

“Robert D. Sutherland Gives Us an Indepth Insight Into the Creation of His Books, *The Farringford Cadenza* and *Sticklewort and Feverfew*” –An interview conducted by Sylvia L. Ramsey on her blogsite “Thoughtful Reflections” (<http://www.thoughtfulreflections.blogspot.com>), September 15, 2011.

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Robert D. Sutherland was born in Blytheville, Arkansas in 1937; from age four, he lived in Wichita, Kansas until attending graduate school at the University of Iowa, and after that taught courses in Linguistics and Creative Writing at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois until his retirement in 1992. He particularly enjoyed teaching Descriptive Linguistics, History of the English Language, Semantic Theory, and Old English. In 1977, he and his co-editor James R. Scrimgeour founded Pikestaff Publications, a not-for-profit literary press that published *The Pikestaff Forum*, a literary magazine, until 1996. He continues serving as editor at The Pikestaff Press, which publishes books of poetry and prose fiction. In 2009 he began a blog for writers and readers of mysteries. He and his wife Marilyn have traveled widely, parented two sons to adulthood, and worked to promote peace, social justice, and preservation of the natural environment. His publications include a scholarly book, *Language and Lewis Carroll*; a novel, *Sticklewort and Feverfew* (containing 74 of his pencil illustrations), which received the 1981 Friends of American Writers Juvenile Book Merit Award for author/illustrator; a second novel, *The Farringford Cadenza*; short fiction, poems, and essays on literature, education, and publishing. His interests include classical music, the nature of metaphor, reading, travel, film noir, and the comparative study of mythologies.

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Tell us about the genre of your work.

I’ve not confined myself to a single genre. I’ve written novels and short stories, essays, poetry, and a scholarly analysis of Lewis Carroll’s interest in language. I particularly like writing prose fiction because I enjoy the challenge of storytelling and character development. ***The Farringford Cadenza***, published in 2007, is a suspenseful, humorous stand-alone mystery that subtly skews generic conventions to continually surprise readers with reversals of their assumptions and expectations. While an exciting and pleasurable read with a host of engaging and memorable characters, it also affectionately parodies the suspense and mystery genres.

What is the story’s premise?

Essentially, the story recounts a *Perilous Quest*, where a number of diverse contenders compete for an elusive but desperately desired object: the unique manuscript of a legendary musical score which, having been lost for thirty-four years, suddenly re-appears only to vanish again. Along the way, the narrative embodies many standard features of the suspense and mystery genres: murder, extortion, deceit, deadly pursuit, code-cracking, disguises, clandestine surveillance, and difficult puzzles that demand solution. ***The Farringford Cadenza*** also depicts the dangers of illusion and self-delusion and explores the possibilities for humor in the interplay of character and circumstance.

The cadenza of the title is a six-minute solo which composer Charles Philip Farringford wrote for inclusion in the last movement of his Fifth Piano Concerto. In 1947, prior to the concerto's scheduled publication, Farringford performs it in three cities, having committed the notes of the cadenza to a unique manuscript. Returning to New York by train after the final concert, he dies mysteriously; and when his body arrives at Pennsylvania Station, his suitcase and the cadenza manuscript are gone and can't be found. A great loss, for the three audiences who heard it performed assert that not only was the music sublimely beautiful, but it also possessed startling powers of physical rejuvenation. Farringford's New York publishers, Lunner & Dinch, print the concerto leaving a blank spot in the score where the cadenza would have gone, and pianists who perform it must improvise their own cadenzas to fill the gap.

Thirty-four years later, a music student discovers the missing cadenza manuscript in the false bottom of a piano bench in a Baltimore flea-market. After her professor holds a press conference to announce the discovery, but before the publishers can reclaim it, burglars steal the manuscript from his house in the first of three break-ins that occur on the same night. The publisher and the Farringford family hire a firm of private investigators, N. F. Trntl Associates, to recover the manuscript. In Baltimore, the investigators are spied upon, confronted with shadowy misdirections and dead-end clues, entangled in two murders, and forced to deal with repeated attempts on their own lives. As the story progresses, readers gradually come to realize (which the detectives never do) that at least ten distinct individuals and groups are avidly pursuing the manuscript for a variety of motives and purposes. Most of these pursuers remain ignorant of the existence of the others, unless they become aware when their paths continually cross.

