



Reader's Luncheon Speech

written/given by

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You know, here's where I wish that I was really elegant and eloquent. That as I stood up here you guys were getting someone like Dixie Carter or Audrey Hepburn who could dazzle you with her beauty and wit.

Instead you're stuck with just plain ole me. But that's okay, what I lack in elegance and sophistication, I usually make up for in comic relief as I trip and fall off the stage. Spill something. Or better yet, learn too late that all my pages are out of order.

You know, my grandfather was a faith healing evangelist from rural Alabama and he used to tell a story about the first time he got up to deliver a sermon. He'd spent weeks working on it, page after page, rehearsing and practicing until he could deliver it without a single flaw.

And then the long-awaited day arrived. He was nervous and scared and before the service began, he carefully tucked that precious speech into one of the pigeon holes in the pulpit and then went outside to meet the congregation. When it was time for him to finally speak, he made the awful discovery that the pages were gone and that he couldn't recall a single word of what he'd written and practiced. He always

said that he knew then it was God's way of telling him that he should never prepare anything beforehand. That he should trust in God to speak to him whenever he stood to preach.

I can remember well going to service and sitting there, watching Grandpa while he stood up there flipping through his bible, saying, "well, the Lord hasn't moved me yet to speak. Let's sing another hymn."

Luckily, I was born with what my mother always called my father's motor-mouth. Which means the good Lord is always moving me to speak, many times even when I shouldn't. So you're all in luck in that I'm not going to ask any of you to sing today.

But if I do happen to fall off the stage during this and get hurt, please note that it is not part of the speech. So, please, laugh once and then go get help.

You know, I have to say that reader's luncheons are probably my most favorite kind of event. I love to sit and talk to other people who share the same passion I do.

Books have always been such a vital part of my life. There was nothing I loved more as a small child than to go to the library and find my latest treasure waiting for me on those magic shelves. Books were my haven. I wish I could say that I had a happy childhood, but that's not true. It did have moments of great happiness, but it had many more moments of profound sadness.

My father abandoned us when I was eight and I grew up in a very small house that was crammed full of people. We didn't have much money and I usually ended up wearing the hand-me-downs of my brothers. Kids at school weren't always kind about it and I remember one girl in particular who would follow me around making fun of my clothes, my accent and my sister who had cerebral palsy.

Unfortunately, she was a lot bigger than me and every time I tried to fight back, she kicked my butt. But in the world of my stories, I was David to her Goliath and I slew that vicious cur daily in my mind.

One of my favorite lines comes from the movie A Knight's Tale where Chaucer is confronting the loan sharks who've been abusing him. They ask him what he could ever do to harm them and he replies, "I will eviscerate you in fiction. I was naked for a day. You will be naked for eternity."

Books were my champions growing up. In them, I found the laughter, solace and hope that I needed to get through the bad times of my life.

As a girl and a young woman I was very lucky, my best friends were Johanna Lindsey, Kathleen

Woodiwiss, Bertice Small, Linda Howard and countless others who meant the entire world to me. But they weren't all big named writers. Many, many more of them never became huge. Most of you have probably never even heard of them.

Kristen Kyle, Coral Smith Saxe, oh my God, how I LOVE Sapphire and Steel, Diane Carey's Will Scarlet, Kathleen Morgan and many, many more. I used to wait with breathless anticipation for their next releases. I'd spend hours scouring the shelves to find something by them that I might have missed.

They were my sanity in a world that was mostly insane. People can say what they want to about romance, but I know the truth. Romance novels saved my life.

I had the kind of childhood where every statistic I ever saw did nothing but foretell my doom. According to the experts, I was destined to drop out of high school because I was pregnant and I would end up on drugs and married to an abusive spouse.

They never said that even though I had to work three jobs to do it, that I could make it through college. That while I was in college, I would meet the nicest man on the planet and be married to him... well it'll be twenty two years this summer. That I would have three beautiful sons who know how much I love them and who have the kind of childhood I only read about in books.

