

Les Standiford is an acclaimed novelist and historian who has written some 20 books, among them the John Deal crime fiction series and the biographical “Last Train to Paradise” and “Meet You in Hell: Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and the Bitter Partnership That Changed America.” As founder and director of the Creative Writing Program at Florida International University, he has taught and guided numerous young writers. He recently spoke with Carver Chronicle writer/editor Alexander Sutton.

CC: What’s the best advice for aspiring writers?

Les Standiford: First, you need to read a lot. Before there were ever classes, that's how writers figured out how to do it: by reading other writers, copying basically what it is that they like. Second, to be a writer, you have to practice. How do you get good at playing the piano? You sit down every day for a little bit and play some piano. It's the same thing with writing. You sit down and you write a poem or you write a story. You don't have to finish it. It doesn't have to be good. You don't have to worry whether the spelling is correct. You just need to do it. Practice. Practice. Practice. Read and write, that's the best thing you can do.

How did you decide to become a writer and what influenced your decision?

I loved to read, and from an early age, I used to think the greatest thing would be to write a story, a story that people would enjoy. And I would show my little stories to my teachers and they would pat me on the head and say, "Oh, that's real good, Les, you keep on doing that." I thought every kid did what I was doing. I came to find later that that wasn't the case. I was the exception rather than the rule, but by then it didn't matter. I had already decided that I was going to write. I thought I would be a lawyer or a doctor or something, and then on the side I would spend a little time writing my stories. I even went to law school. But finally I figured out I probably wouldn't be very good at other things, and I realized that I could get a degree in English and that I could teach reading and I could write on the side. That's what settled me on my career.

Did you ever question your decision?

At the very first, you don't make a lot of money doing this. You're not going to get rich. Most writers don't. So at first I wondered, “Hmm, am I going to be able to make a living, have a family, raise children, be able to make enough to have a decent life and continue writing?” I worried about that at first, but finally I realized I can't do anything else so it doesn't matter. I wouldn't be happy.

What are the rewards of being a writer and what do you enjoy most about this career?

I think the most enjoyable thing that can happen is to run into somebody that I don't know and they ask me what do I do and I say, “I'm a teacher and a writer,” and they say, "Oh, have you ever written anything that I might have read?" And I mention a few of the books that I've written and sometimes they'll say, "Wait a minute, I've read that. That's a good book." Well, that's the greatest thing that can happen, when run into a stranger that's actually read and enjoyed something that you've written.

What are the biggest challenges of being a writer?

You have to be disciplined. At first I thought you could just wait to be inspired and then go sit down at your desk, go get the computer going or take out a piece of paper and a pen and write. But I realize that it doesn't work very well that way. I was talking about practice, practice, practice before. Unless you sit down a little bit every day or three or four days a week on a regular basis, you're not going to get better and you're going to lose your train of thought and you'll get discouraged.

You've transitioned from being a novelist to an historian. What prompted that?

It was almost by accident. Somebody suggested that I write about Henry Flagler and his building a railroad from Miami to Key West over all this open water. I said, "But I'm a novelist," and this person said, "Yeah, but a good story is a good story." And I thought about that and I said, "That's right, a good story *is* a good story. Maybe everybody doesn't know about Henry Flagler and what he pulled off." I did all this research and I started to write. I didn't really know what I was doing, and I was writing like an encyclopedia article, just putting all these facts down and it wasn't very interesting to me. So I rewrote it from the beginning, just trying to tell the story of a guy who had a lot of money who was trying to do an impossible thing against great odds and he finally did it. And he made a lot of people happy and he changed the world. And so in a way, it ended up that even though I was writing history, I was telling a story, the only difference was that this story happened to be true.

You have to learn when you're writing history, how to do that. It's not just a matter of putting facts down but arranging these facts into a story that is going to make people interested to turn the page even though they know what's going to happen. Everybody knew the end of my story. Flagler's railroad got washed away in a big hurricane. If you were writing about the Titanic, everybody would say, "Oh, the Titanic goes down." Everybody already knows the ending when you're writing history. The trick is to make getting to the end interesting. The challenge is not to make up something but to make what already happened interesting.

Which of your books are you most proud of?

In a way, it's like trying to choose between your children. I still have a soft spot for "Last Train to Paradise." Many people here in Florida have read it. I think one of the most satisfying books that I have done is "Water to the Angels" because I really think that William Mulholland has been forgotten out there in the land of where the movies are so important, where glitter and glitz really dominates. Nobody would be there and there wouldn't be a film industry. The town wouldn't have been able to survive if it hadn't been for this guy who taught himself how to be an engineer. He never went to college, never graduated from high school, never took an engineering class and yet figured out single-handedly how to move a river 250 miles away to Los Angeles and make that place possible.

Do you think you're going to go back to writing fiction or are you going to stick with history now?

I might write another novel but right now the next thing I'm going to write about is memoir, an autobiography about dogs, all the important dogs that I've had in my life and how

they've taught me to appreciate life more than I might have if I hadn't had all these dogs. It's called "Seven Dogs to Enlightenment," focused on the seven dogs most important dogs that I've had.