

And that's only one danger in writing about academe. Boredom brings out the worst in me, and I didn't want to be trussed-and-tied on a single campus with a handful of academics. I wanted to set plots in interesting places (England in *Publish And Perish*, Scotland in *Pride And Predator* **and** *Pursuit And Persuasion*, Cumberland Island in *Out Of The Ruins*, Italy in the yet-to-be-published *Watches Of The Night*). Because I did know, right at the beginning, that I wanted to do a series. I wanted to watch Ben change over time, and see how he'd deal with his wife's death as the years went on.

It did help that academics get to travel in the summer. And a major appeal of Ben being an archivist was that we wouldn't get stuck at Alderton University. Archivists study all sorts of strange things -- their own interests, their college's collections, gifts given by donors, the work of colleagues elsewhere. Ben could travel to track coins and manuscripts, or identify the painter of a portrait, meeting all sorts of peculiar people -- then come home to Ohio, to familiar characters and conflicts at Alderton.

Having been a scout in WWII set age limitations, though. I couldn't see Ben being eighty years old solving murders in 2005. I wanted him to be in his thirties, which meant setting the books in the early sixties.

America was different then. Better and worse both, from my perspective. It looked at life with different eyes -- through unlocked doors, at schools without cocaine (when a Columbine couldn't be imagined); at Lucy and Desi (in separate beds) making us laugh without vitriolic potty humor; at families, with both mothers *and* fathers, who talked civilly at dinner; and -- to our collective shame -- at country clubs that black-balled Jews, while Negroes (as they were called politely) drank at separate fountains.

Describing the decisions people thought they ought to make back then offers an interesting vantage point for looking at life here now, in general American society, and in academe.

And while I thought about academic institutions -- the pleasures, the arrogance, the paranoia with job security, the various forms of inbred boredom, the temptations that tend to crop up most often -- I kept dreaming that I was in college. I'd be unregistered, without an apartment, the first day of graduate school; I'd have a final exam, but not have gone to a single class, or read the first word; I'd be lost, and running to find the exam room, and discover I was nude.

It was a relief to wake-up and ask my real-life archivist what he thought about academe, and what it takes to be an archivist: the art, the science, the crafts involved, the museum security you have to learn, on top of all the one-ups-man-ship you have to come to grips with.

He told me that once he'd made it home from the war, he wanted to do something positive. "I'd done enough killing. I'd seen enough horror." So he wrote a newsletter for G.I.s in his hospital. And he and his English-professor-wife took many on jaunts to the country (much as they tried to help college kids later to get-on well with their lives).

He's helped me with my books -- the fisticuffs, the murderous confrontations, the frustrations he found in academe, even though he's attached to his college and loved being an archivist. He's genetically a Scout and a Ranger; he couldn't roll-over for every boss or college president who came down the pike. He had to decide if what they asked was right, and take-them-on if it wasn't -- thereby complicating life in academe.

Which *I* think can be a dispiriting world, even though I love the breadth and depth of what gets studied. I still travel to college lectures, to ask about books and ideas. And many of my favorite people have always been academics. Husband and wife speech professors were really important to me growing-up, when visiting them meant lively wit, kind understanding, interesting talk and spectacular food. Ben's house is basically theirs. And my husband and I were at their summer cabin when I had that talk with the archivist. Both our kids consider professors at Hillsdale College amongst their best friends. And yet there are conditions in academia that give me pause today.

I see forces at work that encourage professors to view themselves as an elite cadre of independent contractors competing against each other for prestige and promotion. Advancement comes from academic reputation based on writing and research. Yours. Nobody else's (except maybe a graduate student's whose research you took and published). Internal departmental cooperation isn't fostered by such circumstances, and I use characters like Richard West and Craig French, in addition to two college presidents, to examine the consequent pushes-and-pulls that can shape life in academe.

There's political correctness to deal with too now, and woe betide the candidate for a teaching position who doesn't toe the party line. Freedom of speech is all very well as long as you don't question a tenet of evolution, pray in public, defend George Washington, mock strident feminism, suggest human infants are as least as valuable as snail darters, or that we ought to build nuclear plants (like those supplying power across Europe), while we work on renewable fuels.

That's an illustration of how to step on all the wrong toes in one single sentence.

All writers have agendas. Look at businessmen in TV dramas; they're the kidnapers, rapists and murderers *many* more times than in real life. Because writers (some of whose perspectives were picked-up in college) have views they want to express.

Writing about academia in the early sixties let's me compare where we were then with where we are now and ask questions that need to be asked.

As Dorothy L. Sayers wrote years ago, "Writers and academics pick-over other people's bones." We analyze. We critique and criticize. We take-up the same weapons.

That is, after all, what Jane Austen did -- ask pointed questions and make scathing observations about human nature in a confined community. And here we all are, still learning from her, two hundred years later.

Which leads to an academic question many authors might ask: *If I could write like Jane Austen would publishers pay for PR?*

Maybe we're better off not knowing the answer.

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