

Staying Gone

When I first heard of ALAN, I was not M. E. Kerr to most people. I was a tough freelance dropout named Vin Packer from The University of Missouri School of Journalism. Vin wrote suspense and mystery for the new paperback originals; each one cost 25 cents, and I earned a penny for every copy printed, usually 2000 to 5000. I was also Edgar and Mamie Stone, an old married couple in their eighties, living in Vermont. Their forte was confession stories with titles like *I Lost My Baby at a Pot Party*. (The heroine was selling Tupperware to her neighbors while her youngster decided to investigate the neighborhood.) Laura Winston was my good girl who wrote about high school proms and the new boy in sixth grade for magazines like *Seventeen*, and *Compact*.

“Aren’t you young to be a literary agent?” some editors would ask. Then I would tell them how there were almost no publishers or agents who would take a chance on new writers, but that was what I had decided to do. “Except for the Stones,” I said, “all my writers are in their twenties.”

“And they believe these fibs?” asked my father, who could no more bring himself to call his daughter a liar than he could believe what she had undertaken. Unable to get a literary agent after a year trying, I decided to become one. An agent was a necessity for anyone foolish enough to set their sights on selling stories for a living. I had beautiful stationery printed: Marijane Meaker, Literary Agent, and already half a dozen clients: all me.

I lunched on hastily eaten peanut butter sandwiches during my lunch hour at Dutton Publishing. Then I took a subway to call on publishers. I was

making enough to pay a monthly telephone bill as Marijane Meaker, Literary Agent, and just a little more as a file clerk at Dutton. Employees there still punched a time clock recording their comings and goings. None of my colleagues dreamed I had this secret professional life.

Years went by before I created another new identity. I wanted to compete with my clients. Vin Packer was still hard at work on her paperback originals, the Stones were still knocking out confessions, and Winston was slowing up, though still earning two or three hundred dollars a story. M. E. Kerr, a pseudonym made from my real last name, Meaker, was Louise Fitzhugh’s idea. An old friend and fellow writer, she wanted me to write for children, as she did. But she thought I should write for kids a little older than her audience. She explained what Young Adult novels were and introduced me to Charlotte Zolotow at HarperCollins. Ultimately, Charlotte became my editor for two books.

Some years later, after I began writing young adult fiction, ALAN invited me to speak at their conference. Charlotte told me that it was an honor to be recognized by ALAN, so I went. I didn’t really know enough to be nervous, for I had done very little speaking anywhere, much less before such a distinguished organization of writers, editors, and publishers. I accepted the ALAN invitation and met Louise for dinner the night before my talk. After our dinner together, Louise confessed to being “tipsy” and asked if I was, too. I told her I was just plain exhausted, and I was. I’d left New York at six that night and suddenly it was eleven.

Just as I was dozing off, I heard a man shouting

through the walls of the modest motel where I was staying. I wasn't sure I heard him right. "Go! . . . And stay gone!" he snarled. Whoever he was shouting at either was not answering or was too terrified for a rebuttal. I imagined some poor, soft-voiced wife cowering under the sheets, terrified as he continued, "Do you hear me? Go! Go and stay gone!!"

He grew angrier and louder. I went into the bathroom for a glass that I put to the wall, hoping to hear more. A murder, maybe? Vin Packer was already imagining an opening. But Marijane Meaker had lost her interest in plotting, imagining a real homicide a wall away. There was no one I could or would call. Louise was staying with a friend from college. What a silly first impression I would make. I told myself I probably should not have had the third glass of wine at dinner.

There was no sleep for me that night. As it grew quiet and morning light showed itself, I heard the sounds of a radio or television, then a man singing in the shower. Again I got the glass from the bathroom and held it to the wall. Whatever this zealot was singing I couldn't make out the words.

I had breakfast in my room and so did the man next door. As they were taking his tray away, a new one arrived with my scrambled eggs. I could not believe my reflection in the mirror. I thought of the old Beatles song, something about a hard day's night. I also thought of how I would sound that noon. I had a speech written thanking ALAN for honoring me for my work as M. E. Kerr, but whenever I drank with dinner, the next day I sounded more like my brother than myself. Hoarse and harsh.

I decided to take advantage of the ALAN writers who were giving little seminars: this one on romance in YA literature, that one on nonfiction, another on the use of stories made from history: Civil War, World War II. I had heard about a man who was creating a YA mystery series. His name was Peter Pullman. Although I had never read anything by him, enough people had that they needed to fetch extra chairs. A lady beside me said he was well known as a writer for adolescent readers. He had bright red hair, big ears, and a lot of freckles. "He tells stories about rabbits, feral cats, that sort of thing," the lady whispered as he appeared to loud applause.

I was disappointed that he was going to read what he had to say. "When you write a series, and not ev-

ery writer can do one successfully, create a hero with an interesting name. Something like my name: Pullman. How about Pull? Call your first book that—Pull. Next, Pull Back. Pull Strings . . . get the idea? And end your series with Pull Over."

His series, he said, was about a kid who practiced magic and who had a younger sister who always got him into trouble. As he read from his new book, I recognized the voice. "Go! Do you hear me? Go and stay gone." (*Staying Gone* would be the title, he said). I don't think he was the first author to practice what he would read the night before, but I might have been the first to steal an idea. It didn't come to me then and there, but when it came, the voice was that of a policeman's teenage son. John Fell.

After *Fell* came *Fell Back*. Then *Fell Down*.

Robert O. Warren, my newest editor at HarperCollins, asked me to come into New York for lunch, just as I was toying with an end to the series. It would be called *Fell Over*, of course. I was bored writing about the same characters book after book.

"What are we going to do?" Robert O. Warren asked me as we ordered oysters at Le Perigord. Ursula Nordstrom, my regular editor, was gone by then. "Your Fell books aren't exactly falling off the shelves, Marijane," said Robert. "Can you bear to part with the idea?"

I could. I did. My Fell series turned out to have only three books. I never knew what became of red-headed Peter Pullman (was he writing under a new pseudonym, perhaps?). I have looked in vain online for a series called *Staying Gone*, but Mr. Pullman was right: not everyone is cut out to write a series.

The End.

M. E. Kerr is one of the pen names used by Marijane Meaker, born May 27, 1927, in Auburn, New York, to Ida T. and Ellis R. Meaker. Establishing her career as a writer under various pen names, most notably mystery thriller author Vin Packer, she was motivated and encouraged by her friend Louise Fitzhugh, author of Harriet the Spy, to embark on her career as M. E. Kerr. As M. E. Kerr, she has written numerous works of fiction for adolescents. She was also inspired to write young adult literature after reading Paul Zindel's The Pigman. Her first book as M. E. Kerr, Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!, was published in 1972. Notably, in 1993, M. E. Kerr received a lifetime achievement award in the form of the Margaret A. Edwards Award from the Young Adult Library Services.