

THE TENNESSEAN

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Author Cathie Pelletier revisits Nashville, where she honed her craft

By Brad Schmitt
| *For The Tennessean*

Author Cathie Pelletier grew up in tiny Allagash, Maine, where she has returned after a 30-year stop in Nashville.

Pelletier is out with her latest character-rich novel, “The One-Way Bridge” (\$24.99, Sourcebooks Landmark), set in the fictional town of Mattagash, Maine, which bears more than a passing resemblance to her hometown.

You lived in Nashville . . .

Longer than any other place.

How did that start?

I was writing poetry as a young student, and when I graduated from the University of Maine, I wanted to know about songwriting. I was involved with a young musician at the time from Canada. And he said, “Let’s go to Nashville and write songs and become really, really rich and famous.”

I fell in love with Nashville. I learned so much from songwriters. I learned as much from songwriters in Nashville as I’ve learned in any workshop or class. Those guys, the skills they need to really hone those words down to a few simple important words. Boy, that’s good training ground for any writer.

I ended up there and decided I would write a novel. Are you familiar with Lee Smith, the Southern novelist? I shouldn’t say Southern novelist; she’s an American novelist. I took a writing class at Vanderbilt, I think it was 1982, a weeklong class, Lee Smith’s fiction class.

And she ended up reading one of my short stories and said (in Southern accent), “Why don’t you write a novel?”

I wrote “The Funeral Makers,” my first novel. And Lee said, “Send it to me and I’ll read it.” And then she got me an agent. Now imagine that, the generosity.

So let’s get into the new book. It’s a cantankerous mailman and a Vietnam vet war hero in a small town. And they hate each other and eventually meet on a one-way bridge, where they have a showdown.

That’s probably the major story in the book, with all the other characters floating around them. I don’t think they hate each other, though. I’m not sure what to call it. I don’t think it’s hate.

What I found really intriguing is, at the end, you find out that they don’t even know the real reasons they dislike each other.

You know, it’s like that in my family. [Laughs] I think that happens a lot of times with people. Especially it happens with New Englanders. You could go nine years until someone says to you, “You know, I didn’t like what happened at the baby shower for Lorraine.” And you’ll think, Who the hell is Lorraine?

What baby shower?

That happens too often, lack of communication.

I think my favorite part of the rivalry was the Vietnam vet, Harry, had a moose mailbox, and he turns it around to point the rear end at the mailman. How did you think of that?

I have to be so careful. [Laughs] Lee Smith and I have talked about this. A critic said to Lee once that she went overboard with her humor. She said, "I think he's right!"

I have to be careful with my humor, too. I hope that worked, Harry's means of speech. This was a tough book for me. It took me years. I deleted more pages than most novels are.

Why was it so hard?

For one thing, to use a term I hate, I'm a very organic writer. I really discover what's happening as I go and what the characters tell me. Eventually I start understanding what the ending's going to be.

This time, I took the idea I had when the bridge went out, and I saw it on CNN, the bridge in my hometown. A one-way bridge — it's a marvelous literary device.

Then I had a short story I'd written about a sister who moved back from Tampa with a velvet painting of Venice, Italy, after her third or fourth divorce. And there was the sister who envied her and their domineering mother.

And I thought, oooh, those characters, I could save them from the story and put them in the book.

Then I found another set of characters I want to work with and I thought, here's my cast. I'm going to assemble them the way you might in doing a play.

And that proved very hard for me. It's not the way I generally work. So I hope I pulled it off because it has taken years.

And then when Harry started talking about Vietnam . . .

Yes, there was a lengthy author's note that talked about your hesitation in writing about combat. Why did you feel the need to explain that?

Well, I just honestly know so many Vietnam vets that I didn't want to ever let anyone think that I could research and know what it's like to be in war. And yet, if you're going to do a character, you're going to have to make sure that everything he does and says is as real as you can get it.

It was a double-edged sword for most of the time I worked with it. And it was out of respect for them that I did that. And a lot of them are going to read it. I have a lot of friends who were in serious combat in Vietnam, including an ex-boyfriend.

I saw hints of Nashville a few places in the book, and one of them was that Orville the mailman loved Faith Hill so much.

(Laughs). All of my characters in Mattagash love country music, as do my friends and all the people I grew up with here (in Allagash, Maine). It's a very Celtic background, very similar to the South.

All my Mattagash characters love country music. Whether I had lived in Nashville or not wouldn't have mattered.

Additional Facts

If you go

What: Cathie Pelletier discusses and autographs her novel "The One-Way Bridge."

When: 6:30 p.m. June 5

Where: Pamassus Books, 3900 Hillsboro Pike

Admission: Free and open to the public

Info:

www.pamassusbooks.net/event/author-event-cathie-pelletier
