

Zoe Tribley/ The Bookshelf

Where did Sanctuary start in your head?

The initial seed of thought got planted the Fall of 2013. My wife suggested I write a story that would contain life lessons for my grandkids. She knew they would not likely sort through all my inspirational and devotional archives. With my wife's blessing, I retired in January 2014 to devote my full-time resources and time to write such a novel. The story that ultimately became Sanctuary I finished the Summer of 2016 and published April 2017. It went through rigorous changes until it came together thanks to a great writing coach who continues to serve as my editor. She helped me grow the story from the simple notion that a beloved coach died saving others in a horrific courthouse fire. Creating the fictional, time-lost South Georgia town of Shiloh and all the believable, yet colorful characters took months, but now Shiloh and its citizens are all very real to my wife and me. Getting intimately familiar with each citizen, street and building in little old Shiloh allowed the story to unfold. Sanctuary began with an "if, then" premise and I merely wrote each scene that followed. The hardest part of the creative process involved the editing after each draft.

The title, Sanctuary, was suggested by one of the Beta readers, and my wife came up with the subtitle, A Legacy of Memories, which got tacked on the updated 2nd Edition to connect with the new sequel, Testament, An Unexpected Return. Of course, Shiloh's citizens are lobbying for the third in the Shiloh Mystery Series, Purgatory, A Progeny's Quest which I plan to publish in 2019.

What does my normal writing day look like?

My wife cleared out the back bedroom for my writing and then kept herself preoccupied during the day running errands, taking care of her mother, and volunteering at the Cancer Treatment Center. Being retired allowed me to devote a minimum of four to six hours a day, five days a week to crafting my novel. There were days my wife still laughs about when she'd knock on my door and ask when I would be getting home from Shiloh because dinner was on the table. I'd smile and say, "give me five minutes," but I'd end up eating another cold meal an hour later.

At least three times a week my wife and I would share a long three-mile walk together. I'd use the hour of fresh air to talk about where I was in the story, and she'd help me with various plot and scene details. No doubt she played a huge role in formulating the airtight facts that came out in the storylines in Sanctuary and Testament. We both wanted realistic, entertaining, and believable stories for the readers to get caught up in reading.

After I finished Testament, we remodeled much of the house, and my writing desk got relocated to a more spacious area of our home that included larger windows, next to the kitchen. Before I moved, someone could bang on the front door, and I'd not hear anything. Now I am more cognizant of activity in and around the house, and with the kitchen more accessible I can refill my coffee cup or grab an apple or handful of peanuts without disrupting my thoughts.

Was the setting of Sanctuary personal?

Absolutely! Shiloh did not spring ex-nihilo (out of nothing). For over thirty years business trips took me in and out towns throughout the South. And, after I went back to school to finish some degree work and seminary, I taught, coached, and preached in Lower Alabama, Northern Florida, and South Georgia for ten years. My wife and I experienced firsthand family-centric, small-town life in the Deep South before we settled outside of Atlanta to retire near family.

Ironically, we ended up buying a home outside of historic Newnan, just beyond the shadows of Atlanta.

The other influence on the selection of Shiloh being in Georgia was my father's family heritage. Although my grandfather relocated the family to Miami at the end of the Depression, my father's relatives resided in and around Atlanta for at least three generations. However, only when my father passed did my father's youngest brother tell me about my father's travails as a young boy separated from his family out of necessity until my grandfather found work in Miami. I named the wily old barber in Testament Wiley to honor my father and grandfather. A name they both carried.

What am I reading now?

When not reading novels by author-friends, I attempt to shrink my to-be-read stack on my nightstand. At the moment, I am enjoying Camino Island by John Grisham. My stack also usually includes titles by Nicolas Sparks, Charles Martin, David Baldacci and Terry Kay, among others.

If I was to give my book a partner, like a significant other that it would balance with, what book would I pair with it?

Though I do not claim to be on the same plain or even stratosphere for that matter as John Grisham, either Ford County and The Last Juror would be the likely first choice.

Who did you have the most fun writing, Theo or Liddy?

Got to say Liddy. I tried to make all my female characters to portray unique, believable, and desirable qualities, while also causing a chuckle once in a while by their antics in the story. I learned to listen intently to my wife and my editor when it came to writing scenes featuring my female characters. Of course, after 47 years together, it'd be hard not to give Liddy some of Connie's traits and quirks.