

Meet the Author: Betty Auchard

An interview conducted by Sue Campbell (www.SueCampbellGraphicDesign.com).

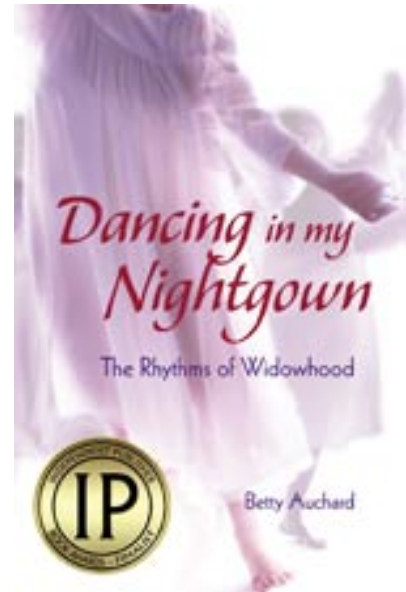


Today I'm interviewing author Betty Auchard. Betty's first book, [*Dancing in My Nightgown, the Rhythms of Widowhood*](#) is her memoir of losing her husband of 49 years, getting through the grief, and learning to live again—in a whole new way. Far from being a morose downer, Betty's stories are touching, inspiring, upbeat, and even funny. Betty had a lot to learn having married at 19, and never having lived as a single person before. Betty's quirky, loving, and funny personality makes her one of my favorite authors to know and to work with. In this

interview she shares her thoughts on the writing process:

I. Tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got started writing. Did you always have a secret desire to be an author?

My secret desires were to be invisible, to fly, and to play the piano. My unconcealed desires were to be a movie star and an artist. I became an artist, so I still have time to become a movie star. But all my life I loved writing letters and telling true stories because I saw, and still do see stories in everything. And I've always jotted things down that I didn't want to forget—sort of like a grocery list for my life.



Becoming a widow at 68 when I had never been single before meant I had more to write about than ever. I wrote about everything that was happening to me because life felt like the twilight zone. It was unreal. I had no way of knowing then that writing was my tool for healing.

Grief recovery was the hardest work I'd ever done in my life and griever's must be allowed to babble about the same old things over and over. It's the only way we can accept that our loss is real. Writing was like talking to paper. If I felt good I wrote about it. If I felt bad I wrote about it. One day I saw that Postum (Denny's favorite beverage) was on sale and I almost put a jar in my cart. I was so blindsided by that unconscious act that I had to abandon my grocery cart and run outside to cry. Naturally, I wrote about it. I knew that someday I would look back on my experiences and realize how far I had come.

Writing was more important to me than eating. Naturally I lost weight, but gradually, I regained consciousness and the act of writing took on a life of its own. I became aware that my journaling on junk was starting to use a lot more paper and my writings were becoming pretty good stories that I liked a lot. One thing led to another and I started taking writing classes. This all happened over about six months. By six months I was in love with telling about life from my point of view which sometimes made me cry, but it felt good; like vomiting from my eyes. Sometimes my quirky point of view made me laugh at myself. As hard as I tried not to come off as a widow I always revealed that I was one. It made me feel

vulnerable. I may as well have worn a talking T shirt that shouted, “This Lady Lives Alone.” But, to be honest, I liked my stories so much that I practically forced strangers to read them. I knew then that Betty, the Writing Beast had been born.

2. Tell us about your writing habits. When you write do you need music? Or quiet? Is there a special place, time or ritual you use to get in the groove? And has this changed over time? For example from the time you wrote the first draft of the first book until now as you work on the second?

Eleven years ago when I wrote all day long in my nightgown, I didn’t know how to use the computer so I did a lot of writing in bed where the light from the window was perfect. If not there, then I wrote in my lounge chair where the good lamp was located. I wrote on a lined tablet on a clipboard, and used only a fine tip Pilot Precise pen. My thoughts landed on paper as easily as I talk.

Once I learned how to use the computer I relocated upstairs to what used to be my art studio and is now my computer room. I first TELL myself the story out loud a few times and then I start typing without stopping, typos and all. It’s still a lot like free writing but it’s on the screen and I feel as though I’m still talking. I write best in the mornings when my brain is awake and lively. But I still write at night or any old time I’m in the mood or when I know I won’t be interrupted. Sometimes that’s into the morning hours. I let other things go unattended, which is slothful but true.

My best writing time was two months ago when I treated myself to a hotel room. I checked into a Holiday Inn Express, 25 miles away so I wouldn’t be tempted to dash home for any reason. I told my children not to call or e-mail unless it was really important and a request for a recipe was not important. It was wonderful. I stayed one week, went home for one week, and returned for one more week. I ate sparingly and used the small fridge and microwave in my room for simple food. I managed to get ahead on my second manuscript. The cost? About \$2,000, but I told myself that I deserved it.

