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Northern exposure

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Say you have written numerous bestsellers. Say you have won the Edgar and many other awards. Say you are interviewed regularly by the *New York Times* and media outlets across the country.



William Kent Krueger

Say that despite a demanding schedule, you make time for some guy in San Diego who writes a newsletter and blog for a small band of dutiful book lovers.

Then you're [William Kent Krueger](#).

He is the author of the Cork O'Connor mystery series and other books. He has lived in the Twin Cities for decades, which keeps him in regular touch with the [Boundary Waters Canoe Area](#), part of the northern wilderness that defines his books. Kent's a busy guy, what with the art and business of writing to tend to, but still he found time to answer my pesky questions. And yes, I did refer to him as Kent. When he agreed to my out-of-the-blue request that he share some thoughts about his writing, I figured that permitted me to move to first-name basis (technically middle name, but you know what I mean).

If you have been to the Boundary Waters in Minnesota or the abutting Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario, a couple million acres of lakes, conifers, and canoe routes, you know the fascination it can exert. In the Chicago-area neighborhood where I grew up, we played touch football, softball, Frisbee, and assorted games of our own invention on an asphalt schoolyard. There were no grass fields that we could get to easily, and a lake was something your parents might take you to in the summer. As a teenager, I realized some places did not have streets, sidewalks, and alleys and that the Boundary Waters was among the best of them. I have managed to get there three times in my life. The town of Ely jammed with wilderness outfitters, crossing into Canada at Prairie Portage, and the realization that portage distances were marked in rods as a perverse trap for unwary city kids. The North Country is mystical. But its Native culture was overlaid with the French fur trade and eventually modern North America, and the results have sometimes been as jangled as you might expect. Therein lies the dramatic tension that drives Kent's books. And a question. Can a White man write with narrative authority about Native sensibilities? Or does presenting aspects of Native culture with the broad reach of a bestselling mystery series help overcome ignorance and build social bonds between the fractious elements that remain in today's world? How do artists of a particular cultural heritage write about any other cultural heritage and earn that culture's tolerance and even respect?

This is not to say that only people who have experienced something personally or inherently can write about it. Writing is a flight of imagination. Shakespeare never went to Italy. Tolkien never went to Middle-earth. And Mario Puzo asserted that he wrote *The Godfather* without ever having met anyone in that particular line of work (*this observation is protected under the fair comment provision of libel laws and the writer in no way means to imply that Mr. Puzo was a "friend of ours" – Ed.*). Although authors who live what they portray may have an inside track to reader confidence, this is a tricky equation. *The Devil's Highway* draws its strength from the life experiences of [Luis Alberto Urrea](#), who grew up with a personal understanding of the border and la frontera. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* is built upon the scholarship of [Dee Brown](#), a White college librarian.

I haven't tripped across a new issue in literature, and it is something that needs a far more scholarly approach than I can give it. But still, it is interesting to know the thoughts of a writer who faces the question every day.

Kent is aware of this issue, of course. Let's dive in.

Q: Does it worry you sometimes that you haven't captured an aspect of Ojibwe life accurately or sensitively enough, and Native peoples will see your work as a culture grab?

A: Whenever I sit down to write a story in my Cork O'Connor series, I'm painfully aware that I'm a White guy trespassing on a culture not my own. So, I try very hard to get it right. I was a cultural anthropology major in college, and I have a lively curiosity about other cultures. Over more than a quarter of a century of researching the Native cultures in Minnesota, I've made deep friendships in the [Anishinaabe](#) community. I rely on these friends for their generosity in sharing their insights, perceptions, guidance, and even suggestions for story ideas. A number of the Cork O'Connor novels have at their heart an issue significant to the Native community and that was suggested by my friends, who hoped I might help broaden the awareness of White readers about the issue.