Why did you choose this genre?

I've always been interested in mysteries. I began reading Sherlock Holmes when I was 10; by 14, I'd read the entire canon (4 novels, 56 short stories) four times through—as well as all of the mysteries for young people in the Wichita Public Library. In high school I read mostly science fiction. Through college and graduate school, and when I began teaching at Illinois State University and raising my family, I read fiction less and did more academic writing in linguistics and educational theory. During the 1970's, while my children were still young, I wrote and illustrated **Sticklewort and Feverfew**, a fantasy in realistic mode, in which the citizens of a community comprised of people and humanized animals must work cooperatively to survive the deadly industrial pollution produced by the Sudge-Buddle Company. After that book was published in 1980, my early interest in mystery stories resurged, and I decided to write my own.

Was it hard to shift from writing fantasy to writing mystery?

Conceptually, no. Mysteries are a kind of fantasy, after all; each creates its own internally-consistent universe, which is carefully controlled by the author and governed (shaped) by defining rules and conventions. My difficulty lay in having to re-familiarize myself with the peculiar conventions of the mystery genre and its various sub-types. If I was going to write a mystery, I wanted it to be a good one—challenging and enjoyable for readers, and able to pass muster as a solid representative of the genre; therefore I had to do it “right”.

Accordingly, since it had been a long while since I'd read mysteries and I felt I had to experience them afresh, with adult eyes, I spent the next several years reading hundreds of them—by British and American authors for the most part, ranging from the classic practitioners of the 1920's, '30's, and '40's, to those authors working at present. When I found a series by an author I liked, I'd read all the books in the series. I became addicted; as soon as I finished one mystery, I'd start another. Cozies, stories of

private investigators and amateur sleuths, historical puzzlers, police procedurals, forensic science, espionage and spy thrillers, those with ethnic focus and exotic locales—I read them all (and still am). In the process, I learned a great deal about the conventions of the mystery/suspense genre, about the various ways that mystery stories can be told, and how diverse authors had achieved their effects. I called this project my “research”; but beyond that, it was a pleasurable apprenticeship. Finally, I felt I was ready to write my own. I knew before I started that I wanted to write a serious mystery, but a humorous one. I felt that the premise I had arrived at was sufficiently absurd to provide an unusual and delightful story bristling with opportunities for humor. Although the action it entailed—the quest by a diverse group of seekers for Sam Spade’s Maltese dingus or Hitchcock’s MacGuffin, etc.—was standard stuff, my challenge was to make the absurdity so matter-of-factly believable that readers would forget how bizarre the premise was, and to make the action so gripping, the characters so real, the consequences of failure so nasty that readers would lose sight of how conventional the plot structure was. I focused my efforts on achieving those goals.

What are some of your books, stories that have been published? Give a short description of each. Books – title, ISBN and where they can be found. (Include your website/s) Newest book?

The Farringford Cadenza. A Novel. ISBN: 978-0-936044-08-8 (trade paperback) 523pp. Available at Baker & Taylor, Amazon.com, and from the publisher, The Pikestaff Press P.O. Box 127 Normal, IL 61761 (<http://www.pikestaffpress.com>)

Sticklewort and Feverfew (a novel for children, adolescents, and adults, with 74 illustrations by the author) ISBN: 978-0-936044-00-2 (hardcover) / 978-0-936044-01-9 (trade paperback) 355pp. Received the 1981 Friends of American Writers Juvenile Book Merit Award for author/illustrator. Available at Baker & Taylor, Amazon.com, and from the publisher, The Pikestaff Press P.O. Box 127 Normal, IL 61761 (www.pikestaffpress.com)

Language and Lewis Carroll (a scholarly book which investigates the scope of Carroll’s interest in language and the extent of his disciplined linguistic training and knowledge). Library of Congress #: 73-101966 (hardcover) 245pp. Available used at Amazon.com and AbeBooks.com

“Point of Departure”—a short story published in *Big Muddy*, 5, #2 (2005). High school Latin teacher Edith Kenshaw, who loves her work, resigns her teaching position at age 52, when, for the first time in her career, no students sign up for third-year Latin. If no students want to read Vergil’s *Aeneid*, so be it; Edith will find other things to do. Available for free download at my website: <http://www.robertdsutherland.com>

How do you come up with the names of places and characters in your books?