Those experts gave me no hope. They had me convinced that my life would be wasted. It would it be dark and dismal, and nothing would ever get better.

And then I read Kathleen Woodiwiss's Flame and the Flower. Heather was a girl like me. Her home life was bleak and unhappy and yet through her strength and her convictions, she took control of her life and found someone who could treasure her for her strength.

My life was set with one book that led me to another and another. There was no expert to tell these heroines that they couldn't achieve whatever dream they had. If they believed it enough, if they fought enough, they could turn around even the worst event.

I can never fully express to other writers what they did for me. What they mean to me.

Laugh if you will at those little Harlequins, but those books weren't little to me. They were the tiny lights that guided me through dark nights toward safety. They along with all the longer romances were my lighthouse during many, many storms.

Never, ever let anyone belittle what you write or what you read. Because there are so many others out there like me who you will never hear from. Men and women whose lives were made better because of something you wrote.

This is what made me want to be a writer... well, that and my second grade bully who made fun of my ugly shoes. Since I couldn't beat her up for real, I beat her up in my stories.

But more than that I wanted so much to give to other readers what those wonderful writers had been given to me. Hope. Laughter. Friendship.

Thank you, Linda Howard. Thank you, Linda Winstead Jones, Beverly Barton, Diana Love Snell, Debra Webb, Gayle Wilson, Lyn Stone, and all the other writers in this room. God bless you all for being there when I needed you and you didn't even know it.

And now I look at all of you not as a reader, but as a writer. I never knew as a reader how hard the life of a writer could be.

It always looks so easy from the outside. But what you never hear about are the doubts that linger constantly in the minds of a writer. The fear that others won't like our babies. The fear that all of you will one day turn into that vicious bully and throw sticks at me in public which is why I'm really glad that I have this podium to hide behind.

You never can be too sure.

I don't think readers really know just how important they are to us. I didn't sit down to write my first book to get money. I sat down and wrote my first book so that I could scare my classmates— I was a twisted little kid.

I, like every writer in this room, sat down to write a book because I heard voices in my head and felt strange people in my heart who wanted to have their stories told.

As a young adult I figured either I was a writer or schizophrenic. Since the idea of being schizophrenic was truly scary, I laid my bet that I was a writer. And since the guys with white coats haven't shown up yet to take me away, I'm thinking I was right. At least that's what those little voices keep telling me. And I really like to listen to them.

But you know as I became a professional writer, I learned a few things and most of them are

scarier than that first story I ever wrote for my friends.

And seeing how I am still to a degree a horror writer at heart, I thought I'd share some of those lessons with you.

These are to me the top ten great myths about being a writer.

1. You have to look like Sandra Brown to be successful. For those of you who don't know, Sandra is tall, gorgeous and absolutely stunning and used to be a model. And as you can see by looking at me, that most certainly isn't true, unless models are short and... well... to borrow my son's favorite word for me, cuddly.

You don't have to be a beauty queen to write. You simply have to hear those voices in your head. Luckily, they are blind to what we look like.

2. Once you hit a bestseller list you gain immediate fame.... I have a dream. It's a little one... well, okay I actually have two dreams. The first one comes from the fact that I was raised with eight boys and I now have four of my own... this is counting my husband. It's a magnificent dream of where I wake up in the middle of the night and stagger my exhausted self into the darkened bathroom and the toilet seat is actually down.

Ahhh, I'm sorry. I'm having a moment of Nirvana.

Which gets me to my other dream. In this dream, I'm at a grocery store, PTA meeting, or just meeting a new neighbor and when they ask me what I do for a living and I answer them that I'm a writer. And what I dream of is that the next words out of their mouth isn't the inevitable... "So have you ever published anything?"

Yo, Linda, I just gotta know. Does anyone ever do that to you anymore? Please throw me a bone and tell me that one day I won't have to answer that question anymore.

3. Once you hit a bestseller list you become rich. I'm sorry, I'm drifting off into Nirvana again. To that perfect dream in my mind of what the life of a bestselling author is like. You know there's a reason I write. My fantasies are just so much better than reality.