I understand the concern and the discussion surrounding cultural appropriation. Rather than looking at what I do as cultural appropriation, I try to think of it as helping to educate readers and to dispel vicious stereotypes about Indians that many White people still cling to. And I have to say that to a person, every Native reader who has contacted me or with whom I've spoken has been complimentary in how they feel I've dealt with their culture. Does that mean that every Indigenous person agrees with what I do? Certainly not. But if they wish to be in dialogue with me about this, I'm happy to engage.

Q: To follow up, can you tell us more about the friends you have made in the Anishinaabe community? Do you have a group of Native early readers who have a look at your manuscripts and provide an assessment before you submit the work to your publisher? Or is it more of an informal, meet-for-coffee, here's-what-I'm-writing discussion? How did you find these folks, persuade them to forego any wariness, and give you their impressions?

A: I've had a number of mentors and friends in the Native community across all the years I've been working on my Cork O'Connor stories: a professor who taught the Ojibwe language at the University of Minnesota; an editor who is Anishinaabe; the directors of Native American charitable organizations in

Minnesota; women who work with trafficked Native youth and Native women; an officer on a reservation police force. My relationships have run the gamut, from very intimate to casual but respectful. Several of these folks I meet with on a semi-regular basis over coffee or lunch, mostly when I have a specific area of their expertise that I would like to tap. And whenever my deadlines will allow, I ask at least one, but usually two, of my Anishinaabe friends to read and vet the manuscript, so that I haven't said anything that's too stupid or, even worse, offensive.

My earliest approaches to the Native community were met with surprising acceptance. But these were professional people who grasped what I was hoping to achieve, which was a favorable approach to their culture. A number of others, who have become good friends, entered my life as a result of reading my work and contacting me. I am always aware of and grateful for the generosity of their sharing.

Q: After a fair amount of wanderlust, which you describe as a family tradition, you moved to St. Paul in 1980 so your wife could attend law school. But how does a guy who lived in six states by the time he graduated from high school and who piled on travels after that come to the realization that he could set a mystery series in the Boundary Waters and focus on the Anishinaabe? I ask this even though I understand that you studied cultural anthropology and St. Paul is not far from the magical Boundary Waters. But did the spark come from more than proximity? Can you recall a particular moment when it hit you that you had the setting, characters, and foundation for a book and eventual series?

A: My love of the North Country long preceded my decision to set my series there. That said, when I first moved to Minnesota and discovered the remarkable area we call the Boundary Waters, I pretty much knew that someday I would create stories that were steeped in its beauty.

The ultimate decision to set a series there came when I decided to abandon trying to write the Great American Novel and focus on writing something someone might actually want to read. I looked around me and realized that everyone reads mysteries. So that's what I was going to write. I was a huge fan of Tony Hillerman's work, and I thought that maybe I could incorporate aspects of the Anishinaabe culture in my writing in the same manner as Hillerman. In fact, when I took a good look at the North Country, it seemed to me almost impossible to write a story set there without including the Ojibwe as an element because the influence of the Native people in northern Minnesota is ubiquitous and powerful.

Q: Wow. Not only did you answer my last question, you answered what was

going to be my next question. I wondered whether you might feel a connection to Tony Hillerman. Now I know, but let me ask something anyway. From what I have read, the Navajo received Hillerman's novels well. Did you ever have the chance to compare notes with him about writing novels that focus on Native people?

A: One of my great regrets is that I never had the opportunity to meet Tony Hillerman. I know [his daughter Anne](#) quite well, but honestly, I've never spoken with her significantly about her father beyond expressing my admiration for his work and my gratitude because his stories have been so inspirational in my own efforts as a storyteller.

Q: It's intriguing to me how authors come to be associated with a place and how their literary interpretations help readers build an understanding of that place. For example, I've thought [John Sandford's](#) Minnesota is different than Kent Krueger's Minnesota, which is all the better for readers. It makes me want to know more about how you make yourself aware of, knowledgeable about, and sensitive to the North Country and its residents. Have you gone for paddles in the Boundary Waters? Do you have favorite lakes and canoe routes there? And not to get all meditative, but is the loon's call the loneliest sound in nature?

