

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Barbara Anton, author of *Egrets to the Flames*

Start to finish, how long did it take you to write *Egrets to the Flames*?

The book took almost 10 years to complete.

How is the process of writing a novel different than writing a play?

The process is quite different. In a play, the audience can see the actors and their responses, but in a novel, the actors and responses must be described. In many ways, the character and plot development is similar in writing a play and a novel.

What prompted you to write a novel?

I have been writing all my life, and the time seemed right. I was caring for an elderly father at the time, and *Egrets to the Flames* gave me release into another dimension.

***Egrets to the Flames* presents an eye-opening look at the sugar cane industry. Why did you choose this as a backdrop for the book?**

The setting intrigued me. My curiosity was initially piqued by a short piece in The Sarasota Herald Tribune about lobbyists for the industry. I had to do a great deal of research on the industry in order to write the book – literally hundreds of hours of research over the years. I studied government reports, encyclopedias, on-line information, newspaper morgues, and every book on the subject I could find—and I live in Florida.

***Egrets to the Flames* is populated with memorable and believable characters. Are any of the characters based on people you know?**

The characters are made up of human frailties and strengths, and I think we have all known people who share these traits. No one character is taken fully from anyone I have ever known, heard, or read about.

In *Egrets to the Flames*, there is a wonderful dichotomy of the Hamptons – a wealthy, privileged family – living in their palatial mansion amidst the burning cane fields. Do you feel that in some ways, the Hamptons are living in a hell of their own making? Why or why not?

In many ways yes. They are living in a hell and flying into the fire of their selfish desires.

You do a masterful job of spotlighting the crazed egrets diving into the burning cane. How are the Hamptons themselves so much like the egrets?

Like the egrets, the Hamptons choose the path to their destruction.

What is James Henry Hampton's motivation? Do you think he makes an effort to distinguish right from wrong, or is he a victim of his own excesses?

James Henry Hampton knows right from wrong, but ignores the truth when it serves his purpose. He is dictatorial and obsessed, and his actions spring from that.

Do you think Grace Hampton is a victim of, or a willing participant in her husband's deceit?

Grace is a victim of her upbringing. She feels compelled to go along with her husband.

Of all of the characters in the novel, who do you think is most likeable? Least likeable?

Everyone seems to like Jazzman and Vonda, and occasionally someone understands and loves James Henry, probably because he mirrors their personality. I guess I understand and love all of the characters, especially Sami and Jeff.

What holds this family together? Money? Tradition? Love? Something else?

All of the above, with possibly a little Karma thrown into the mix.

Is James Henry out of line when he tries to stop Henny from marrying a woman he genuinely seems to love? While his motivations become clearer as the story progresses, do you think part of his motivation hinges on his own failures in his marriage?

I think James Henry views his marriage and everything else he is involved in as a success. The young James Henry would never admit failure in anything. I think James Henry should have stopped Henny from marrying Beth, but perhaps in a different way. But, James Henry couldn't be anyone other than himself and that is reflected in his actions.

Do you think James Henry and Grace are too involved in their children's lives, or not involved enough?

James Henry and Grace are perhaps involved in the wrong way. James Henry should have tried harder to understand Henny and work with him, not at him. Grace should have been more forceful with James Henry and tried harder to help him understand his children, although I don't think anyone could sway James Henry in the beginning.

Grace Hampton seems consumed with appearances. Is she superficial or is this her way of coping with reality?

Grace was reared to be concerned with appearances, and she is truly trying to do what is best for all concerned.

Of all of the Hampton children, Melisandra seems to be the most independent from her family, yet she seems dependent in many ways, as if she is trying to fill some sort of void. What motivates her?

Mel is suffering the loss of her true love Jason. The loss motivates her and she seeks constant reassurance from her family and friends. While Vonda is an active participant in James Henry's infidelity, in the end she is pitiful in her desperation.

Was it your intention to paint her as a sympathetic character? Why or why not?

We are all sympathetic characters. I viewed Vonda as sympathetic throughout. Only a needy, unfulfilled, woman with low self-esteem would behave as she did to her husband and to others.

In many ways, Egrets to the Flames explores the difficulty of accepting what is. Do you think James Henry comes to accept his fate and his family's decisions?

Yes. In the end he is contrite and he tries to make up for his mistakes.

Does James Henry ever feel remorse for his intolerance? His industry's impact on the environment? The deplorable treatment of the cane cutters? Or do you think he is either immune to remorse or able to justify his actions?

After the loss of his son and his grandson James Henry sees things differently. He is basically good, just pig-headed and misguided. But eventually, he does what he knows to be right.

In many ways, Egrets to the Flames hinges on conflict – family conflict, the conflict between old and new, and the tug-of-war between holding on and letting go. What do you think is the greatest conflict in the book? Is it ultimately resolved?

Everyone in the book is struggling to achieve something: Grace -- family harmony. James Henry-- survival of the cane industry. Mel-- to experience again the love she shared with Jason. Jazzman and the other cutters -- to complete cutting the rows and earn enough to support themselves and their families through the off-season. Henny -- to marry Beth. Jeff and Sami -- to live in Japan away from James Henry and the cane. The overlying conflict is striving for self-fulfillment.

What commentary do you make about sin in the book? Do you think the wage of sin is death – literally or figuratively?

Both, unfortunately.

AN INTERVIEW WITH

What do you think drives those crazy egrets into the fire?

I have no idea. I don't know why people do what they do either. When I was a child I saw a barn burn and watched men go into the burning barn to cover the horse's heads so the horses couldn't see the flames. Otherwise, the horses wouldn't leave the barn. So many things, like this, and the egrets, are just strange and inexplicable.

Do you have any other books in the works?

Yes, several. "Terse Verse" and "Savories: a collection of award-winning humor, short stories and articles" are available online. "50 Award-Winning Feature Articles" and "Demi Verse" are scheduled for 2008. I am now working on a biography of my misspent youth titled: "My Guardian Angel is Exhausted." I hope it proves humorous. My life is a hoot!