

THE ACCIDENTAL NOVELIST

By Craig Lancaster

Fellow Toastmasters, today I wish to tell you how the worst day of my life led me to the fulfillment of my biggest dream. But first, a little background on that dream ...

I wrote my first novel, “600 Hours of Edward,” in 24 days of November in 2008, was finished revising it by February 2009 and sold it to the first publisher who looked at it. It came out in October 2009 and has since been named a Montana Honor Book and a finalist for a High Plains Book Award. Zero to published in less than a year. Man, I thought, this novel-writing stuff is going to be a cinch.

Then I wrote my second novel.

The differences were stark. I drafted “The Summer Son” over three arduous months in the summer of 2009, turned it over to my beta readers – a group of people I trust to give me honest feedback on my work (which is to say, none of them is my mother) – and watched them drive Buicks through the holes in the plot. So I wrote it a second time, rearranging pieces of the story, backfilling details, cutting out the useless bits and generally turning my work area into a bloodbath of narrative body parts.

I’d have given my second effort to my beta readers, but for one niggling fact: I hated it.

So back I went, through a third, a fourth and a fifth draft. The original manuscript, which checked in at around 79,000 words, lost weight and gained focus. Late in the fourth draft, I finally discovered what the story was really about – the beating heart beneath the prose – and my pace quickened as I saw the solutions to all the problems I’d put in my own path. By June 2010, I had a finished manuscript, at just a shade under 72,000 words. It promptly sold, and now I await a January 25th release date.

A 12-month, five-draft slog to Book No. 2. Man, I thought, this novel-writing stuff is going to kill me.

The truth of the matter is this: It was only after almost literally killing myself that I embraced my long-held dream of being a novelist. In July 2008, just a few months before I wrote “600 Hours of Edward” in a literary frenzy, I cajoled my wife into letting me have a motorcycle, bought it in Sidney – because, you know, why not purchase a death machine 260 miles from home? – and began piloting it back to Billings. Thirty-seven miles from home, at 60 miles per hour on Interstate 94, I went down when a buck jumped in my path. I bounced through the passing lane and came to rest in the median strip. The damage, while not fatal (obviously), was plenty bad: I broke all the ribs on my left side, collapsed a lung, lacerated my spleen, wrenched my left knee

and tore up my elbows with road rash. The impact blew off my shoes and wrenched my wedding ring from my finger. Recuperation came with a weeklong hospital stay, another month at home in a recliner (because of my ribs, I couldn't lie flat on my back) and enough pain medication to turn me into a drug dealer, had I so chosen.

In the month that I was out of commission and unable to do much but sit and think, my mind wandered. I knew how fortunate I was; at that speed, on that terrain, one shift in the geometry might have done me in. I was lucky that Ang was following me in our Ford Explorer – not so wonderful for her to witness the wreck, but she was able to call in help immediately. In the days and weeks that followed, I endured nightmares about the wreck, nighttime visions that still occasionally visit me. But I also found my thoughts drifting toward goals I'd once had for my life, and notable among those was a desire to write books. Here's the deal: I can't tell you how many people come up to me and say, "I have a novel inside me, I just know it." For years, I was one of those people. Do you know why most of those novels never get written? BECAUSE IT'S HARD. More than that, it's because we all harbor dreams about what we want to do, but for many of us, the day-to-day demands of life crowd in, and those dreams wither on the vine.

Sometimes, it takes a powerful jolt to shake those aspirations loose, to remind us that we really do have only one life and one chance to pursue happiness. A motorcycle wreck, for example. On July 22, the day after my wreck, I might have spit in the eye of anyone suggesting that I'd received a gift, but that's exactly what it was. It was a gift of perspective.

"600 Hours of Edward" changed my life; there's simply no way to adequately capture what it's meant to hear from people who've been moved by it. "The Summer Son," a darker, more psychological, more personal story, promises to give even more lift to my literary dreams. The great Western novelist Richard Wheeler, in endorsing my new book, wrote: "*The Summer Son* travels straight into the realm of broken hearts and hurt souls only to discover miraculous things at the core of each of us: grace and love."

Grace and love. That's pretty heady stuff for a guy who was just trying to get home one very bad day in July and ended up crashing into a new way of looking at his life.