

An Interview with Wendy Byard by *Women2Women* magazine

Tell us a bit about yourself.

I'm a retired college English instructor, former high school teacher, current newspaper columnist, and author of a new crime story set in West Michigan: *Devil in the Dunes*. It offers a satisfying blend of unusual plot, psychological suspense, and meaningful themes like betrayal and vengeance, but also love and redemption. It's a compelling read for those who enjoy crime fiction and an exciting journey through a dark, yet ultimately hopeful, tale. Additionally, I wrote *Teach and Reach for Classroom Miracles*. It focuses on the transformative power of love and compassion in the classroom and that genuine care and building positive relationships with students are what truly empower learning. I also write the newspaper column "Beyond Our Backyards." Previously, I wrote for *On the Town Magazine*.

What you do for women?

As the mother of three daughters, I want to empower young women in their personal growth. As a Mott College educator, I promoted students' self-discovery through storytelling when I taught memoir writing, motivating women to explore their experiences and express themselves through writing, fostering self-discovery. I created an environment where women felt nurtured and confident in their abilities, stimulating creativity and connection as they supported each other's journeys, encouraging empowerment. Currently, I am the Vice President of the Women's Fund in Lapeer County. We are dedicated to improving the lives of women and families across Lapeer County in the areas of health, human service, education, and enrichment. As a former school board trustee, I belonged to the Student Advocacy Committee and Healthy Choices Committee that improved women's lives. Additionally, I was a Big Sister in the United Way Big Sisters.

Why did you write your book?

My motivation for writing *Devil in the Dunes* was a long-held desire to write a mystery novel that delved deeper into themes including the power of love over the destructive forces of hate. I also desired to create a strong female protagonist, drawing inspiration from Nancy Drew, a character I admired in my youth. My empowered character Cadie McLeod embodies qualities of intelligence, courage, and resilience, serving as a role model. Further, I have always viewed Michigan as a dynamic setting and was drawn to the idea of a mysterious tale set against the backdrop of Michigan's beautiful yet sometimes dangerous Lake Michigan coast. I also loved suspense ever since I would sneak out of my middle school class and hide in the library to read Nancy Drew – my first literary feminist. Early on, I became a fan of strong female characters and whodunnits; I appreciate the excitement and critical thinking the suspense genre provides but also important themes.

Why do you do what you do? Do you feel “called” or compelled?

After graduating from MSU, I worked in advertising in Chicago and Ann Arbor. Although it is a dynamic industry, I felt compelled to make a deeper difference. I returned to school and earned my 7-12 English and history teaching certification and a masters’ degree in English Education from Michigan State University. I believe my decades of teaching and empowering people have lasting impact. Recently, I ran into a lady I instructed years ago. She said my teaching style and her love of my course encouraged her to become a teacher. Regarding *Devil in the Dunes*, for years I mused on writing a novel. After retiring from teaching, I had the time and passion. I quickly fell in love with immersing myself in a story with a strong female lead that contains hope, bravery, and love.

Where do you get your strength when going through tough life challenges?

I find strength in Keith, my husband of 33 years. My daughters Haley, Kacie, and Kellee are all successful women who amaze with their wisdom and strength. They always have my back! Additionally, I learned from my parents’ struggles. My mom is challenged with a lifelong illness and yet perseveres, always fighting for her happiness. My father grew up in a difficult home yet went on to live a positive life. He was the general manager of a nationally-successful Flint automotive dealership and treated everyone with kindness and respect. I named my student scholarship “Invictus” after my father’s favorite poem about overcoming adversity.

What, from your life’s story, do you want most for women to know?

I want women to have confidence - to believe they can accomplish most anything. In school, I was a chatty cheerleader and not taken seriously, so I never perceived myself as intellectual. My senior year, an influential science teacher called me up front. He spent ten minutes singing my praises, revealing he was proud of my academic growth and abilities and excited to see what my future held! As a result, I underwent a paradigm shift - a fundamental change in my self-perception, in what I was capable of. I re-evaluated my identity. I went on to earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees and become a college instructor, elected official, author, business owner, and columnist. Although I have felt self-doubt, I grow in my understanding that accepting challenges increases my strength and enriches my life. Growing stronger allows me to be vulnerable to write a book and put it forth for the world. I’m not so afraid of failing or disappointing others because I finally know my own worth.

Tell us about your book, why should we buy it, and how it will benefit us.

Devil in the Dunes is a captivating whodunnit that provides intriguing plot, suspense, thematic depth, strong characters, a rich setting, and important messaging. In it, Cadie’s parents were brutally murdered one night. Now, on the very same night six years later, the 18-year-old goes missing. She must escape her abductor if she’s going to live and solve the mystery of her parents’ grisly deaths - murders for reasons no one could imagine. *Devil in the Dunes* offers a satisfying blend of mystery and psychological suspense. The book also features a strong female protagonist, a symbol of empowerment and heroism. People who enjoy an immersive setting will love fictional Harbor Cove. The book transports readers to Traverse City,

Mackinac Island, and MSU, as well as dunes, cliffs, beaches, and a battle for survival off North Manitou Island. It captivates readers with its compelling mystery, engaging characters, thrilling plot, evocative setting, and insightful exploration of human nature.

Where can we learn more about your book and events?

To learn more about *Devil in the Dunes* and *Teach and Reach for Classroom Miracles*, read my columns, and discover my upcoming events, visit wendybyardauthor.com. *Devil in the Dunes* and *Teach and Reach for Classroom Miracles* are available at amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com and other distributors. *Devil in the Dunes* is also available at Ingramspark.com and mid-Michigan and Michigan West Coast bookstores.