

An Occurrence in Deadwood, South Dakota

As related in my last blog, origins—the creative spark, the seed, the turning point—are mysterious and fascinating. Some have planning behind them—as a carefully designed garden, house or career—but often they are capricious and spontaneous, dictated by chance more than anything else. Such is the nature of life, I think. The origins of my novel, *The Sins of Maggie Black*, began with a memory. As I empathize with the underdog and misfit, the nature of my novel would be set, but one needs the solid elements of a story to make it come to life. As I casted about for ideas, an encounter I had several years previous seemed to capture my imagination.

It was in the fall of 2003, and my wife and I had stopped in a small park in Deadwood, South Dakota. We were touring the Black Hills, sacred ground to the Plains Indians—their omphalos or navel of the world—the place where their creator and ancestors dwell. I mention this because my encounters with the area, including the Badlands, have deeply affected me—and because it relates to what I'm going to discuss later about story setting. On that particular day—a bright, sunny day filled with the excitement of new places—we parked our truck next to a young family. The doors to their minibus were wide

open, and I noticed it was packed with provisions. The mother held her baby while two other children played on swings, and I walked over to chat with the father. I said it must be cool to camp in a minibus, which my wife overheard. Later she said, “Camping?” Did you see what was in their van? They are living out of that thing.” In my naiveté, I failed to realize the family was homeless—the parents perhaps working, or looking to work, in the town’s booming casino industry.

That family became Maggie and her son in my story, and they would also be homeless, living out of a van but hoping for a better life. *She knows he’s paid for her mistakes, but that’s all going to change—he’ll be proud of her and their love will be perfect and things will be different. She imagines a stable job, a nice home with nice neighbors, a new school—and her body lightens, her thoughts turn dreamlike . . .*

My heroine needed an occupation, and somehow the gritty world of door-to-door sales came to mind. I wasn’t far into exploring this when I knew it would be a perfect fit for my novel—ripe with emotions, full of dramatic possibilities. Once common, it may seem outmoded now, but it still exists—sometimes involving scams to outright theft and other felonies. For honest and dishonest salespersons alike, it is hard, demanding work—and not without risk. Often young, gullible people work for unscrupulous con artists

who have rigged the entire system to their benefit. I once had an experience with the dark side of this world. I was working with my boss in our office suite. We let two young guys in who wanted to sell us picture frames. We weren't interested, so they left. The next morning I opened the office to discover a guy already inside about to steal a computer. I chased him outside, but lost him around a corner. I believe the salesmen from the previous day had cased our office.

I now had my heroine, her occupation, and her most precious possession. She dreams of a stable job in Deadwood, so I needed someplace along the way where she would be delayed, a place that had a municipal campground and park—and a park ranger. In my next post I'll discuss that place and the importance of setting—the sacred ground where reality and myth collide.

Discover Maggie's journey: **THE SINS OF MAGGIE BLACK** is now **available!** Find paperback and eBook versions on Amazon.