by Vicki Lane

"...by next week you should have decided on a protagonist, a setting, and a plot. Remember: Write what you know; write what you read. Your assignment for next week is to write a two page scene ...."

September of 2000. On a whim, I'd signed up for a class called "WRITING FICTION THAT SELLS." The class met six times; the fee was forty dollars.

Why not? I thought. I'd been an English major—about forty years back. Hey, I'd even written a

short story in a creative writing class back then. And I still knew my way around a sentence. So I'd signed up—without a thought in my head of what it was I might want to write, never having been one of those folks who just knows they have a novel in them.

As I walked away from that first class, I wondered what in the world I could have to say that was worth a novel. After all, I'd been living on a small mountain farm in a rural county, doing small mountain farm stuff for the past twenty-five years. My connections to and experience in the larger world were minimal—what made me think I could write a novel?

"Write what you read," our teacher had said. Hmm, I read lots of things but have always enjoyed mystery series. And there are so many types of mysteries published, ranging from really mediocre to quite literary. Maybe I could find a place within this genre. One big advantage, I thought, my spirits lifting as I considered my assignment, is that with a murder mystery, your plot is already there–there's a murder and your protagonist has to find out whodunnit. Great, there's my plot.

Continuing to take the easy way out—write what you know—I decided that the setting would be a small mountain farm in a rural county and the protagonist would be fifty-ish woman living on that farm. And that was the birth of my Elizabeth Goodweather series, published by Bantam Dell. (My sixth novel, *Under the Skin* , comes out October 18.)

I took no other classes, attended no workshops or conferences, but, with the help of a critique group comprised of myself and two women from that class, managed to write a novel that got me an agent. (I wouldn't have known one needed an agent without the class.) And during the past ten years of writing and teaching, I've learned a lot about publishing and come up with some useful tips and strategies–the importance of the hook; how to construct a plot (I quickly learned there was more to it than just finding out whodunnit); aids to continuity; tips for realistic dialogue that propels the action; ways to create a believable setting rather than a backdrop; and, as they say, many, many more.

In this brief workshop, I'll try to give you some useful items for your writer's toolkit. We'll also take time (twenty to thirty minutes) for questions about writing, publishing, and marketing. Who know, it might be all you need to get going on the book that will change your life.

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VICKI LANE will lead a workshop at the North Carolina Writers' Network 2011 Fall Conference , November 18-20. She is the author of
The Day of Small Things
and the Elizabeth Goodweather Full Circle Farm Mysteries, which include
Signs in the Blood
,
Art's Blood
,
Old Wounds
,
Anthony-nominated
In A Dark Season
, and
Under the Skin
. Vicki draws her inspiration from the rural western NC county where she and her family have lived on a mountainside farm since 1975. Since 2007, she has led writing classes in UNC Asheville's Great Smokies Writing Program. Visit Vicki at her daily blog or her website:
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Registration for the 2011 Fall Conference is now open .