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## RESIDENT FEATURE

# Mary Daheim: Bringing Words to Life

By Cathie Wigert | Photos by Jamison Johnson

When asked to recall when she first started writing creatively she confesses it is hard to remember a time when she *wasn't* writing.

"If there was a typewriter nearby, I was writing," she says.

Mary Daheim was born and raised in Seattle. Her love of writing led her to pursue a degree in Communications from the University of Washington.

"I had been the editor of the UW Daily," she recalls. In addition to the being the first woman editor of The Daily — other than the female editor during WWII — she was well-known on campus for never shying away from challenging situations or controversies.

Mary remembers with humor, "When President Charles Odegaard handed me my diploma, he said he was glad to see me go. I told him I was glad to be going."

The years following graduation brought her first to Anacortes where she worked with the Anacortes American-Bulletin, which was a five-day-a-week daily publication.

"Small town life wasn't for me," she says. As the sole reporter on the paper, she quickly became embroiled in small-town tensions that were occurring at the time. She remembers when the community was upset about a particular situation and bricks were thrown through the windows of the office.

"Before the year was out I accepted a job in PR at Pacific Northwest Bell in Seattle." Happy to be back in Seattle, Mary was also the first woman ever hired directly into management with the new, young company.

"Everyone was young, creative and excited to be there," she remembers.

Though Mary was a skilled editor and a cherished member of the Pacific Northwest Bell PR team, her first love was always creative writing. She fondly remembers her first major attempt at tackling a large project. She wrote her first novel in her teens.

"My mother was a paralegal. I would use her typewriter and her steno pad." Though she admits that first novel wasn't necessarily

top quality writing, the elements were all there and she'd caught the writing bug.

As she matured as a writer she eventually decided to try her hand at another novel. Understandably, due to her background in journalism, Mary had a deep love of research. This interest led her to write historical fiction.

"I loved the research aspect of it," she said. One thing that was to her advantage was her connection to information and archives others might not.

"Since Dave worked with the school system I was able to access the archives at University of Washington and in other libraries, they would even send items up to me."

Mary met her husband, David Daheim, at the home of a mutual friend. They were married in December of 1965. A teacher, David first worked at Peninsula Community College in Port Angeles before moving to Shoreline Community College in 1969. Together they raised three daughters, Barbara, Katherine and Magdalen.

When Mary shifted to working as a contract freelance writer for Pacific Northwest Bell, it allowed her the flexibility of raising her daughters while also pursuing her own creative projects as well.

She worked on her historical fiction novel for a while before deciding it was ready for possible publication. She began the search for an agent who aligned with her genre and interests. When she stumbled across Donald MacCampbell she realized she didn't want to send her query by snail mail and then wait six months to possibly receive a rejection.

"So I picked up the phone," Mary said. She looked up the number of the agent, called his assistant, and introduced herself.

"She was shocked," she remembers. "No one had done that before, called her up and asked if they could send their writing."

Mary's bold move and risk paid off, the assistant told Mary to send her writing on over.

The agent liked what he saw. There was only one problem: historical fiction wasn't selling at the time. "This was in the 80s," she says, "and at the time it was historical *romance* that was selling."

The agent recommended she look into some popular historical romances and revise her work to mirror that. Though it wasn't initially what she envisioned for her work, Mary realized the importance of understanding the market. After making a few revisions to her book, the agent gave it the green light.

Within several weeks she had a contract for her first book. "It was amazing," she recalls.


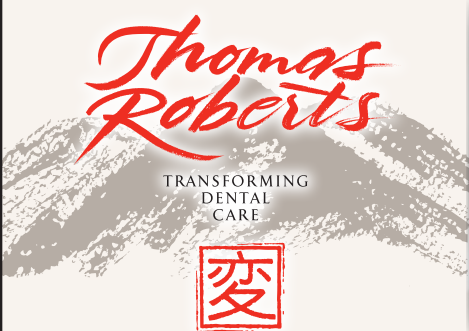
As the years went by, Mary could feel herself feeling pulled towards the genre of mysteries. She'd always loved reading mysteries.

"No one does it better than Agatha Christie," she says, when asked about her favorite mystery author.

"I'm rereading a Christie novel now, but I only reread them when I can't remember who did it," she says with a laugh.

After years of writing historical romance, Mary wanted to try her hand at the beloved genre. She knew of a friend who was headed to a writing conference and asked if she could bring along the first 87 pages of a mystery she'd begun.

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Luckily, not only did her friend think the first 87 pages had promise, but an editor at Avon Books also saw the potential.

Before Mary knew it, she was immersed in the world of her Bed-and-Breakfast mystery series.

One day, Joe Blades at Random House asked if she wanted to write another mystery series.

“At first I had no idea what it would be about,” she said. The idea of diving into an entirely new series was daunting. But then something came to her, memories of stories passed down from her parents.

“I decided to write about Alpine.”

A former logging town nestled near Skykomish in the Cascade Mountains, Mary’s parents lived in Alpine for several years during its heyday in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The town was small. There were no roads that led there and with the community being so tight-knit, it felt more like a large family.

Though Mary’s father had worked on Alaska fishing boats for years, his interest in being gone for months at a time waned when he married Mary’s mother in 1926. Shifting paths, they decided to move to Alpine, where Mary’s mother lived as a teenager. He was



able to get a job working the mill boiler in the small logging town.

“They always talked about Alpine and it sounded like an incredible place,” she recalls.

Though her parents eventually moved back to Seattle, where Mary was born and grew up, she always heard stories about Alpine.

“The Alpine mystery series is a way of bringing it back to life,” she says.

Writing itself is a way of immersing yourself in the world in a new way. It brings things to life. For those individuals who may have always dreamed of writing a novel of their own, Mary has some advice.

“Stop talking about it and start writing,” she says with a smile. She recalls the famous writing adage: “Writing is the art of applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair.”

As Mary has always known and as her incredible life has shown, if you want to be a writer and bring words to life, you simply need to start writing. It is as easy — and as hard — as that.

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