

Bend historical fiction author Jane Kirkpatrick writes of the lives of Western women

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By [Special to The Oregonian](#)



Photo by: Quentin Smith
Author Jane Kirkpatrick

For 25 years, Jane Kirkpatrick wrote each evening in a travel trailer on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation or each morning from a second-floor office of her ranch house overlooking the John Day River.

First it was letters of homesteading tales to family and friends. Next, a breakthrough magazine article. A writing contest and more freelance success followed, and then finally, in 1991, a first book with a \$12,000 advance.

Twenty-one books sprang from that reservation trailer and Starvation Point ranch. The past two years, Kirkpatrick's writing -- and two more novels -- occurred in a converted bedroom in a comfortable home tucked into the juniper of a rural cul-de-sac near

Bend. Now her computer faces a bright window overlooking a yard and a labyrinth lined with lava rock.

Kirkpatrick, 66, maintains a prodigious schedule. Specializing in women's historical fiction with a spiritual message, she has researched and written at least one book a year since 1995.

On April 1, she finished the first draft of her 23rd book -- this one about mental health pioneer Dorothea Dix set in 1830s New England. That allowed time to meet a June 1 deadline to complete a small devotional book. Days later, her editor's revisions of the Dix novel arrived in the mail. She will tackle those until August, all while keeping a travel and promotion regimen that requires a hired scheduler to keep straight and a husband, Jerry, 82, to make work.

"It's as busy as I've been," Kirkpatrick says of her writing life.

Writing and ranch life

Kirkpatrick was meant to be a writer, but veered into social work for three decades.

A high school English teacher in Mondovi, Wis., saw Jane Rutschow's promise and convinced her parents she should go to college. Starting out in English, she changed to communication and speech, grew interested in social work and earned a master's degree in that field. She fell in love with Oregon during a visit and landed a social work job in Bend in 1974.

During that work, Kirkpatrick said she discovered her writing "moved people." A community college writing class led to some freelance sales. It also gave Kirkpatrick enough confidence to leave her job in 1984 and move with her husband to 160 acres of sagebrush, rock and rattlesnakes along the John Day River.

"I thought it would keep me from going crazy down there," she said.

The Kirkpatricks lived in a 35-foot trailer for more than a year until their house was finished. Electricity arrived in August 1985, powering the computer on which she composed letters, articles and eventually books.

But even successful freelance writing wasn't enough.

"That ranch sucked up money like water in the desert," Kirkpatrick said.

She returned to social work -- a part-time job in Warm Springs that lasted 17 years. Because the job involved a two-hour commute, she would spend two or three nights a week living in the trailer moved from ranch to reservation.

At Warm Springs, she would write each evening. At the ranch, she would be at her computer by 5 a.m. and write until 7, when daily chores began.

"I made the commitment," she said.

Kirkpatrick's first book, "Homestead," was published in 1991 and chronicled years of work and lessons the couple learned from creating the ranch. It sold 25,000 copies and gave Kirkpatrick the momentum to tackle more.

Historical fiction

While in Warm Springs, she heard about a woman who in the mid-1800s with her husband created a bustling hotel and life along the Deschutes River. She aimed to write a biography of Jane Sherar, but there just wasn't enough original material.

So Kirkpatrick decided to write a historical fiction in which history "is the spine of the book," some characters are enhanced or created, and where dialogue is what she calls "approximate speech."

"A Sweetness to the Soul," Kirkpatrick's first novel, was named the outstanding Western novel of 1996 by the Oklahoma-based Western Heritage Center.

Kirkpatrick convinced her publisher she could write three more historical fictions. "I had one of them in my head," she said. "I found the other two."

The series launched a career leading to 500,000 copies of her books in print.

Kirkpatrick's publisher, WaterBrook Multnomah, is a Christian subsidiary of Random House and each of her novels carries a low-key spiritual message that she tries not to make "overbearing."

"I am a Christian, but I'm hopeful that anyone can read these and find inspiration," Kirkpatrick says.