But back to the reality for a second. You have to have a lot of bestsellers to have a lot of money and I do mean a lot. The cold hard truth is that less than 10 percent of all writers make enough to support

themselves, never mind a family. Out of that 10 percent, less than two ever make it rich. Now personally, I want to be part of that 2 percent.

But I have never written a book to make money with it. I've always written books to touch the hearts of other people. I write because the people inside my head won't let me sleep at night until I get their voices down on paper. They're evil little trolls who, much like my kids, don't take no for an answer. And they don't like to be told... later. They're horribly impatient which is why I write so many books a year. It's either this or exorcism and as my baby brother so often says: "If this is torture, man, chain me to the wall." I really enjoy my insanity so if you happen to discover a cure... pass it along Dan Brown. I'll let him be the test puppy.

4. Once you become a New York Times bestselling author you immediately have control over your cover, your title, your back cover blurb, your release dates, the price of your book, the format of the book and sometimes even the content of your book.

Oh wait, I drifted off again and I'm really trying hard not to laugh, especially after the week I've had. Well, the truth is they do at least start to consult you. But the consultation takes on multiple meanings. I'll never forget a cover that I absolutely despised. My publisher kept asking, what is it that you don't like?

So I read off the grocery list of problems I had with it. The hero was surrounded by a turkey platter. He looked depressed and ready to jump off a building. He was wearing purple pirate pants and the book was a contemporary. The color of the cover was cotton candy purple and it looked like cigarette smoke was covering him.

They then asked me what I actually liked about it and I answered, my name is nice and large and it's on the cover, and not misspelled.

"We'll work with it," they told me. The next day the cover was back and what I learned was that they were going to give me a choice. The turkey platter would be on purple, blue or white. I got to pick the color. I chose white.

The cover turned out to be blue.

As for titles, I have learned that no matter what you do, never throw something at the publisher as

a joke... Many of them don't have a sense of humor and now you all know how I ended up with a book called Big Guns Out of Uniform.

I've also learned that the only way to escape titles such as Fantasy Man is to quickly tell them that another writer is coming out with a book by that same title a month before me.

But basically, at the end of the day, we really are at our publisher's mercy as to all of the above. All we can do is pray the Hail Mary and hope.

5. Writers spend all their time touring to exotic locations as they research their next book.

This one makes me think of when I sold rights to my books in the UK and I had a battle with the IRS who wanted me to prove to them that I was a US citizen and that I had no intention of leaving the country before they got a share of my UK pay.

I was aghast at the woman who was harassing me and told her that I only live six hours from the place I was born. Two and a half hours from, Gadsden, AL which is where my father was born, and I don't even have a passport. Lady, please give me my fifty dollars and I swear I won't jump the country with it. Heck with gas prices being what they are, that won't even get me to the grocery store.

But I am lucky in that I have a lot of friends who aren't writers who have been to many cool places. Between them and the internet I can pretend I've been there too.

There are some writers out there who are very lucky and do get to travel... many of them are married to pilots. But between kids, ailing parents, deadlines and money woes, many of us never get to even take a vacation, never mind charter a flight off to the exotic setting for our next mega bestseller.

6. All writers live in gigantic pink houses with gorgeous pool boys named something sexy like Juan-Carlo or Arturo.

Yes, there I am. Busy pounding out my next blockbuster novel in my massively large office on my furniture that didn't come from the Staples clearance aisle as I glance out my stained glass window to watch Arturo in his speedo as he cleans the leaves from my large designer pool that has a waterfall...

You know, I saw that movie She-Devil and I have a bone to pick with fate. Where's my big pink house with the pool and pool boy? I want one of each and I don't mean my son's kiddie pool that has

fungus growing in it.

Then again, I was raised with eight boys and have four living with me currently. Now that I think about it, I don't ever want to swim in a pool that has been used by that many boys. Eww! That's a scary thought. Thank God for chlorine. But let's not go there.

