

SLWG Spotlight...*We're pleased to present...*

Linda O'Connell



**Multi-genre Author
SLWG Member since 2005**

LINDA O'CONNELL developed a love of writing when she was a child. Many teachers inspired her and encouraged her God-given talents and creativity. She touches the future each day as she looks into her preschool student's eyes. She also reaches into the past; she teaches a senior citizen's memoir writing class.

Linda, a multi-genre writer has been published in a variety of publications. She writes inspirational and educational articles, prose and poetry. Her personal essays have been published in the Chicken Soup book series: *Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul*, *The New Mom's Soul*, *The Beach Lover's Soul*. "A Working Mom's Retirement Plan" will be available this fall in Chicken Soup for *The Working Mom's Soul*. Her work has been featured in print, on line, in literary journals and educational guides such as *Joyful Woman*, *Whispers from Heaven*, *Releasing Times*, *Flashquake*, *Andwerve*, *The Mochila Review*, *Hot-Psychology.com*, *Partnership for Learning*, *Fanning Follies*, *The Wonder Years*, *Start*, *The Healing Project Breast Cancer Anthology*, *Boomer Women Speak* and *Beneath the Harvest Moon*. She has also had numerous essays published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Suburban Journals*. Linda says her greatest achievement is keeping journals for her eight grandchildren who tickle her fancy and provide many laugh lines, (one of their quips paid off; it was published in *Reader's Digest!*).

Here's an interview with Linda O'Connell...

Where are you originally from?

I was born in Chicago, Illinois. My parents returned to St. Louis one week after my birth, and I have lived here ever since.

I also lived in Delta Junction, Alaska, a tiny frontier town at the end of the Alaska Highway, where the free-roaming dogs, buffalo and moose outnumbered the transient military residents in 1969-'70.

When temperatures plunged to minus fifty degrees, my exhaled breath would crystallize and freeze in midair. The stars appeared so close it seemed like I could reach right up and pluck one, and the sweeping pastels of the aurora borealis looked like an artist's pallet.

How has your environment and upbringing colored your writing?

My free-spirited parents didn't put down roots for any length of time; we moved and traveled a lot. I was always the new kid in school or on the block, which made me very resilient. I am an optimist by nature. I have written a great deal about my childhood memories and life experiences. My writing sometimes hits a nerve, but I think it's important to write from the heart.

I have always cheered for the underdog and reached out to those in need. I have been a teacher, a mentor, a writing partner, and an educational facilitator. I believe that in the grand scheme of things, we are all interconnected and there are no coincidences in life.

When/why did you begin to write?

Does writing in yellow chalk on the side of my dad's faded green car count? I won a big fat piece of teacher chalk playing bingo and decided to be the 'teacher'. I didn't just teach a lesson; I learned a lesson. When you hear your dad come whistling your way, run! No matter how hard you wipe, coat sleeves aren't erasers.

Words have always fascinated me. When I was five, I enjoyed listening to my grandmother, mother and her four sisters talk at once. One of them prefaced her remarks with, "Frankly...". I thought for certain that my uncle Franky was always in trouble. When I discovered the definition, I nearly wore the word out.

I learned to write compositions in first grade and I have been writing ever since - humorous personalized birthday poems for family and friends, ten page cathartic letters, love notes on my children's bananas when I sent them off to school, complaint letters to retailers (with good results), opinion pieces to publishers and editors, positive comments on report cards and heartfelt messages to many people who have influenced my life. By the way, thank you St. Louis Writer's Guild members for your encouragement and support. My knees were knocking when I read aloud at the very first meeting I attended. Everyone made me feel welcome and I have gained so much from the workshops.

When did you first consider yourself a writer?

I saw my words in print in 1987. My Sweetheart Dance, a short personal essay, won runner-up in the Suburban Journals. Next, I entered a creative writing contest sponsored by a local radio station. I won a complete wedding package. The ceremony was broadcast on air on Valentine's Day. Originally, our wedding was planned for April. Not many women can brag that their husbands married them twice within two months.

After my best friend died at age fifty-two, I decided life was too short to wait until I had enough time to write. Ten years ago, I enrolled in a writing class, joined an informal writer's group and began to send my freelance work out. My first submission, a story about my friend, was accepted and printed in *Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul*.

What inspired you to pen your manuscript?

I met a fascinating settler in Alaska; Emily Keaster is now 80 years old. I wrote her biography, Queen of the Last Frontier, a chronicle of her trip up the unpaved Alaska highway in a convoy and her adventures with the elements, wild animals and people. Her life as a homesteader, wife and mother has been a struggle for contentment and survival, of courage, inspiration and hope.

How long did it take you to write it?

It took almost two years.

How much research?

I asked Emily to send me information about one significant event in her life for a magazine article I intended to write. Each time I thought the article complete, she remembered something else, and before I knew it another letter arrived. Soon the article developed into a book, as yet unpublished. Emily is very proud of her copy.

Which genre are you most comfortable with?

I prefer prose, non-fiction, personal essay and poetry.

Would you consider other genres?

I enjoy a challenge; fiction writing has been my greatest challenge. I have a completed unpublished novel, Caged No More.

What is your current project?

I write a bi-monthly column for a sports newspaper on the topic of early childhood development. Most days I awake before dawn to write, research or search the writer's markets. I send a dozen or more submissions a month to a variety of publications.

What books interest you?

My favorite books are Frank McCourt's autobiographies, *Angela's Ashes* and *'T Is*.

My favorite author is Toni Morrison; I admire her writing style. I also enjoy reading nostalgic novels by Fannie Flagg.

What are you reading now?

I'm reading For One More Day, and Chicken Soup for the New Mom's Soul. My story is on page 24.

What new author interests you?

I've just discovered Mitch Albom and I intend to read his other works.

Name one entity that supported your writing goals other than family/friends.

When I first started freelancing, an editor from *Parents Magazine* telephoned to say he liked my articles so much that he pitched them to the senior editor—who rejected them. His words of encouragement bolstered me: "You have such a unique writing style. Don't stop writing."

How do family and friends feel about your writing?

My husband, Bill is very supportive, even though some days he thinks he's been replaced by a computer. My family and friends encourage me, but I'm sure they secretly dread my phone calls. I usually screech, "Guess what? I got published in..." or "Would you like to hear my latest story?" I disregard their heavy sighs and read on.

Are you in this for the long/short term?

Writing is a creative outlet for my dual Gemini personalities. I am a multi-tasker and I bore easily. I must write, just as I must eat. I'm in it for the long haul. One day I will retire and sit by the sea and write the great American novel. Dare to dream!

What advice would you give to others?

Be patient; waiting for a response is the hardest part. Don't let rejections get you down; resubmit your work elsewhere. Don't make excuses. Instead, make yourself write. Most of all, believe in yourself.

If you had it to do over again would you change anything?

I wish I had started earlier to write professionally, and I should have taken more writing classes. I am pretty much self-taught and very motivated.

Tell us your latest news.

I'm almost embarrassed to admit it. I just received word that my essay and a photo of my famed wedding will be in print at True Love.

A poem, Grandpa's Fiddle will be published in the spring issue of The Mochila Review, and an essay titled, One Nation Divided will be on line at Hot-Psychology.com in April.

Check out www.boomerwomenspeak.com to read my winning entry, I Will Survive Menopause---Secrets.

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