

An Interview with Terri A. DeMitchell - Mystery and Historical Fiction Novelist for Middle Grade Readers and Young Adults



Terri A. DeMitchell is author of the award-winning Olde Locke Beach mystery series for middle grade readers. *You Will Come Back*, the first book in the series, won Mayhaven's Award for Children's Fiction. A writer with an eclectic background, she is an attorney who has also taught elementary and university age students and who holds graduate degrees from the University of San Diego School of Law, the University of California, Davis and Harvard. She is active in the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators, the Boston Authors Club, and the New Hampshire Writers' Project. *The Portsmouth Alarm: December 1774*, to be published in 2013, is her debut at historical fiction. She lives in New Hampshire.

Q & A with author Terri DeMitchell

1. Your books seem meticulously researched. This is definitely so in *The Portsmouth Alarm*, which examines events just before the American Revolution. But the historical accuracy is also impressive in the Olde Locke Beach mysteries, even though "Olde Locke Beach" itself is a fictionalized composite. Why have you taken this care in writing fiction?

Events are influenced by the history that gave rise to them. I strive to provide a perspective about the importance of history to the story. For example, in *The Portsmouth Alarm* I came to know and respect the people like Governor Wentworth and John Langdon. It became important for me to treat their story with respect by portraying them accurately.

2. Your stories are very character driven, with storylines and outcomes highly dependent on the choices and actions your preteen and teenage protagonists make. How do you go about developing these characters?

Facing challenges and handling conflict help to define our character. I am interested in exploring how children and young adults respond to these situations and develop resilience in the face of adversity and define their value system. I look for issues that can be viewed in multiple ways, ones where there are not easy or right and wrong answers. Then I develop strong characters to deal with those conflicts. In particular, in *The Portsmouth Alarm*, all three viewpoints, patriot, loyalist, undecided, were common and valid ways of viewing the issues that led to the Revolutionary War. And, in my mysteries, the characters deal with family issues, challenges as they work part-time jobs and conflicts within their own personal relationship.

3. *The Portsmouth Alarm* provides details about political life and divisions among Americans at the outbreak of the war. This may be new material to those only familiar with what happened after the war began. What is the relevance of this deeper background information to readers today?

Once the bloodshed and fighting began, it was easier to decide which side to support. Questions such as how far the British government would go to enforce policy were answered. But, focusing only on that time forward does not provide the information about what led to those events. It is interesting to consider how we would have dealt with those issues that were not black and white.

4. Though you write for a national audience, your books are primarily based in the New Hampshire seacoast region. What is it about this region that makes for a compelling setting or universal appeal?

I'm originally from Southern California so when my husband and I moved to the New Hampshire seacoast I couldn't help but think, what a great place to grow up. Olde Locke Beach, the fictional setting for my mysteries is based on Hampton Beach. And, learning the history in the area made me want to share this special place with readers. I think it is fascinating that Blackbeard lived at the Isles of Shoals and that the first shots in the Revolutionary War were arguably fired at New Castle. The seacoast is rich with history and stories that need to be told.

5. What advice would you give to young people thinking about developing their own writing careers?

The age-old advice is write what you know and it is certainly good advice. But, in addition to writing about topics you understand, begin writing your story at the point you know. In other words, if the part you have in your mind is the middle of the story, start there. You can go back and forth. You don't have to know every piece of your story before you start writing. And, remember that your ability to write will improve with practice. The more you write, the better you will write.