

Telling nursing's stories: Reality or fiction?

By Eleanor J. Sullivan, PhD, RN, FAAN

“YOU’RE GOING TO DO WHAT?”

my colleagues asked when I told them I planned to quit my job to write mysteries. I had a good job as dean of the School of Nursing at the University of Kansas, rewarding professional activities, and a productive career writing for nurses. I decided, however, to marry my two passions—nursing and mystery fiction—to tell nursing’s story. I planned to use fiction to show nurses in action in the behind-the-scenes world of health care.

How hard could it be? I’d been writing nursing books and journal articles for years and even edited a nursing journal for a time. Plus, mystery fiction is my favorite form of entertainment.

I soon learned why so many people say, “I’ve thought about writing a book,” but so few actually do. Certainly, I could craft a sentence, paragraphs, a whole book even, but I discovered that writing fiction required an additional set of skills.

Besides learning the craft, I had to overcome my obsessive urge to describe every nursing action in excruciating detail. Fortunately, award-winning mystery writer, Nancy Pickard, came to my aid when she offered to review my early work. She called to tell me that I had too many characters in my first scene.

“But, Nancy,” I responded, “I have to have that many nurses. It’s a 12-bed unit.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s fiction!”

Creating real characters

Slowly, after many drafts and rewrites, my character Monika Everhardt, head nurse of the intensive care unit (ICU) at St. Teresa’s Hospital, came to life. Monika loves nursing but struggles with the real-world problems nurses face. While providing patient care and managing the ICU, she also solves murders. Unrealistic? Only the part about solving murders; the nursing care is all too real.

Monika first emerges in *Twice Dead* (2002) when she tries to find out how a young woman who was never pregnant bled to death after an abortion, while struggling to



maintain patient care in spite of recent budget cuts. Monika returns in *Deadly Diversion* (2004) to solve the murder of a small-time crook who died unexpectedly just before he was to tell police about a long-ago crime. In *Assumed Dead* (2006), Monika uncovers two clever killers while battling a hospital reorganization that puts her in charge of the stepdown unit as well as the ICU.

I intended my books to show the public what nurses really do and how vital their work is, and I have succeeded. *Ellery Queen Mystery*



Eleanor J. Sullivan

Magazine wrote, “The telling and characters are expertly handled, and the specialized background is rendered in warts-and-all detail.”

Response from nurses

My biggest fans are nurses. At nursing events where I speak, nurses snap up my mysteries faster than my nursing books. Recently, a nurse said to me, “I could tell this was an author who had walked those halls.” Such praise from nurses means more than any other accolades.

I have found fiction writing to be challenging and rewarding, much like nursing. At times, writing can be difficult and frustrating, but hearing readers say they enjoy my work is satisfying.

It is my privilege to tell nursing’s stories. ★

To learn more about Eleanor’s mysteries and nursing books, see www.EleanorSullivan.com.

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