

Why I Write About Marquette
by
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Since *Iron Pioneers* was published, I have been overwhelmed by the positive response my novels have received. I am equally intrigued by my readers' questions, foremost of which is why did I decide to write about my hometown of Marquette. The question is difficult to answer because I spent so much time working on the novels that the characters seem always to have been with me.

I was born and raised in Marquette, and having been so enculturated into this city and its history, as a writer, I cannot *not* write about it. My earliest influence for writing the book was just growing up in Marquette. I am unable to remember the first time I saw St. Peter's Cathedral, the Old Savings Bank, or Presque Isle Park. They have always been there, always been a part of my conscious world.

My earliest memories include my grandfather telling me about Marquette's past, stories I never forgot that made me wonder what it was like to grow up in this town in years past, before automobiles were common, before television, in days when my grandpa would get a quarter to scrub the kitchen floor, and he would use that quarter to treat himself and a friend to a silent movie at the Delft and still have change left over for snacks.

I always wanted to write, and I always had an insatiable desire to know more about Marquette's past. While in college, I grew interested in family history. I learned my ancestors came to Marquette in 1849, the year the village was founded. My family has lived here ever since, and as I learned more about Marquette's history, I found myself wondering what it was like to live through all those events--the building of ore docks, the fire of 1868 that left the town in ruins, the constant economic worries. What was it like to come here from a foreign land, or from a big Eastern city, to find only forests and harsh winters? In my novels, I tried to reimagine such events and depict them so readers would understand the incredible courage of those early settlers.

The scene in *Iron Pioneers* that I feel best exemplifies the novel's theme of courage and survival is when Molly and Patrick talk about why they left Ireland to come to America. Their discussion reflects the tale of many immigrants who came to Marquette--some like Patrick to escape religious or political oppression--some like Molly, to avoid poverty and suffering. Molly's daughter asks herself how she can live happily in America when her own grandmother starved to death during the Irish potato famine and when others equally suffer throughout the world. Patrick replies that she must honor the struggles of others by appreciating her better life and the sacrifices her forebears made for her.

I wrote my trilogy as a tribute to those pioneers who built Marquette, and those like them in every community who built this nation despite the difficulties they faced. I hope my novels inspire readers with courage to endure their own trials and overcome them.

A tale of pioneers could have been written about many places, but I know Marquette so well that it was the obvious setting. I have lived here all my life except six years when I foolishly thought I would find a better life elsewhere, only to feel exiled. While I was away, Marquette celebrated its sesquicentennial, and I, homesick, decided to write about its history.

I had written other books, but I was never satisfied with them. When I began writing *Iron Pioneers* and its sequels, although I knew the task would be monumental, I finally felt I had found my voice, the books I was actually born to write.

I wrote about the outdoors--the forests, Lake Superior, the fierce winters, the splendid summers, the sense of peace one feels among so much beauty. I wrote about the history, for I could not imagine a more inspiring story than the American dream played out in a quest to build an industrial empire alongside Lake Superior, of an iron discovery that produced more wealth than the California gold rush, of a mined product that helped to win major wars and change the world. And I wrote about the change and decline of that iron industry, how it effected the people who lived in Marquette, sometimes fulfilling, often destroying their dreams.

Mostly, however, I wrote about life in a small town, of the relationships between people in a community. Many people think small towns are quiet and dull because they lack the fast-paced lifestyle of metropolitan areas. But small towns have a greater and more personal drama. Willa Cather, one of my greatest influences, described the relationships in small towns best when she wrote:

In little towns, lives roll along so close to one another; loves and hates beat about, their wings almost touching. On the sidewalks along which everybody comes and goes, you must, if you walk abroad at all, at some time pass within a few inches of the man who cheated and betrayed you, or the woman you desire more than anything else in the world. Her skirt brushes against you. You say good-morning and go on. It is a close shave. Out in the world the escapes are not so narrow.

Relationships are complex in small towns, the layers of social networks dizzying; in the intertwining family trees and the friendships of my characters, I tried to capture this reality.

I have felt lonely in large cities, walking down streets where not a face is familiar, where no one notices you. In Marquette, although it has grown to where I can go into a store without seeing a familiar face, I know if I stop to speak to any stranger for a minute and name a half-dozen acquaintances, we will know someone in common. We are only separated by a degree or two here in our little city of twenty thousand.

Living your entire life in the same place breeds familiarity. Even if I see no one I know when I walk about Marquette, the city is rich with memories and history for me. It is an indescribable comfort to enter the downtown post office and recall that my grandfather helped to build it. I can walk down Washington Street and see the stone in the sidewalk marking where the Marquette Opera House once stood, where my grandfather proposed to my grandmother. The First Methodist Church has a stained glass memorial window to

honor my ancestral aunt and uncle. I look out onto Iron Bay and imagine what my ancestors must have felt when they first arrived on its shore. My readers tell me they now walk about Marquette, equally imagining life here for the generations before them--that to me is the ultimate compliment for my work.

A timelessness settles over a person who grows older while living in the same place. You refer to gas stations by names they have not held in twenty years, yet your old friends know where you mean. As you drive into South Marquette on 553, you turn your head out of habit to look at the old red brick house of the Brookridge Estate, which you have always admired, only to realize it is 2006 now, not 1982, and the house was torn down over a dozen years ago.

I imagine such nostalgia and family connections are why people enjoy my books, why some of my readers stay in Marquette despite the possibility of better lives elsewhere, or why many of my readers, exiled from Upper Michigan, find comfort for their homesickness by revisiting Marquette through my words.

This deep abiding connection, this sense of place, of belonging, of knowing I am home and knowing how much that is to be valued--that is why I write about Marquette.

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