Well, there are several ways. In ***The Farringford Cadenza*** the protagonist is a female private investigator named N. F. Trntl (since she doesn’t wish to be called ‘Nasturtia’ or ‘Fanny’ or ‘N. F.’, she goes by ‘Trntl’; for her I wanted a name with no vowels [there are such]); the members of her investigative team have less unusual names: Carol Brown (a spirited young widow who’s found that she likes living alone), Torvald Grimsson (a Viking with a black belt in karate who’s engaged to lovely Rachel Weintraub, whom the reader never gets to meet), and Felix McKay, who plays jazz clarinet in his spare time and is in love with concert pianist Rosamond Foxe (whose name describes her perfectly). For the most part, the Baltimore mobsters have Roman, Italian, or vaguely Sicilian names: Giuseppe “Lefty” Scaevola (head of the Family), his nephew Tony (exiled to his Uncle Vinnie in Newark), and members of Lefty’s Organization who come to various kinds of grief: Angelo Torelli, Giovanni Speranza (“John Hope”), Alfie

Colonna, Nick Dellanotte (“Nick o’the Night”), and Davis “Fingers” Beauregard. Silas Dinch of the publishing firm Lunner & Dinch is a worry-wart who’s obsessed with bringing out a new edition of Farringford’s concerto containing the cadenza. Pianist Peter Shipley Abbott is much taken with himself, as his three names and elegant gloves imply. Character names have never been a problem for me.

For instance, Victor Zyzynsky (billionaire collector of unique artifacts who has always bitterly resented coming at the end of the alphabet). His black-bag men: Marco (late of the Flying Gruschenkos), Jerry (a retired Green Beret), and Chip (a Princeton graduate). There are composer Charles Philip Farringford, his domineering widow (known simply as Mrs. Farringford), and his middle-aged children—Clara (named for the nineteenth-century pianist Clara Schumann) and Anton (named either for Bruckner or Rubinstein, he’s not sure which) who is embezzling from several accounts he manages at Swinfurth-Lightfoot Bank and Trust and facing an external audit.

Also, Anton’s girlfriend Twila Bidwell (who knows what she wants and how to get it); Naomi Sternberg (friend of the arts who will spare no expense to recover the cadenza); Dietrich Van Voort (an unscrupulous art dealer who knows how to choose his cheese and wine and dangerously play one client against another); Professor “Ted” Pettigrew (who finds his life and career as a musicologist to be sadly disappointing); Morgan Latimer (a fading stockbroker who, having heard Charles Philip Farringford play his cadenza in 1947 wants desperately to hear it again before he dies); and Big Verna, the St. Croix tavern-keeper who needs no help in keeping riff-raff out of her establishment. Place names tend to be actual locations. Readers who were living in Baltimore or Christiansted, St. Croix in 1981 would feel quite at home reading this novel.

Names of characters in my earlier novel *Sticklewort and Feverfew* are of a different order. The title references two herbs drawn from a poem within the text: “Sticklewort and feverfew/ Mixed with fennel’s yellow flower/ Makes a health-fulfilling brew/ That gives a doctor sovereign power.”) I did not pick this title. It was chosen by my wife and two sons (for whom the book was written), after they had (vehemently, and rightly) rejected all of my suggestions.

In retrospect, I found that the novel contains 48 major characters that, in the writing, I’d been required to particularize, differentiate, and make believable. Naming them contributed to this process. Following a standard convention in traditional children’s literature, for the animals’ names I sometimes chose alliterative combinations (often linking them with non-alliterative names for the characters’ close associates).