Instead, I will never forget the look on my best friend's face the day she came to visit my house for the first time. We'd actually met online and she knew that I was a bestselling author. She comes over and her jaw drops as she takes in my gigantic 1700 square foot ranch mansion, complete with one car garage that had part of the roof falling in from the toilet my sons had overrun one time too many, one molting plum tree and the toxic waste drainage ditch in back... and let's not even talk about the rusted out El Camino that lived next door that was permanently attached to my neighbor's front yard.

"Jeez, Sher. You live here? My house is bigger and I work the counter at Fed Ex. I think you need a better agent."

Then I told her what a step up that house was from the hovel I'd owned before. Hey, all the toilets work (unless my sons had recently been playing drown the evil Power Ranger) and the foundation wasn't cracked. In my book, it was a mansion.

7. People will respect you. This one always makes me think of the day my son was in the bookstore with me. He was five years old at the time and I took one of my books off the shelf to show him what his mom did for a living.

His beautiful blue eyes lit up and his dimpled smile of pride warmed me through and through. He was so excited that he grabbed the book from me and ran over to a woman in the next aisle. His angelic face was so sweet as he pulled on her jacket and held the book toward her.

"Guess what? Guess what?" he asked excitedly. "My dog is in this book! Look, it's Lady."

Oh boy, that taught me. I hadn't even thought about the fact that I shared my photo with my dog. But hey, Lady gets respect.

My other favorite example comes from my husband who seems to think that I enter my office and that somehow the words just flow like water out of my mind and onto paper.

Even after twenty years, he doesn't believe that writing is hard work. Now granted, I've had jobs

where I scraped gum up off the floor, carried buckets of water for miles on end, seriously and shoveled gravel in the hot Georgia summer sun. And well, okay those jobs really were harder, but there are days when I do scour the want ads, ready to hang up my computer forever.

Writing is a challenge every single day. People don't think about the backaches, the neck aches, the headaches, the carpal tunnel that hurts so badly that there's always a jug of Advil beside me. Unlike working outside of the house, you can't call it a day and go rest. Because as you sit at the tv, in the back of your mind you know you should be at the computer, working.

Writing is a jealous mistress and only another writer truly understands what that means. It is always on your mind and you're always trying to solve problems from character flaws to plot points, to reliving past books trying to figure out how you could have made them better.

We don't get up from our gilded beds to go sip coffee while our assistant goes over our daily agenda with us. Then afterwards we dictate our words to our secretary. Writing is a solitary endeavor that takes a great deal of discipline and concentration.

Concentration that is easily broken by, "Honey, where did I put my keys? Honey, can you pick up my dry cleaning? Mom, he's hitting me."

It means that when we could be taking an extra fifteen minutes in the shower, we use it to make a character interview sheet. That instead of taking lunch at work, we use that hour to write four more pages. That we stay up until the wee hours of the night, knowing we have to get up and go to work the next morning, but that this is the only quiet time we have.

And we suffer all this so that the next time we meet someone and they find out we're a writer, they can say... "I want to be a writer, but I just don't have the time for it."

Or better yet, have you ever published anything?

8. Your publisher will throw lavish parties for you. Hmm... You know, this is again one of those things that sounds so much better in the abstract. I remember when one of my publishers threw a reception for me at the publishing house. I was thrilled. I was ecstatic. Me and my bestfriend went up there with stars in our eyes.

My editor took me around and introduced me, then took me into the publisher's office where we

sat sipping soda, not champagne and eating chocolate and cookies, not caviar. We were chit-chatting when all of a sudden a stranger popped her head in the door.

“Hey! I’ve just found the perfect manuscript bag!”

The next thing I knew, my friend and I were alone in the room while they all went to investigate it. I wasn’t nearly as important as the bag from Gap.

My other favorite memory is of one of my best friends who had been rushed by a publisher. They had paid the big bucks to get her to write for them and I was thrilled for her. While attending the Romance Writer’s of America’s national conference, we went to the publisher’s party. Because she was much higher up on the food chain than I was, she got to sit at the table with the really important people from the publisher while I was sent to the back kiddie table.