When I think a story is finished, it’s imperative that I read it aloud. Only then do I hear what is clunky or awkward. The sound of the words and the cadence of a sentence are critical. A radio is distracting and never on when I write, which means that it is never on. I watch TV only when I eat something or to watch *Dexter* or *The United States of Tara*. The truth is that I sit way too long at my computer because I’m in love with it. And where the day goes I’ll never know. Time just races by when I’m in the writing zone.

3. For most writers time management and "getting their butt in the chair" seems to be an all too common theme. You seem to have the freedom to write when the mood strikes. Do you think that you could have written a book in the midst of raising your family and working? What advice do you have on time management for writers who can't write as a vocation? (full-time)

I’m out of my element regarding this question—but I can’t imagine myself writing a book while raising a family. I did, however, manage to do my college homework and art assignments when my children were preteens and teenagers. But my husband took over in the kitchen in the evenings whenever I was studying for a test or working on an art project. He and the kids fixed meals and they either called me to the table or brought the meal on a tray to my bedroom upstairs. After graduating I got a fulltime job

as a high school art teacher, so we were all busy. All four of our children were in competitive swimming and somehow we managed to do it all. I'm in awe of young mothers who manage to get any writing done. It wears me out just writing about it.

4. How do you maintain the stick-to-it-iveness in the face of self-doubt?

For some reason I don't recall ever doubting myself during this 11 years of writing. If I'm stuck and unsure how to resolve a story, I know that it means a whole lot more work is ahead. I've recently been stuck as to how to rescue certain stories that I am determined to keep, and that's where I am right now with a second manuscript. With help from my writing coach (I consider myself still a student.) I'm learning how to remove myself from the first draft of a stubborn story and approach the whole thing from a different angle. The only way I can do that is to dialogue with someone else about why this story is important to me—or I write an e-mail to either my coach or my editor. Since they each have an interest in my work, they usually can brainstorm with me until we find a solution. Once in a while, though, I have to admit that I'm riding a dead horse, and I just set the story aside in the deep freeze in case there's a chance of reincarnating it in the future. Of course this means that some of my revisions are endless, but revising does not bother me one bit. It's not finding a way to revise a piece that drives me crazy. I hate admitting defeat with any story that is too dear to my heart. But not all of my ideas are meant to be stories. Thank God for good coaches and good editors. Lucky me...I have both.

5. Do you, or have you ever, belong(ed) to a writers critique group? If so, is it valuable to you?

I'm sure that critiques groups help a lot of people, but I'm not one of them. There are too many things that get in the way of my appreciation of a critique group. I don't like all the time it takes to give feedback to everyone in the group. It means a lot of extra reading and responding to the work of other people. And...if I don't like what they write, I sure am not going to value their comments about my work. And there are so many different opinions from one group that it's just plain confusing. Instead, here's what I do: there are four people whose judgment I trust, and they are always honest. The two women are my daughters and the two men are my friends. They are my muses, and not writers but avid readers. We never meet as a group, but I take turns asking them to read certain stories. I used to attend English teachers' conferences and I learned a technique from them that is very student-friendly. There is no discussion about a story that is read aloud. Instead, each listener writes down only two comments on a piece of paper to be given to the reader and no one else. The listener writes down something that he liked a lot (a word, a phrase, a description, etc.,) AND any question he has about the story. That's it. It is constructive and helpful and takes very little time. If I did belong to a group, I would want them to use that method. Now, THAT I could handle.

6. Do you ever outline first, or are you a "seat of the pants" writer?

Never do I outline. Even as an art teacher I never sketched out my art work and then painted on top of the sketch. I created it as I went along. When I write, I have an idea of what I want to share with the reader, and I even write a "pretend" letter to one of my muses mentioned above so I can write the new story for them. OR, I tell the story out loud to one of them. Telling the story first does seem to help bring it to life. Another reason I don't outline is because it's too confining. It means I have to "stay inside the lines." The thing I love about not outlining is that a story comes alive and suggests other directions. I'm never sure where it's going to end up. So after it seems to be finished, I know that's only the first

step. I use my mental check list to see what might be missing and eventually (after perhaps 10 edits and revisions), everything falls into place...if I'm lucky.

7. Many writers hate editing and would rather just write the draft and consider it done.

Others like the polishing. Which are you, and why?

I love going over a story with a fine-toothed comb, making sure that all the verbs are active and that all the sentences are succinct with no extra words. Or I simplify sentences and paragraphs. I like the challenge.

8. What are you reading now? (Or before you got into the thick of what you're writing now.)

I have several books going at one time and they all have bookmarks in them. Some, I finish. I just finished Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*. Now I'm reading Eudora Welty's memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*. It's excellent. I'm a slow reader so I don't mow through books very fast. And I savor every word and often take time to underline or write in the margins.

9. What is your favorite book? Why?

Whatever I'm reading at the time is my favorite. I'm fickle, because while I'm reading a new book, I fall in love with it and forget how much I loved the previous book that I just dumped.