Some examples: Parker Packrat (who creates art from the town’s trash in the building of his multi-leveled junk sculpture in the Chickalooga Forest); Priscilla Possum, dress and bonnet-maker (who’s teaching her nephew Randy to sew buttonholes); Lafayette Lizard, editor of the local newspaper (who nearly dies when the tunnel being dug beneath the Sudge-Buddle factory collapses); Murchison Mole (wise old leader of the Underground Community); Fergus Fisher, inventor and scientist, and his close associate Oliphant Owl; Rebecca Raccoon, her husband Thorstein, and their daughter Arabella (who owns the village shoe store and writes flute sonatas); Simon Skunk, cabinet maker; Oscar Otter, his wife Lucy, and their son Jamie who is brought back from Sudge-Buddle poisoning only by the combined efforts of Dr. Bascom Badger, Izzy the Witch, and her special friend, Prosper the Cat. I thought it important that not all of the animal characters should have alliterative names; and for these I chose euphonious combinations, such as Hilda Badger and Roscoe Lynx, proprietor at the Old Hex Inn (a retired hockey player and harpist who writes poetry, secretly, by candlelight); Franklin Groundsquirrel, his brother-in-law Richardson Groundsquirrel, and Townsend Mole (all of whom possess the actual

names of particular species); the three swallows, Cassandra and Summerfield Scissortail, and Scooper Singebottom; Ambrose and Grandfather Fieldmouse; and M. Lucius Ferret, the village bookseller (who can't bear to sell his books but would gladly share them through temporary loan). I assume the 'M.' of 'M. Lucius' (the name he answers to) stands for 'Marcus' in the Roman fashion.

The human characters have names that are suggestive of their personalities and values: Miss Proudie Fairblossom is a globetrotter allowing her farm to go back to nature; Farmer Ben Barker and his wife Elizabeth H. grow peaches and paint landscapes. Others are Matthew Muddie, the courageous schoolmaster; Peabody the Postman; Estella Higgins, the town Mayor (who, when her asthmatic husband Thaddeus is forced to leave town until the factory is decommissioned, stays behind to do her duty). J. Philpot Skinner, a lawyer in the firm of Butcher, Skinner, Flesher, and Tanner, represents the town in a lawsuit against the Sudge-Buddle Company. Pearson Renwick is a malfeasant bureaucratic hack at the Pollution Control Agency, while Amos Tinker is a Sudge-Buddle spy. Chief villains are Sudge and Buddle, crass industrialists, and Ferrell Snade, the factory manager. I consciously tried to give Snade a "bad rap" by homophonically punning on the word 'feral' and using the /sn/ consonant cluster which, in English, seems to suggest something unwholesome, disgusting, or foul.

I began writing and illustrating *Sticklewort and Feverfew* for my two sons when they were 10 and 8, respectively. Nine years in the writing, it was published in 1980 and received a major award in 1981. Not only does the book express ecological concerns, it is by design a non-sexist novel, in which male and female characters have equally important parts to play. It was written so that it could enjoyably be read aloud. Implicitly, the story urges that survival comes through cooperation, that cooperation can occur only if there's a sense of community, and that community can exist only if people accept others for who and what they are.

How did you develop the character of your protagonist in your books?

Returning to *The Farringford Cadenza*, I guess I'd have to say that, for me, the creation of a well-developed character is an evolutionary process. Starting out, I don't have a clear, fully-articulated notion of who and what a character is, or understand the full scope of that person's personality and values, habits, hopes, and fears. Just as with people we know in the real world, our understanding of the characters we create expands and deepens through our living with them and observing how they transact with events and other characters. As with our friends, even when we've come to know our characters well, we can still find mysteries and contradictions that puzzle us and defy resolution, still encounter surprising revelations that catch us unawares.

In creating my protagonist N. F. Trntl, I wanted a female private investigator who was intelligent, resourceful, and strong-willed. Though I knew something of her "backstory", I didn't burden readers with it in great detail—providing only enough information to explain some of her attitudes and behaviors. As the plot developed (also an evolutionary process), Trntl's responses to its various events and unexpected twists and turns progressively "fleshed her out"—for me as author, as well as for readers. Early in the first draft I decided that the trajectory she would exhibit was one of growing self-awareness: progressing from an initial arrogant belief in her own capabilities (a defensive posture engendered by a personal fear of failure) through the trauma of being forced to cope with a series of investigative and judgmental errors, to finally arrive at a humbling, but more mature—and useful—sense of her limitations. Fulfilling this design and watching her change helped me in developing the plot.

