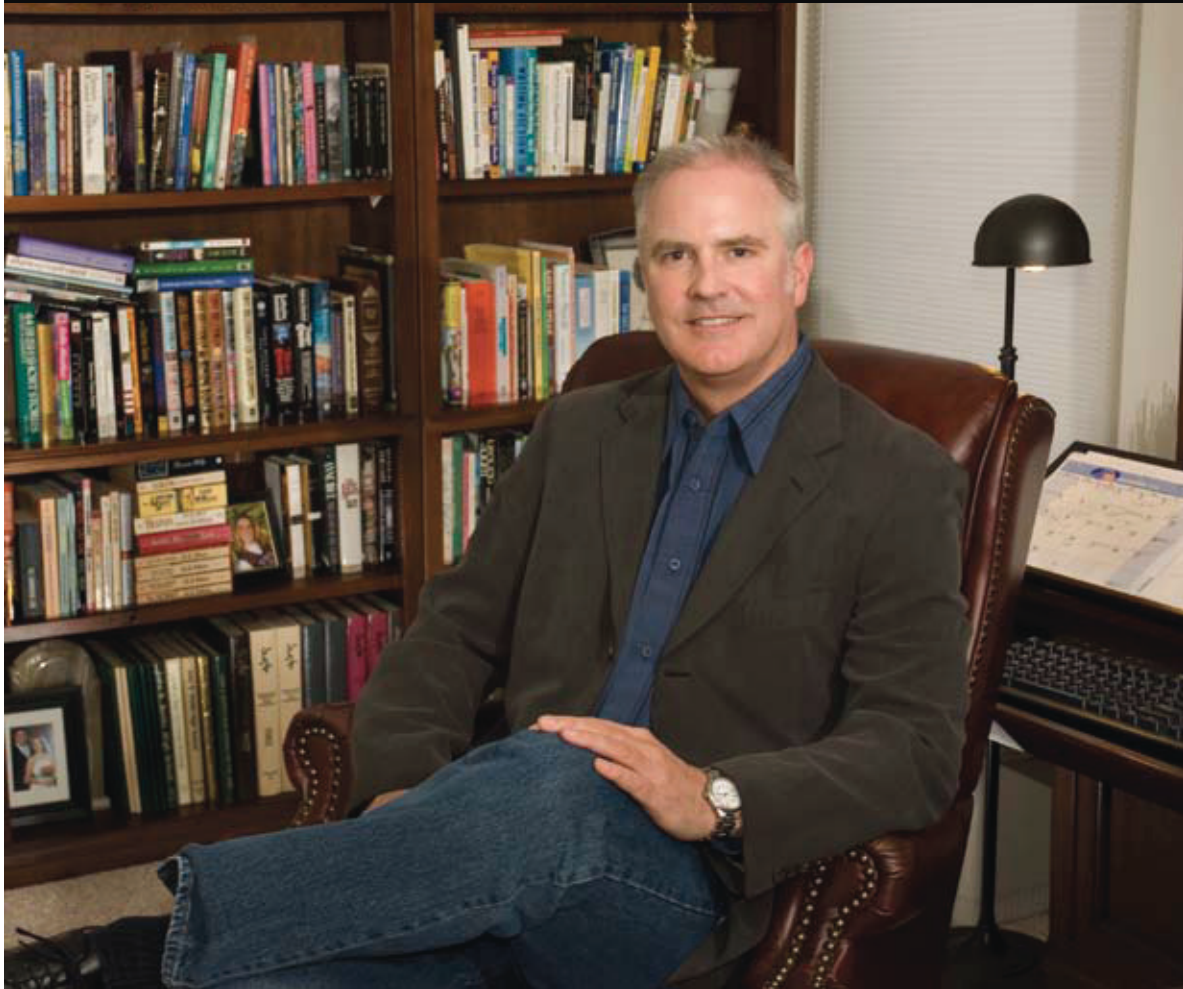


GREG LILLY



WRESTLING ALLIGATORS

By Linda Landreth Phelps

For every mountaintop experience and literary success, a J. K. Rowling or Stephen King selling millions of books, there are thousands of writers slogging through the swamps of rejection. Those who lack drive or who are

thin of skin soon sink and disappear, but Greg Lilly persisted and beat the odds. He's living every writer's dream and making words his livelihood.

"Ninety percent of my time is spent writ-

ing," Greg says. "It's been great, but at times I do miss that steady paycheck I used to have. My income can be wildly variable. Book royalties can be good one quarter, then the next I'm embarrassed to take the check to the bank," he

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says with a laugh.

Greg didn't dream of a writer's life as a boy growing up in Bristol, Virginia, a small city tucked snugly away in the southwest corner of Virginia. His father was a practical man and told his son: "When you go to college, make sure you are equipped to make a living by the time you're through."

Greg graduated from Virginia Tech in 1985 with a degree in Management Science. He was one of the first to major in a new field that combined business skills with computer technology. Greg also had enough elective credits to earn a minor in English Literature, choices indicative of his eventual vocation.

After college, Greg found employment with Belk department store at their headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina. His job was to train staff in computer skills and write technical manuals. