



Boise
Nonfiction
Writers

**Susan Stacy, contract historian
February 6, 2008**

Notes recorded by Cindy Salo (Your Humble Scribe)

Twenty-five nonfiction writers gathered to hear author Susan Stacy describe her career and share advice for aspiring writers at the first Boise Nonfiction Writers event. Susan is the author of five books, and numerous other works, about Idaho history. As a consulting historian she has been paid to conduct research and write on a variety of topics. As with many that came to hear her speak, Susan's writing was not her first career, but came later, as she gathered her courage and followed her passion.

Susan obtained her undergraduate degree from Georgetown University, then served two years in the Peace Corps in Malaysia, followed by two years in West Virginia with anti-poverty programs in the 1960s. She came to Boise in 1973 with a master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Pittsburgh and went on to direct Boise's City Planning Department for seven years.

Susan Stacy planned her move to a second career carefully. She returned to graduate school for a Master's degree in History at Boise State University. Susan credits her advisor, Dr. Todd Shallat (<http://history.boisestate.edu/faculty/shallat.shtml>), with helping her learn a new style of writing...by getting out his red pen and "bleeding all over" the first draft of her thesis. She described her bureaucratic style of writing, which worked well in city government, as "sentences containing a weak verb or two and about 47 prepositional phrases". Your Humble Scribe suspects that Susan may have overstated the facts to make the point that even accomplished writers must be willing to learn new skills when changing career focus.

Her thesis, a history of flood control on the Boise River, was published (sans red ink) by the US Corps of Engineers, becoming Susan's first book. Although she credits this first writing opportunity to luck, Your Humble Scribe adds that Susan was prepared to seize the opportunity when it presented itself. In the years immediately after graduate school she was too busy to get (or need!) business cards, a situation she has since remedied.

Although women in the West originally drew Susan to a writing career, she has written relatively little on that topic. Her first project after completing graduate school was text for the display in the women's wing of Boise's Old Idaho Penitentiary (<http://www.idahohistory.net/oldpen.html>), but that was followed by topics as disparate as nuclear energy research, current city issues (a column in the Idaho Statesman), the fences of Owyhee County, Idaho Power Company, and the recreation industry in Idaho.

Historic buildings in Boise have also been documented by Susan, as part of the Built in America: Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, 1933-Present (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/) Project of the

Library of Congress. Documentation available online includes building plans and photographs. With her most recent book, published last fall, Susan has returned to women in the West, with *Tom and Julia Davis: Some Good Place*, the story of two of Boise's prominent early citizens. Over the years, Susan's work has received a number of awards, among them: Book of the Year Award (1990), Idaho Library Association, Friend of the Boise River Award (1997), Boise River 2000, and Distinguished Science Communicator (2002), Idaho Academy of Science.

Pros and cons of working as a contract historian

Among the pros Susan mentioned were being paid to do work she loves. She added that she has never had a client question her conclusions or suggest that she change what she has written.

Potential downsides of life as a consulting historian include not having control over how your work is distributed. Although you own your research and are free to publish similar work in another format, your client owns the report or book that they commissioned. Working as a consultant also means that you work on projects that *other* people are interested in (although Susan mentioned a folder of "if money were no object" projects).

Your Humble Scribe was not sure if, "Write a book and the world thinks you're an expert", was an upside or a downside of writing.

Susan Stacy's advice for aspiring nonfiction writers

Susan suggested establishing credentials in an appropriate area. This is especially important if serving as an expert witness in court, where the witness with the most degrees tends to carry the most weight.

Much of Susan's time is spent doing research in libraries and museums. She suggests asking a living, breathing librarian for help early on, as they are excellent sources of information and experience.

In response to a question about how long she would continue to search for a particular item, Susan responded, "As long as your client is willing to pay you to go farther and farther a field." She pointed out that the farther you get away from where you would expect something to be, the lower the chances of finding it.

To illustrate the importance of placing a topic in context, Susan gave us short critiques of two historical works. She first described a history of the sugar beet history in Idaho and Utah. In addition to describing the development of sugar beet cultivation in the area, it also explained the social and economic setting of the region. This gives readers a clear understanding of the importance of the industry and why it developed when and where it did. Susan then described a church history that consisted largely of a list of the

comings and goings of pastors and the dates of building projects. This work fails to give readers any historical or social context within which to interpret events in the church.

Learning techniques used in fiction will help nonfiction writers produce more compelling work. Creating suspense will keep nonfiction readers turning the pages.

Susan was quick to credit copy editors and book designers with making her hard work look its best in print. Book designers were new to many of us and we were surprised at how much they can contribute to a book. These include designing a cover appropriate for the topic and selecting the right kind of paper. For example, if a book includes many photographs, it is important that photos not be visible while reading the other side of the page. Smaller items to be designed include text and title fonts, page numbers, and the small figures at the beginning of chapters. Pete Wilson, at Design Works (<http://pwdw.com/>), has worked on several of Susan's books and she recommends him.

⊗ *Susan emphasized that, for history writing to live, the passive voice is to be avoided!* ⊗

In closing, Susan Stacy recommended two books:

Revising Prose, by Richard Lanham

Writing on Both Sides of the Brain, by Henriette Anne Klauser

The latter book helped Susan understand her unease about writing projects and overcome procrastination. Your Humble Scribe adds: I read Klauser's book since Susan's talk and visited my Inner Critic, who I discovered hiding under the stairs. I knew I'd seen the character somewhere before, but it took me a minute to recognize it: the toenail fungus character from the TV commercial. But why do I call it 'Momus'? Read the book to find out; I've returned it to the Boise State Library.

Some writings by Susan Stacy

Tom and Julia Davis: Some Good Place by Susan M. Stacy. Boise, Idaho: T&J Publishing, Inc., 2007.

Proving the Principle: A History of The Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory 1949-1999 (<http://www.inl.gov/proving-the-principle/>) by Susan M. Stacy. Idaho Falls, Idaho: Idaho Operations Office of the Department of Energy, 2000.

When the River Rises: Flood Control on the Boise River, 1943-1985 (<http://desastres.unanleon.edu.ni/pdf/2003/Enero/pdf/eng/doc9087/doc9087.htm>) by Susan M. Stacy. Boulder, Colo. and Boise, Idaho: Natural Hazards and Research Applications Information Center, University of Colorado/Boise State University College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs, 1993.

Legacy of Light: a History of the Idaho Power Company

(<http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=1031553247&searchurl=kn%3Dstacy%26tn%3Dlegacy%2Bof%2Blight%26x%3D0%26y%3D0>) by Susan M. Stacy.
Boise, Idaho: Idaho Power, 1991.

Conversations, A Companion Book to Idaho Public Television's "Proceeding On Through a Beautiful Country, A History of Idaho"

(<http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=265134150&searchurl=an%3Dsusan%2BM.%2Bstacy%26sortby%3D2%26sts%3Dt%26x%3D0%26y%3D0>) by Susan M. Stacy, editor. Boise, Idaho: Idaho Educational Public Broadcasting Foundation, 1990.

Boise Nonfiction Writers: - Nonfiction writers learning from guest
speakers and from each other in Boise, ID

www.sageecosci.com/Writers.html