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Spirit Road Mysteries
C. M. Wendelboe: Q & A

Q: How has your experience as a law enforcement officer influenced your writing?

A: When I describe a crime scene, for example, it's as accurate as possible because, whatever I'm describing, I've seen firsthand. If I describe the victim lying on the floor with a gunshot to his head, or bludgeoned with an iron pipe, it is because at least a portion of that scene I've witnessed and investigated.

Being a law enforcement officer for thirty-eight years has also aided me in depicting police procedure accurately. There's no CSI in my writing. Cases are solved more often by the investigator using his LPCs (Leather Personnel Carriers) and dogged determination than any whiz-bang forensic crutch.

And my law enforcement experience has helped me when it comes to character interactions. Any good cop will be nose-y. Any good cop will want to know why someone commits a crime as much as he wants to know how. Personal interaction among characters is as important as their motivations for their actions.

Q: Why do you write about the Sioux Indians in your mysteries?

A: I could have written about any Plains Indians: the Crow or Cheyenne or Shoshoni or Arapaho. I chose to write about the Lakota mainly because those Reservations in western South Dakota, Wyoming, and Nebraska are so rich in history. Those reservations are all that's left of the Great Sioux Reservation after the lands were carved up by the government. Which brings me to what I can relate to personally: When I started in law enforcement in 1972 in South Dakota, Indian-White relations were terrible, and I'm afraid we didn't treat the Indians very well. The American Indian Movement was in full swing with violent takeovers and militant demonstrations, and

we didn't trust Indians. I often think we justified our actions because the Indians didn't treat us very well, either.

But through years of study and associations with Indian people, I gained a profound respect for their culture and a deep empathy for the way they were treated by Whites through the years. In my writing, I don't sugarcoat this relationship, nor do I sugarcoat the problems on the reservations. What I strive to portray, though, is the positive things going on in Indian country.

The Lakota are no different from any other group of people: Their community has its problems, but it also has its positives. And if I've learned anything in my studies of the Lakota, it is that they deserve as much dignity and respect that they have been denied for so long by so many people.

Q: Why are spiritual elements integral to your novels?

A: Traditional Lakota treat everything as sacred: animals and trees and rocks and land. Without the spiritual aspect, my stories could be set anywhere. But they aren't. There is no other place where my stories could take place except on Indian reservations. And this opens up conflicts between those traditionalists who want a return to the old ways and worship as Indians did for hundreds of years, and those, such as my protagonist FBI Agent Manny Tanno, who fight against the old ways.

Q: Why do you write murder mysteries?

A: I could write about burglaries or assaults or property-destroying arsonists, but they don't catch the interest like an unsolved murder. Think how you read a newspaper. The headlines mention a house burglary last night where some valuable jewelry was taken, or maybe someone's car running outside a bar was stolen. You think: The fool should have had his house alarmed or jewelry in a safe deposit box. And that idiot who had his car stolen shouldn't have left the keys in it. You gloss over these things. Then you see where someone's been murdered, the culprit unknown. A couple streets away perhaps. You jump up and make sure the door's locked, your interest level through the roof now, and you want to know more. You have to know more.

That's where I come in with the murder mystery. I pass out tidbits of information, little slips of the narrator's tongue, just enough info that you are within the mind of my sleuth. I give you just enough line to keep you snagged until the end where you'll find out if your deductions were right. My job is to feed you those tidbits, not too many to give the story away, and just enough that you can't cry foul that I was playing unfair—and I stump you. My job is to give you the "aha" moment at the end where you slap your forehead and say, "I should have seen that coming," or "I forgot about that clue."

You'll pick yourself up and brush yourself off and vow that the next book of mine you read, you're going to be ready for me. You're going to figure out who the murder or murders are before my sleuth does. And if I do my craft right, I'll be up for the rematch.

Q: How can you sustain your series through subsequent novels?

A: My characters are in part composites of diverse people I've met with and worked with through the years, and I strive to keep my characters fresh. Making my main sleuth, Manny Tanno, an FBI agent allows me the flexibility to move him to other Indian reservations. I consciously wanted Manny to be a federal lawman so that my series wouldn't become stale being stuck in one locale and dealing with one group of people. So, subsequent novels will see Manny traveling to other plains reservations, yet always returning to Pine Ridge. And by moving Manny around to places he is not familiar with, I can keep him on his toes as well as keep my stories interesting.