A: I discovered the incredible North Country of Minnesota shortly after moving to Saint Paul more than forty years ago. We began vacationing for a week or so every summer at a YMCA camp (Camp Du Nord), which is literally across the road from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. After being stunned by the remarkable beauty and tranquility of the Boundary Waters, I knew this was the area I wanted to focus on when I got serious about my writing.

In the intervening years, I've done my best to get up to the Arrowhead of Minnesota as often as possible, soaking up the atmosphere, geography, and culture of the region. I don't get there as often as I used to (lots of touring these days), but I still try to visit the region in whatever season my next novel will take place. I want to make certain I know the colors, smells, conversations, weather, and other details that will nail the time and place. My hope always is that I've grounded a reader profoundly in a sense of the unique beauty in every aspect of the North Country.

As for the call of the loon, I don't know that it's the loneliest sound in nature, but I would certainly vote for it being the most haunting.

My sincere thanks to Kent for finding time in a packed schedule to add to our understanding.



Grant A., Jack H. (a subscriber to this newsletter, may he be praised), your humble scribe, and Rich S. on Fourtown Lake, Boundary Waters Canoe Area, 1984.

Glad I read that

The Bullet that Missed, [Richard Osman](#):

People drift in and out of your life, and, when you are younger, you know you will see them again. But now every old friend is a miracle.

*

Rock of Ages, [Tim Hallinan](#) (a mystery complete with rock and roll rhapsody, consideration of friendship and parenthood, and even prickly admonishment about the importance of grammar. No wonder I like Junior Bender so much):

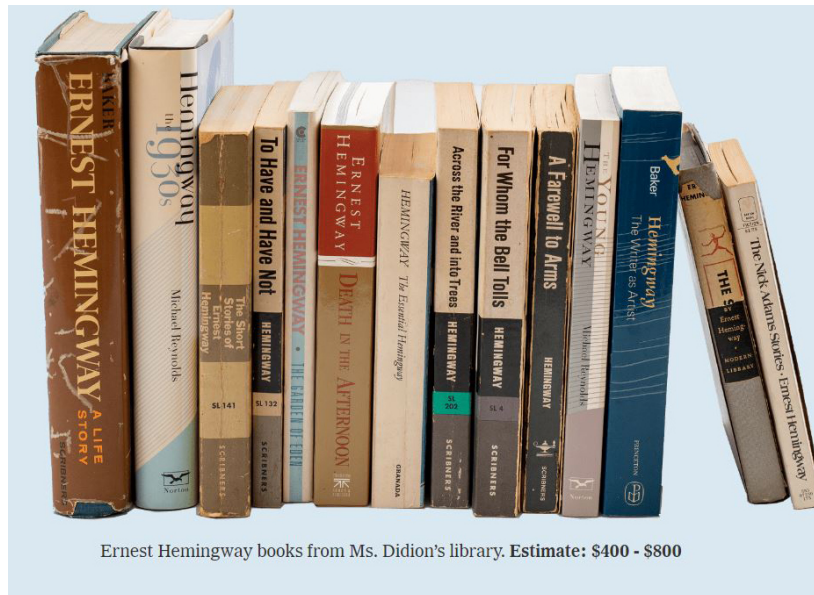
On the far side of the stage, the band that had been working there—four guys who, all together, probably didn't weigh 450 pounds—stripped off their headphones and started yelling at each other. I said, "Who are they?"

"Rasputum," he said. "Punk rock. They wear Russian robes and spit at each other."