In *Sticklewort and Feverfew*, the protagonist is the community as a whole. (My Aristotelian friends—in theatre mostly—tell me this is impossible: there’s no such thing as a collective protagonist; my response to that is: “Phooey.”)

What about an antagonist in *The Farringford Cadenza*? is there a unique “bad guy” or a recurring nemesis of any kind?

In *The Farringford Cadenza* there are a number of antagonists. Some are known to protagonist Trntl and her associates, some are known only to readers. In the first group are Victor Zyzynsky, a wealthy and powerful collector of “unobtainable” treasures and cultural icons; Lefty Scaevola, a Baltimore “businessman” and members of his Organization; and several other persons whose names are never known. In the second group are Zyzynsky’s “obtainers”, Marco, Jerry, and Chip, and a number of characters whom I can’t name here, because their roles as antagonists become apparent only as the narrative unfolds. Now that I think about it, perhaps the chief antagonist is the cadenza manuscript itself, which stands in opposition to everybody: a quarry “at large”, its whereabouts unknown, frustratingly afloat (hidden? held for ransom? passing from hand to hand?—or possibly all of these, as is evidenced from time to time). All of the pursuers are equally baffled as to where the manuscript is. Does the reader know? Well, some of the time.

What’s your favorite thing about *The Farringford Cadenza*?

The sheer joy I had in writing it, and knowing now, four years after publication, that a large number of readers greatly enjoy it.

How is writing in the genre you write, different than other genre?

This is a difficult question to answer. As I said earlier, I write in a variety of genres. Each has its own characteristics, traits, requirements, and conventions. In writing scholarly analysis, for example, one does not withhold information or attempt to mislead readers with red herrings as one does in writing mysteries. In writing personal opinion essays, authors do not efface or disguise themselves, the whole point being for them to articulate and be identified with their ideas.

There are many modes of writing fiction, many styles of narrative, a whole spectrum of forms and types, ranging from meat-and-potatoes “connect-the-dots” realism to the outermost limits of imaginative experimentalism—where linear narrative can cease to exist, word-associations can be the organizing principle, concepts can fragment, and fictive elements continually morph into new shapes, pattern themselves into shifting mosaics, or warp into kaleidoscopic bursts of living color—in which (perhaps) prose and poetry fuse. In framing narratives in both fantasy and mystery I have one foot grounded in realism and the other doing a toe-dance of exploration to see what else might be possible.

Why and when did you begin writing?

I began writing seriously about ten years of age; I loved reading and wanted to participate with the authors I admired and respected in creating new fictional worlds for other readers to enjoy. Now that I’ve said it, I realize that, yes, it’s the creating of worlds and having the freedom and capacity to people them with creatures of my own devising, embracing (and sometimes grappling with) the elements of language to craft precise and beautiful expression that’s my *raison d’être* for writing fiction; experiencing (and this may sound melodramatic or sentimental, but it’s true) the rush, thrill, exhilaration

of fashioning random or chaotic materials into a coherent, pleasing form that can transport responsive readers out of, into, and beyond themselves to be forever changed.

My earliest writings were, like most people's, imitative of works I enjoyed: Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, P. L. Travers' *Mary Poppins*, various adventure stories by authors who took their characters into jungles, caves, and haunted houses. In junior high and high school I left rudimentary imitation behind, and tried my hand at three series of adventure and mystery stories (oddly, casting the series characters as adults rather than as young people like myself). By the time I'd finished college, I'd written two and a half novels, the completed ones science fiction, the other an ambitious psychological soap opera about a concert pianist (!) who dies young. I learned much from writing them. When I "came of age" with *Sticklewort and Feverfew*, my celebratory rite of passage was solemnly to consign these three earlier novels to the flames.

What is your writing schedule?

When I was at Illinois State University, I had to write in the free spaces allowed by my teaching schedule which varied from semester to semester, and my family activities (some weeks I got very little done). Since I retired from teaching, my blocks of time are much freer. When I'm deeply engaged in a project and things are going well, I tend not to notice the passing of time. I can work steadily for six to eight hours, take a break, and come back to work for several hours more. My wife Marilyn can pull me away by saying, "Look, we have to be at X, Y, or Z in forty-five minutes. Time to get dressed." When things are not going well, I don't sit wallowing in funk; I get moving and do something else.

