

## POTPOURRI



*Summer, 2016*

## JUNE

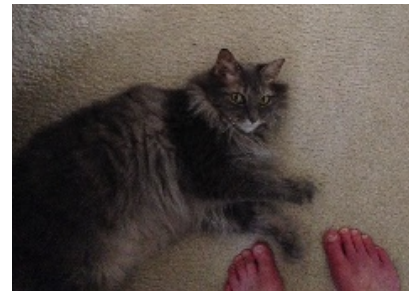
- **MEMORIES OF GUAM**



This has been an unusually wet summer in Arkansas (not to mention Baton Rouge, NYC, and southern China). Although the altitude of Hot Springs Village is only 700 feet (you have no idea the strange looks I got when I kept asking what the altitude was), we're in the foothills of the Ouachita Mountains, high enough to be safe from all except occasional flash floods in low-lying roadways. It's also been unusually hot. Rain + Heat = the Tropics! Believing itself at home, my hibiscus bush has thrived, often giving me as many as five dessert-plate size blossoms a day. Since the blossoms only last a day, they're perfect for picking. I've had fun floating them with the shade-loving impatiens which has also thrived in the rain. Yellow, red, white, pink, and orange hibiscus grow with wild abandon on Guam, requiring frequent pruning to keep the bushes in neat hedge rows. Every morning on our walks, Mary and I collected hibiscus blossoms to bring home and float. Who would guess I could relive those memories on my deck in Arkansas?

- **SHIMMER: AFFECTION DEFICIT DISORDER**

No doubt you've heard of ADD, or Attention Deficit Disorder. ADD afflicts many school children (as well as their teachers and parents). Shimmer, however, brings a new definition to the term. This kitty, I discovered, though a housecat was basically wild. (Remember she came from a small house with 13 other cats.) She didn't want to go outside, but she didn't want to be petted either! And she wasn't about to get in my lap. The first three months of our relationship were literally "touch and go." I would touch, and she would go! Around



month four, I started to wonder if I was going to be forced to return Miss Shimmer to the cat rescue squad. About that time (or do cats read our minds?), Shimmer suddenly decided it was okay for me to touch her. Once she got used to being petted between the eyes, she became quite enthusiastic about the process, wanting to be stroked from between her eyes to the tip of her fluffy tail. What you see in the picture is a common sight around my house these days: I *try* to walk from one room to the next, but Shimmer is always one step ahead of me, throwing herself on the floor, refusing to move until I lean down and stroke her. I've decided she hasn't had much affection in her life, and now that it's available, she can't get enough of it. A more opposite kitty from Gabby I cannot imagine!

- **WHAT I READ THIS SUMMER**

I've loved cozy mysteries since I was a kid reading my mother's Agatha Christie books. This summer I discovered a new author and a new series from a favorite author. Published in the general market, both series demonstrate why there is no market for "Christian" cozies. In cozies Christians are alive and well and working with good against evil. Light-hearted but with serious themes, these series both revolve around churches in small towns.



I found **G.M. Malliet** (my new author) while I was browsing a catalog of audiobooks. Her Max Tudor series set in tiny Nether Monkslip, England intrigued me. In *Wicked Autumn*, Max (a former MI5 agent called in his early forties to be an Anglican priest) is drawn into a murder at the fall church bazaar. I know of at least 3 more Max Tudor mysteries—*Fatal Winter*, *Pagan Spring* and *Demon Summer*—but there may be more, and I plan to find out.

**Carolyn Hart**, one of the founders of "Sisters in Crime," has been a favorite author for twenty years (or more—who can count that high?). She's written several series: my favorite up to now has been her Annie & Max Darling *Death on Demand* books. This summer I found a series she began in 2009 with *Ghost at Work*, quickly followed by *Merry, Merry Ghost*. Featuring ghost Bailey Ruth (properly referred to as an emissary of Heaven's "Department of Good Intentions") is dispatched to earth to rescue a pastor's wife who finds a dead body on her back porch right before the women's group is due at her house for tea!

On a more serious note, I also read *An Altar in the World* by **Barbara Brown Taylor**. I was familiar with it but had never read it cover to cover. A memoir in the tradition of Madeleine L'Engle's *Crosswicks Journals*, the book quickly drew me in. A pastor who left the church, Taylor describes how she discovered God in the world. She asserts that everything from walking to speaking a blessing can be a sacred act. If you haven't read it, I recommend it.

## JULY

- **ARKANSAS BIRDS**

This summer the birds raised two broods. I missed shots of the first group because baby birds showed up at my feeder much earlier than I expected. But I was ready for their younger siblings.



*Daddy's Little Girl*

Male cardinal feeds a sunflower seed to a young female.

*The Line Forms to the Right*

Two Yellow-Shafted Flickers (mother on the feeder arm, baby on the railing) wait a turn at the suet feeder. The large bird with the red topknot is a Pileated Woodpecker—the largest woodpecker in the U.S.



*The Video I Missed*

Imagine this: a hummingbird feeder hangs from the eaves. A male ruby-throated hummingbird and a black wasp approach the feeder at the same time.

