

Judith Geary is a life-long learner. Historical fiction suits her as a reader and a writer because it provides frequent excuses to chase down that elusive tidbit that puts a story in context. A Masters in Counselor Education from George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, and experience as an adjunct instructor in the ASU Department of Communication since 1985 speak to her focus on how historical facts provide the background from which the story of the people emerges, not the story itself.

Geary is the author of *GETORIX: The Eagle and The Bull*, a Celtic adventure in ancient Rome, and co-author with Sandra Horton of *Getorix's World*, the related curriculum about the novel and life in Republican Rome.

I: How would you describe your own writing?

G: My writing begins and ends with character. I formulate the opening scenario and I have an idea of how I want the story to end, but the characters have the final say. I spend lots of time wading around in the characters' backstory, imagining how they got to the beginning point of the novel and why they have the attitudes, needs and personalities they do. I also indulge in the same kind of speculation with the "real" characters I know, but with my fictional characters I'm always right.

I: Where did the idea for this particular novel come from? Is it a period that has always interested you?

G: Actually, I always found history boring in school – perhaps a result of always being taught by coaches who only tested on things like battle dates. What I liked to read was speculative fiction – science fiction and fantasy. That's why I signed up for a class at ASU taught by Orson Scott Card. Actually, I ended up taking several classes and workshops from Card.

The short story that became *Getorix* was written for one of those classes. Card had said he liked to read history for pleasure and admired historical fiction (and has published several books since of biblically-based historical fiction), so in the grand old tradition of "writing for your audience" (or sucking up to the teacher), I wrote a story with an historical setting.

When he liked the story well enough to say, "This is a young adult novel, expand it and send it out," I was stuck.

I: Because you're supposed to write what you know?

G: Exactly. And I didn't know enough to credibly set a story in ancient Rome. In doing the research, I was hooked. I discovered that history is the epic story of the people not just the dusty facts.

I: Yet reviewers praise you as often for the accuracy of your facts as for your characters and plot.

G: Thank you. But the fun of getting the details of the historical era right is to give the characters the correct context in which to operate. The minor characters in my novel are major characters in history – real people – so I have access to biographies and other things that were written about

them at the time. In fact, I often write monologues from the point of view of minor characters, just so I'll understand them well enough to make their actions in a scene true to character. Of course, these monologues will never see print.

I: So, has your research been primarily in your head – plus books and on the internet?

G: The internet is really helpful, and, of course lots has been written about Rome. However, I've also made several trips to Rome in the last 15 years, so I can get a sense of the actual places. Museums and archaeological sites are really useful. And I won't deny the mystical aspects of walking in your characters' footsteps, even if it is centuries later.

I: You edit for Ingalls Publishing Group. How has that affected your writing?

G: The experience has been a real gift to me as a writer. I've learned so much from the authors I've been privileged to work with. Ann Chamberlin, Tom Deitz, Cameron Judd, Charles Price, all are nationally or regionally well-known and award-winning. To suggest small changes to their work to bring out the story that they want to tell, and to have them embrace those suggestions, is very confirming, of course. But I've learned as much from the writers who are not as sophisticated, who aren't as far along in their development. Their ineffective choices have taught me as much as the good examples. Whatever the skill level of the writer when we begin working together, to become part of the process of bringing a book to life is rewarding on a level close to giving birth.

I: Was Ingalls your first choice for your own book?

G: I first sent *Getorix* around to publishers before Ingalls was formed in 2001. And, it drew interest from some of the better known publishers. In fact, it went back and forth for a couple of years with an editor from Houghton Mifflin before the editor and I agreed we weren't getting close enough to both being pleased with the book to continue. Of course, some of what I think she wanted – notably the opening – is now part of the published novel. If she had seen it with the beginning and ending it has now, I think she would have been satisfied. But I wasn't able to give her that at the time. The five years of fiction editing I did for Ingalls in the mean time has made me that much better writer.

I: So, are you glad things turned out as they did, or do you wish you'd held out for a bigger publisher?

G: I'm glad *Getorix* was published by Ingalls. Even though it's small and publishes only a few books a year, it's well respected and has a number of award-winning authors and books on the list.

There are advantages, especially with national visibility, of a NY publisher, but on balance I been especially pleased with the results. As a small regional publisher, Ingalls is more in touch with their authors and their vision for the book. I had a great deal of say in the design of the cover and the interior. And they've been particularly generous and flexible with the promotion – something major publishers are notorious for dropping.

So, when Barbara Ingalls read the manuscript and said they'd like to do the book, I was

really pleased. It's been a good experience.

I: You said your stories are character-driven. But doesn't the author ultimately just make the characters do what he or she wants?

G: Authors can write whatever they please, of course. But if the story is to resonate with the reader, if it is to feel "true," what happens must grow from believable motivations of the particular characters. That was a major problem with the version of the story I sent around initially. I had ended the book the way I wanted it to end. Unfortunately, I'd created a character who was way too much of an individual for that ending to feel right.

I: Your character refused to end the book the way you wanted it to end?

G: Let's say the ending never really worked until I let go of what I had in mind and asked myself what Getorix – admittedly a character I created – what the character the reader had come to know throughout the book would do in the situation I had put him in.

I: So the ending that's there now is true to the character, not to your original plot?

G: Absolutely.

I: So, what are you writing now?

G: At the end of Getorix I, we included a draft of Chapter I of the second book. In it, Lucius the Roman boy is kidnapped by "Celtic terrorists." Getorix and I have to get him back.

I'm also still refining and adding to the curriculum that goes with the book. North Carolina schools cover the ancient world in sixth grade, and Getorix's story is sixth grade reading level, so it's being picked up by a number of schools in this area and in Alabama. Sandra Horton and I have released the curriculum in sort of a "beta" version so we can use the responses to make the package more "user friendly" for teachers and students.

I: So you're staying in the world of ancient Rome.

G: For now. However, I'm also researching a period of North Carolina history, the late 1700s, during which Quakers were struggling with the issues of slavery and were freeing slaves and sending them back to Africa. I'm waiting to find the right point of view characters to tell the story.

I: You said you were working with school teachers. Are you available for programs, and how can teachers find out the details – cost, etc.

G: My website has contact information and details about me as a presenter. At this point, I'm being as generous with my time as possible in exchange for the experience and feedback from teachers who are using the novel and the curriculum in the classroom. So, for now, I invite teachers to contact me directly through my website: www.judithgeary.com