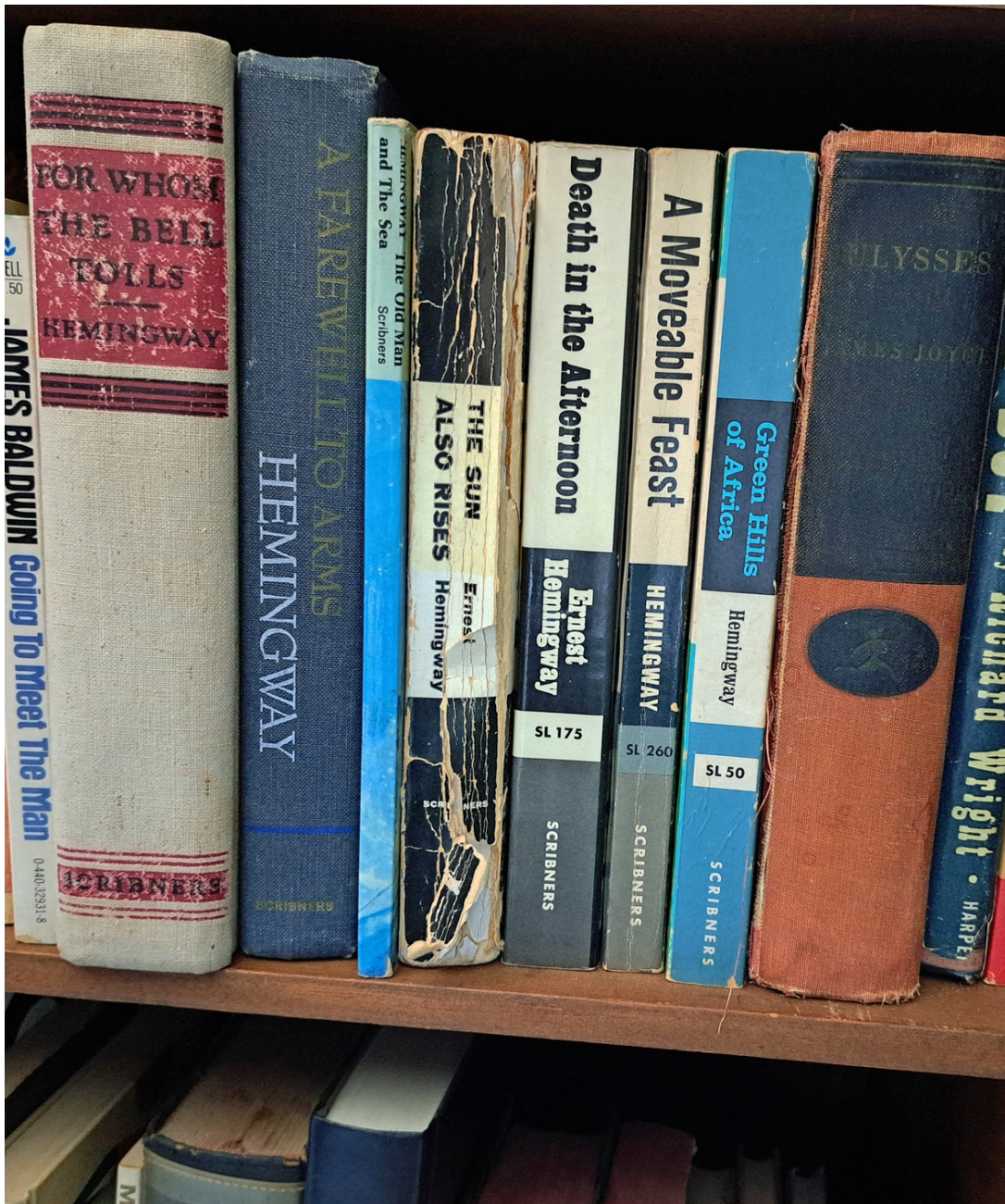
AND:

“Problem is, there have always been people who have a use for guys like that,” Cappy said. “Hard to think of a period of history where there was high unemployment among sadists.”

Book deals



A New York auction house recently sold numerous possessions of the late (as opposed to early) author Joan Didion. Her collection of fourteen books (photo above) by or about Ernest Hemingway sold for \$13,000, far beyond expectations. If you are still in the market for secondhand, beat-up Hemingway paperbacks and a few old hardbacks, I'm willing to let my collection of seven books go for only \$12,500 (photo below). It's fewer books, but these are inflationary times and I'll throw in that copy of *Ulysses*.



Kind regards
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