One of her original editors, Dudley Delffs, said Kirkpatrick quickly became one of WaterBrook's main authors.

"She was miles beyond the genre writers ... especially the Christian writers who often let their faith agenda override their writing agenda," Delffs said. "I always admired her integrity, her wholeness."

The writing process

When Kirkpatrick gets a book idea -- or suggestions from others -- it goes into a storage file. The focus of her latest release, lilac hybridist Hulda Klager of Woodland, Wash., came only after years of correspondence with a relative.

Once the subject is chosen, months of research ensue. It may involve -- like the Jane Sherar book -- visits to rural libraries, museums, tracking down relatives and records. For two books about Jessie Gaebele, Kirkpatrick's turn-of-the-century photographer grandmother, it meant returning to Wisconsin roots and careful conversations with the children from her grandfather's first marriage.

If "you have to have your butt in the chair" to write, as Kirkpatrick puts it, then research is boots on the ground. "That's the fun thing about research ... what you stumble into," she said.

Research goes into binders and folders stored in clear plastic bins stacked in the closet of the bedroom-turned-office. Before writing, Kirkpatrick asks herself three questions: What is the story about; what is her attitude toward the story; and what is her purpose for writing it?

Next is an extensive theme statement, which is synthesized to three sentences and taped to the top edge of her computer screen. Kirkpatrick then sketches a historical timeline and adds characters.

"I have an idea for the start and end," she says, "and then I just start writing."

She still writes early each morning, though without the prospect of grueling farm chores, "If I have a thought at 1:30, I just get up and pursue it."

Even with the never-ending demands of social media, she will not go online or check email until 10 a.m.

"I think of it as a horse race," Kirkpatrick said. "I just want to sit down and finish it."

Bob Welch was Kirkpatrick's first writing instructor 30 years ago. Now he's a columnist for the Eugene Register-Guard and author of 15 books and has Kirkpatrick help at a yearly writer's workshop he organizes. Welch says when he's grinding on a book, agonizing about getting up and getting to work, he rolls over in bed and tells himself, "Get up you jerk. Jane Kirkpatrick has already been writing for an hour."

Like any writer, Kirkpatrick understands and can appreciate the pain of editing. The best editors have a great sense of story, see what's missing and ask questions. The worst call to ask if they can change the dress's color to red.

Kirkpatrick initially wrote her 2011 book, "The Daughter's Walk," through the eyes of both a mother and daughter in turn-of-the-century Spokane, Wash. When Erin Healy of Colorado Springs, Colo., got the first draft, she suggested to Kirkpatrick that telling the story through the daughter's eyes alone would be more powerful.

"Let me think about that and try," was Kirkpatrick's reply, Healy said.

Kirkpatrick went back to her computer and spent two months rewriting the book.

"Almost all revisions have a certain amount of pain," Kirkpatrick says. "You just have to grow new flesh."

Healy, who has edited 10 of Kirkpatrick's books, said the author never stopped researching even when editing started. Sometimes Kirkpatrick would call in small corrections to timelines or historical detail, Healy said.

As with any performance artist, Kirkpatrick is keenly aware of reviews and tries to avoid the negative. She won't look at reader comments on some websites but appreciates when friends tally positive versus negative numbers.

Not slowing down

Two years ago, Jerry Kirkpatrick had a stroke and heart attack that necessitated the couple's return to the Bend area. So far, it has not slowed Jane Kirkpatrick's wide-ranging speaking engagements, workshops and book-selling that often consume three weekends a month.

"I have a fear that if I didn't do the personal promotions the books just wouldn't sell," Kirkpatrick says, laughing at herself. "But as I get older, I just may have to see if that's true."

But she has no plans to slow her writing.

The Dorothea Dix book, to be released in April 2013, is the last with her current publisher. Kirkpatrick recently signed a contract with Revell Books for three more novels set in the 1800s.

"I have ideas," she said, smiling. "There are all kinds of possibilities."

Quinton Smith is a freelance writer.

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