After the dinner ended, they put us on buses. I noticed my friend was missing and told them we were leaving her behind. They didn’t believe me.

“She decided to take a cab to another publisher’s party.”

Now I knew this wasn’t true since the two of us were supposed to go back to my room and talk. I tried to tell them that, but they didn’t listen.

Instead, they left her there alone, in the middle of the night in a less than safe area of Washington, DC. She ended up getting locked out of the building, in the rain, while in a cocktail dress and had to walk several miles in very high heels to another hotel where she was finally able to catch a cab back. It took her three hours.

So yes, they can throw you a marvelous party, just make sure you don’t get distracted by the artwork in the building while they’re loading up the buses.

9. You will get spectacular book tours.

You know when you look up the word spectacular, it means thrilling. Thrilling means to feel a sudden emotion. Ever notice that fear, humiliation and trepidation are emotions?

I always thought that a book tour meant that a writer had a personal assistant and a media escort who went them to make sure everything went smoothly. What I’ve learned is that a book tour means showing up at a bookstore where they stare at you like you’re an alien beastie and ask. “Are you sure this

is the right store? No one here knew you were coming. What's your name again?"

My other favorite was a few months ago when my publisher sent me to an area where I'd never done a signing before. The store had no idea who I was and they didn't advertise me. The manager told me afterward that at first they were just going to put a little table right in front of the door for me, hoping customers would see me when they came in and that they might stop and buy a book. But, after I posted it on my site, they started getting calls from three states away about my appearance and when they got the call from a woman in Australia who was flying in for the signing, they knew it was time to put me at a big table upstairs.

The only thing about book tours that is wonderful, is meeting readers. God bless every one of you because you make those 18 hour layovers bearable. To meet that one person whose eyes glow bright when they talk about your characters is worth every bit of humiliation the bookstore personnel can dish out.

And now we come to the last one.

10. Once you hit the NYT, life becomes easy. What most readers don't realize is that most writers hit the NYT twice. Usually writers hit the extended list that isn't published and then they hit the actual list that is printed in the paper. Both times are milestones in a writer's career.

The first time I hit the extended list, I was on my way back from visiting my mother in ICU. I was in the car, again with my best friend, when my cell phone started ringing. I almost had a heart attack because I was terrified they were calling to tell me my mother was dead.

My poor agent had to tell me three times that I had two books on the extended list before I understood her. I was thrilled. We celebrated the news by pulling over at a gas station and dancing around the car.

When I got home and told my family, my sons only wanted to know what mom had brought them and where their dinner was. My husband acknowledged it with a nod and then proceeded to tell me about how my eldest son had gotten into trouble at school for urinating on a tree outside the principal's office.

It wasn't exactly the celebration I was looking for.

Then when I hit the Times print list, I was sitting on my mother's couch. That call came three days

after I'd buried her and instead of celebrating, I cried as if my heart was broken. Because it was. The one person I wanted most to share that news with was gone and she would never hear me tell her that I finally, after so many years of trying and many, many setbacks, had made it.

So no, your life doesn't become perfect. One of my close friends said it best years ago when she hit it. I called all my friends. I told my husband and then I sat in my house, looking at the dirty dishes and thought. You know I need to load the dishwasher.

As my mother used to always say, life never gets easier. There's always going to be another challenge on its way to you. You should always try to meet that challenge with courage and laughter. The best souls are those who can laugh through their tears.

And those are some of the lessons I've learned. Writing is a hard business, but we do it because we love it.

No, we do it, because we love you readers. You guys are our hearts and our souls. Every letter you send us, every time you tell us that you fell in love with so-and-so hero and that you can't wait for the next book, it's like the sound of a heavenly choir to us.

So I guess the best way to end this speech is simply say Thank you. Thank you to the writers and to the readers who have touched my heart over the years. I hope God keeps you all safe and sound.

God bless you and thank you for coming.