10. What is your favorite title? (Not the book, just the title.)

What comes to mind is the sound of *Teacher Man*, by Frank McCourt. I also like the quirky nature of *The Liars Club* by Mary Karr. I also enjoyed reading both of those books. I've never read the book called *I Hate My Neck*, but the title cracks me up. Now that I think of it I think I like the title of my own book more than any. *Dancing in My Nightgown*, catches the attention of women and men alike. Men think that it's a sex book until they look at the sub title: *The Rhythms of Widowhood*. Yes, I do like my own title a lot, and that's the truth.

11. As a reader, what is your biggest pet peeve? (Stock characters, pat endings, unresolved conflict, etc.)

When descriptions go on too long. As much as I enjoyed reading the *Clan of the Cave Bear* series, one of the books went on for pages describing the ground, rocks, plants, cliffs, flint, tundra, etc., I finally scanned the pages to see when the tour ended and started reading again.

12. As a writer, what is your biggest pet peeve—or stumbling block?

Being interrupted. It takes too long to get back in the zone and pick up where I left off. Another thing that bugs me is if a writer friend wants to know what I'm writing and I share a story with them, and then they say, "Do you mind if I make some suggestions?" Yeah, I do mind but I always lie. Or, the story comes back all marked up with edits that I never asked for. I never give suggestions to another writer unless she begs me to. Even then I say that it is only my opinion and may mean nothing.

13. What is the best piece of writing advice you ever received?

Three things: 1) Read your stories aloud because that's when you hear what sounds klutzy or good. 2) When you think a story is finished put it aside for a week if possible, but at least for several days before reading it again. It seems like a new piece which you either love or not. 3) Hire a professional editor for your work and not your cousin who got good grades in Language Arts classes.

14. What advice would you give writers just starting out?

Just get that story down as though you're talking to paper. Don't think of it as "writing." Talk to the paper and DO NOT EDIT AS YOU GO.

15. Do you have a website or blog where readers can find your book(s) and learn more about you?

Yes indeed. www.DancingInMyNightgown.com. Everything is there about my availability as a speaker and more. On every page is a link to the publisher. In an enthusiastic moment a visitor can order the book that minute. Within a week the book will arrive.

16. How long before your next book comes out?

I'm guessing, but the manuscript is almost finished and I hope that by summer the finished book is in my hands.

17. Many first time authors think that when their book comes out their work is done. We know better. What kinds of things have you personally done that have been effective in marketing your first book?

I've always had a love affair with a live audience, so since 2002, I've been speaking to groups and selling my book after the programs. Before my book was published in 2005, my short memoir stories were included in five anthologies and I sold them. Now, I sell only my book. Every person attending gets a flyer and I ask them to please share it with any group needing a speaker, so my advertising is by word of mouth.

18. Is there anything I haven't asked that you'd like to tell us?

Yes, I would like to add that *Dancing in My Nightgown* received a 2005 IPPY Award when it was first released. IPPY stands for Independent Publisher. That year I think there were over 2,000 entrees in many different categories. My award was one of three in the memoir category. And one more thing: I am the dancer on the cover while wearing a silk nightgown that was made for the cover. I will never sleep in it. The two-hour photo shoot was one of the most fun experiences I've ever had. In fact, the first thing people say about my book when they see it is that they LOVE the cover. And so do I. The cover is so upbeat and attractive that it helps people know right away that it is NOT a sad book, but instead a very joyful and humorous collection of stories. One widow who read my book said, "It felt so good to laugh again." One widower said, "Your book makes me want to start flirting with women again and going out on a date, and THAT'S a good feeling." So he asked me out.

SC: Thank you so much Betty for doing this interview with me. I always enjoy chatting with you, and hearing your insights on the writing process. I'd like to add a couple of things about Betty's cover. The photos were taken by Fred Armitage. The photo shoot for the cover was directed by Chris Wheeler of Ignite Design. He admitted to me

that he was a little nervous about directing the shoot with a “lady dancing in her nightgown,” but afterward he said, “She really got into it. Betty’s a pretty good dancer! One of the most fun shoots I’ve done.” The photos that came out of that shoot were great, and I had more than enough to work with. I wanted to convey the vitality of Betty’s bubbly personality—and one static image didn’t seem enough to do that. So I composited several images tilting and blurring parts of them to get across the dynamo that she is. People may ask why I chose to cut off her head... yes that was deliberate. The book IS a personal story of grief resolving itself into a more hopeful present and future life for Betty. But the message in the story is universal to all who suffer, or who know one who is coping with loss. I wanted the reader to see themselves in Betty’s place. As pretty as Betty’s photos turned out—I still wanted this cover to be more special. And I found that quality in a lovely pearlized paper stock we used for the cover. This paper has a subtle iridescent glow with a soft pearly sparkle. We simply can’t show that here on the screen. But it was just the right touch and this cover, for all its simplicity remains a favorite of mine—both for the paper’s unusual visual eye-candy, and most especially, because it represents a lovely lady in more ways than one.