



Write On...

BY DEBORAH WYATT FELLOWS

One day, just as the leaves were beginning to change, Peter Matthiessen walked into our offices. The renowned novelist and nonfiction writer arrived with award-winning author Doug Stanton to tape a video interview for MyNorth.com, in anticipation of Matthiessen's National Writers Series appearance at the City Opera House in Traverse City. There was no pomp and circumstance. They both opted for the coffee they walked in with. What was present was a couple of guys who are passionate about writing having a lovely conversation about Matthiessen's work, his travels and written lines that capture the mystery of the art and of life.

Hours later, Matthiessen took to the stage of the City Opera House. And while he appeared before a packed house, the conversation had much of the same characteristics that took place in our office—relaxed, engaging, approachable dialog about the art of writing and the life of the writer. And that is by design. Doug, who started the National Writers Series in 2009 with his wife, Anne Stanton, also a writer, and lawyer Grant Parsons, often speaks of the evenings as having the qualities of a “dinner party,” filled with relaxed, entertaining conversation that easily engages audience members as well as the people on stage. There is an easy intimacy to these National Writers Series evenings that reflects the founders' vision, the ready engagement of the writers and the essence of life in Northern Michigan.

Doug Stanton has traveled the world writing for magazines like *Esquire* and *Outside*. He has met the shining stars in entertainment of all kinds, slogged through jungles and then, in 2002, he wrote *In*

Ham's Way, the story of the 900 men who were thrown into the Pacific after their ship, the USS Indianapolis was torpedoed by a Japanese sub. *In Ham's Way* was a *Publishers Weekly* Notable Book of the Year, a Barnes and Noble.com Editor's Pick, an Amazon Historical Bestseller, and was chosen by *Book* magazine as “One of the ten who made it big.” Stanton followed that in 2009 with *Horse Soldiers*, a *New York Times* best-seller, that beautifully and authentically captures the heroic efforts of a small band of Special Forces soldiers who secretly entered Afghanistan following 9/11 and rode to war on horses against the Taliban.

Clearly, Doug's an accomplished author in a demanding profession. But he is also one of those unique individuals who take their passion for their craft beyond their own work and relationships. Doug acts upon big ideas. After serving as one of the founders of the Traverse City Film Festival, Doug turned his attention to writers, in part because time has seen the disintegration of truly engaging events between writers and the general public. The book world has seen what was once was an active dialog between writers and the public reduced to a short exchange at a book signing table in Cleveland today and Phoenix tomorrow. Doug, Anne and Grant set out to create an environment reminiscent of the days when exploring the themes in literature and non-fiction was the past time of a broader part of the population. And a constant refrain that runs through the series is the enthusiasm for the high school scholarship program the series funds, designed to inspire and recognize young writers.

Why do they care about this? At its purest level, they care about and believe

in writing and writers. But Doug often cites an even broader theme that speaks to the universal quality writing has of crossing the lines drawn by our increasingly polar political universe that cordons people off into worlds that have them interacting only with those who share their ideology. Literature and nonfiction writing doesn't know those boundaries. The themes explored are so often about the joys and trials of the human condition we can all relate to, regardless of our political beliefs—themes that help us identify with one another rather than find our differences. And, similarly, writing offers young people a powerful tool for sorting through and funneling the emotions that come with figuring out the world at their stage of life.

Northern Michigan itself plays its own role in the National Writers Series. We have a long tradition of being a haven for creative people, for the obvious reasons of the inspiration of the landscape, the tranquility, the ability to step away and the presence of a vibrant creative community. But our region's attraction goes a bit deeper than that. We allow world-renowned authors, screenwriters, musicians, painters and chefs to wander easily about our communities without being accosted or gawked at. For decades, these creative folks have valued the fact that they can sit at the bar of a local tavern and chat with the house painter they fish with or the person who fixed their car last week. It's nothing to run into one of them picking up a dozen eggs and the *New York Times* at the market. This “live and let live” approach is an odd sixth sense when it comes to how the public treats the famous Up North, born of that universal truth we all share that says, “This just isn't the place.” Whether you live here or visit, ►



Editor's Note (cont'd)

Northern Michigan is a place of respite and we honor that truth for everyone.

I remember being in a tavern one night with Oscar-winning screenwriter, Kurt Luedtke, who had stumbled upon some trivia cards for World War II left at the bar where we sat. I am really a failure at trivia, but the woman on the other side of him picked up on the game and she was almost as knowledgeable as Kurt. It was literally hours of playing the game before it ever came out that he had written the screenplay for the movie *Out of Africa*, or that her husband, seated on her other side, was the CEO or president of Seagram's. What was so typical of Northern Michigan is that once those truths were revealed and acknowledged, the game simply went on. It was a winter night in Northern Michigan in a warm bar filled with people who had braved the cold and nothing else mattered.

I'm sure the National Writers Series would be a success in many regions of the country. Agents, publicists and publishing companies have embraced the unique approach as enthusiastically as the writers and audiences themselves. Now entering its fourth year, the lineup for 2012 is as stunning as ever. But it's Northern Michigan that gets to welcome some of the world's finest writers to our beautiful place in the relaxed, accepting way we have for generations. It's Northern Michigan that is getting known as a place where books are valued and where talking about the themes writers continue to explore is becoming not quite commonplace, but certainly a more accessible experience for so many of us. Young writers in Northern Michigan get to listen and interact with established writers so that the craft can flourish going forward and that those young adults' often first impressions are of dialog, passion and exploration.

I'm sure Doug, Anne and Grant could have made a go of the National Writers Series anywhere. I'm just really grateful they did it here.

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