

The accidental novelist

Lynn Kostoff has published four novels (with a fifth on the way) and has taught thousands of students, but he never intended to be a novelist... or a professor.

"In fact," says Kostoff, a professor in the FMU English Department and the university's writer-in-residence. "I think it's fair to say that just about everything I've done has been by accident."

Kostoff was raised in the countryside outside Youngstown, Ohio, hardly a hotbed of intellectualism. But he did have a grandfather who loved to read and who engaged Kostoff in that passion. That probably accounts for the novelist bent – almost 40 years later Kostoff still reads better than a book a week and regularly tells students the only way they'll ever learn to write is to read – but it was no easy road. Kostoff got into Bowling Green State University because he ranked high in a small high school class. He came armed with a good sense of self-awareness and, as he quickly found out, not much else.

"I realized early on that I was basically a dumbass," says Kostoff.

Impressed by the erudition of two English professors he met early in this career, he asked both for a reading list of books he should know.

Both provided said list and then were stunned to discover Kostoff actually running through it. What's more, he kept coming by their office, wanting to discuss what he'd read. Impressed, both profs took Kostoff seriously, a turning point, he says, in his life.

That set him on course for a

degree in English, and eventually a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, which was fine. Kostoff loved all the reading and showed some talent for the writing. But he realized, as most students in that discipline eventually do, that he still had to eat. Kostoff's solution: take a low-end-of-the-totem pole teaching job, serving as instructor in remedial English (technically it was called Developmental Composition) to a roomful of semi-literate BGSU jocks.

"They needed to learn this, had to pass this course, to stay eligible and get through school, and I really needed the money," Kostoff. "We were all a bunch of rejects at the bottom of the pole. We hit it off great. They were so needy. I really had to teach my tail off, but I did and some of them appreciated it and actually got better. And I realized then, 'hey, I can teach!' I thought there might be something there."

"We were all a bunch of rejects
at the bottom of the pole.
We hit it off great...
I really had to teach my tail off..."

~ Dr. Lynn Kostoff

There was. Kostoff graduated and landed a similar position at Indiana State (where the basketball team included a not especially gifted student named Larry Bird); and then a few years later at the University of Alabama, where he received weekly phone calls from coach Paul "Bear" Bryant, checking

to make sure "his boys" were doing okay.

Kostoff continued to work on his writing, and on his ideas for novels, while all this was going on. He never really thought of it as two careers. It was just what he did: teach and write.

And, it's what he still does today.

Kostoff calls the existence "schizophrenic," largely because the pace of the two pursuits is so discordant. The rush from beginning to end of a scholastic semester stands in sharp contrast to the plodding pace of a professional novelist.

"It's almost tortoise and hare kind of stuff," says Kostoff. "In the classroom you've got to keep your students on track, on what always seems to me to be a very fast schedule. Then, there's the writing where I may be working on something that's four or five years in the making, and where a useable page a day is a good goal."

Because it was for years his only real source of income – he didn't publish his first novel until 1991, almost 15 years into his academic career – Kostoff has always viewed teaching as his "job."

"My students always come first," he says.

"There's no question about that. But, because I've always understood the discipline required of a writer, it's never been a problem. Oh, it's easy to get frustrated at times, but that's just part of it."

Kostoff can share an assortment of writer's war stories with his students, and certainly

understands that, as a writer, he can “offer the author’s point of view, can inhabit a writer’s work and maybe show the students how they can do that, too.”

That may be helpful to the aspiring author or critic, but deeper insights can mold young minds. Lynn Kostoff, the self-described dumbass from the Ohio back country, preaches diligence and a sort of cleansing humility to his students. It is the lesson of his two-headed career.

“A lot of the writing I’ve done, it’s been like an apprenticeship,” says Kostoff. “Lots of people don’t think that’s good. They want the keys right away. That’s always an issue with my students. But anything worthwhile take time, and nothing but time. Like Falubert said, ‘talent is a long patience.’ And it is.”

“You’re going to be humbled by your job and that’s fine. It’s fine to be an apprentice, to be learning something. I’m fine with all that. I see everything I write, maybe even writing, as a draft.”

Students chaff at this notion, but Kostoff does not relent. Every year, in every class, he makes the same assignment: keep a personal log for a day. In it, students must write down everything they do that day.

“Then, a few days later,” says Kostoff, “we come to class and divide the log into the things that matter and the things that are b.s. It’s a humbling sort of exercise because mostly you find that you’re spending a lot of time on b.s.”

“But that’s okay,” Kostoff says. “It’s good to learn that, too.”

Tucker Mitchell is executive director of public affairs at Francis Marion University.

DR. LYNN KOSTOFF SHARES HIS KNOWLEDGE
WITH FMU STUDENTS DURING A LECTURE..