Round 1: The two squared off and rushed at each other. At the last minute they both backed off. They tried again. The third time the wasp won and landed on the feeder for a sip of nectar. *Mr. Wasp 1; Mr. Hummer 0.*

Round 2: Mr. Hummingbird flew off, but not for long. Within seconds he was back, flying angrily at the wasp. A second skirmish ensued. This time Mr. W flew off, leaving Mr. H to claim the feeder and settle in for a drink. *Mr. W 1; Mr. H 1.*

Round 3: An angry Mr. W came back, flying at Mr. H. The two squared off a third time. However, neither flyer put much effort into the battle. After a moment the two seemed to make a silent deal. Mr. H claimed the feeder port in question and began to drink. Mr. W flew around back, settling at a port where neither could see each other. Evidently a tie was acceptable to both!

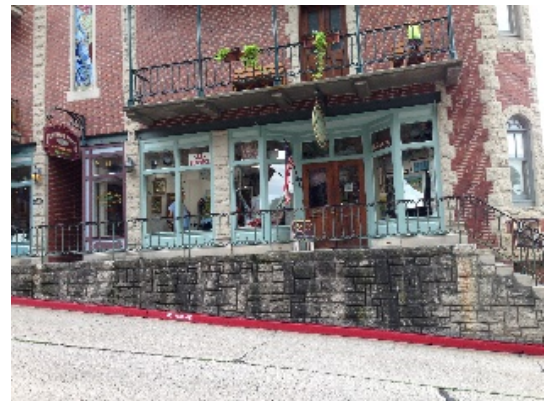
- **ON THE ROAD IN ARKANSAS**



My friend Becky Gifford and I made an overnight trip to Eureka Springs, a tourist town in the Ozarks known for Victorian houses, art galleries, and quirky shops. Three pictures captured the trip for me. The “Today’s Special” sign was in front of a truck stop just outside of Eureka Springs. “Come on in—Free Wi-Fi while you savor Tatertot Casserole!”



As we entered Eureka Springs, Humpty Dumpty greeted us from the wall. I’m not sure how he came to be the mascot, but he sets a fairy-tale tone for the town. Shops line a street that climbs the side of a mountain. Arizonans will know why I immediately loved Eureka Springs. For the rest of you—it reminds me of Jerome, the setting I used for *The Copper Box*.



## **AUGUST**

- **FAMILY REUNION**

August 3-7, 2016, fifty-plus Bratchers gathered at Cumberland Falls Kentucky State Park. We ranged in age from 13 months (5 babies all that age—2 sets of boy twins born on the same day and a girl born two weeks earlier) to 92 years (my father). We travelled by airplane, car, or a combination of the two from Alaska, California, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and, of course, Arkansas. A few didn’t make it from Brazil!



What made this family reunion remarkable was that August 5, 1916, Lewis Bratcher and his new bride Artie Porter (my grandparents) arrived at Cumberland Falls for their honeymoon. They travelled by train from Caneyville, KY to Corbin, KY (about 150 miles). There they hired a horse and wagon to travel 15-20 miles to the year-old Cumberland Falls Lodge. Known for the

rainbow that shows through the mist when the moon is full (moonbow), Cumberland Falls was already a tourist attraction. We weren't there for a full moon, but I read a brochure that said sometimes the moonbow was visible at noon, which technically, I suppose, makes it a *noonbow*! If you use quite a bit of imagination, you may catch a glimpse of it in the photo.



The highlight of the trip for me was getting to spend time with my daughter, Jorie, and her fiancé, Jay as well as with my dad and his wife of three years, Maggie. (I'll save their story for Valentine's Day.)



- **MY WRITING LIFE**



August 24-28 found me in Nashville at the American Christian Fiction Writers Conference. One highlight was a workshop called “21<sup>st</sup> Century Writing.” The presenter, top NY literary agent Donald Maas said today’s readers want more than a thriller. They still want strong plots, but they want more: complex character development and beautiful writing. He challenged us to work on foreshadowing, symbolism, and metaphor—all the techniques we English teachers love!

A second highlight was a workshop led by Allen Arnold called “The Two Creative Realms.” Arnold began by distinguishing between the stories we write and the Story we live. In both, he distinguished between writing *with* God and writing *for* God. Amazing what a difference that little preposition makes! As we started to think of writing *with* God, Arnold challenged us to become co-creators with God, both in the stories we write and the Story each of us is living. Lots to think about...

The third highlight was an explanation of my long wait (four months and counting) for a response to the revised chapters of *Guardians of the Canyon*. When Harper Collins bought

Harlequin (and thus Love-Inspired Suspense) this year, the entire staff had to move buildings. The move created so much upheaval the editors were hard-pressed to keep up with their publication schedule, much less continue working with new writers. Tina James (senior editor) assured me they would be back in touch. She also encouraged me to begin work on what I hope will be the follow-up novel. Good news!

- **QUOTE OF THE SUMMER**

*"I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere."*

--Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, author, Nobel Peace Prize winner (died 7/2/16 at age 87)

From *Common Good News*--a twice-weekly newsreel for progressive people of faith. Powered by *Faith in Public Life* and [Convergence](#).

\*Author's Note: I read this newsletter regularly. To read it (and sign up), go to [commongood@faithinpubliclife.org](mailto:commongood@faithinpubliclife.org)