What projects are you working on now, or plan for the future?

I'm currently working on a short story (not a mystery), one of several I've planned. My future novels will be shorter than *The Farringford Cadenza* (though *its* length was required by the story it had to tell). While *Farringford* reads fast, it took a long time to write (and that's one of the reasons *why* it reads fast); but in the future, I'll want to get closure more quickly.

What kind of advice or tips do you have for someone who wants to write (especially mystery)?

It is important to read, read, read—in a variety of genres; and if writing mysteries is the goal, to read widely in the works of the best practitioners. One should always read with a critical and editorial eye in order to understand what authors do to achieve their effects, tell their stories, shape their arguments, depict their characters, etc.

Time is short, and beginners learn the most from the most effective authors; but even the best authors nod on occasion, and while it is important to understand why something is effective, it is equally important to understand why something else is not. Writers starting out should not be in a hurry to publish; time is not so short that writers should put forward anything less than their best effort.

Writers should become their own best editors; the field of publishing is rapidly changing, and writers can no longer rely on the industry to guarantee close editing. Besides, writers know better than anybody else what they want their writing to accomplish. They should train themselves to realistically assess the quality of their own work. It's part of being professional.

In writing mysteries, it is good to remember that readers trust authors to play fair in providing them all the clues they need and not blind-side them by pulling rabbits out of hats. Authors must uphold their

end of the bargain, because if they betray that trust and don't play fair, readers will remember and not be inclined to forgive. It is also worth remembering that if one has used language effectively, it will feel good in the mouth and sound good to the ear. Therefore, while composing and editing, writers should always subject their work to the oral/aural test by reading it aloud.

For detailed advice (and tips) I would refer would-be writers to my "Short Course in Creative Writing" which I composed over many years' teaching at Illinois State University. It's available for download free of charge as "Primetime Monographs #1" on my Personal Website: <http://robertdsutherland.com>.

For persons wishing to write mysteries, I would recommend my monograph "The Importance of Suspense in Mystery-Writing: How Writers can Create and Sustain It—and Why They Must" also available for free download on my Personal Website (as "Primetime Monographs #2").

In addition, I would refer mystery writers to three articles I wrote last year for the "Murder by 4" blogsite: "Tact in Mystery-Writing" (Jan 8, 2010); "Creating Interesting Characters" (Feb. 1, 2010), and "Humor in Mystery-Writing" (March 1, 2010). Go to <http://murderby4.blogspot.com> and search for 'Sutherland'.

What do you do when you are not writing? I work at promoting my books and fulfilling orders that come into The Pikestaff Press. (I just finished editing and publishing at Pikestaff a chapbook of poems written by a sitting judge.) I try to follow current developments in publishing, keep abreast of socio/political issues, answer my e-mails, and moderate my mystery-writing blog. Once a month at the county juvenile detention facility I talk to the young inmates about HIV/AIDS prevention. My other interests include classical music, the nature of metaphor, history of the English language, film noir, and the comparative study of mythologies.

My wife and I go to movies; I read; she quilts, gardens, does Sudoku; we attend the meetings of various organizations (League of Women Voters, American Civil Liberties Union, Abolition of the Illinois Death Penalty (now abolished, as of 2011!); go to the annual Diwali dinner at the India Association (our daughter-in-law was born in India), visit our children to see our grandkids; and, when we can, travel in foreign countries. I enjoy cooking and experimenting with new recipes, and do more cooking now than Marilyn does (which suits her to a T).

What "Made It" moments have you experienced in life? There have been so many. Highlights: getting married (we've just celebrated our 51st anniversary); having helped two sons grow into upstanding men of integrity; obtaining my Ph.D. in English from the University of Iowa in 1964; having the late Martin Gardner highly praise my scholarly book, *Language and Lewis Carroll*; finishing the 74 illustrations for *Sticklewort and Feverfew* and having that book receive the 1981 Friends of American Writers Juvenile Book Merit Award for author/illustrator. Hopefully, there will be more such moments in the future (I'm only 73!).

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts; I think your hosting authors' interviews is a valuable service. I don't frequently talk about my writing in such detail, and I've found responding to your questions not only challenging but very useful in better understanding my work.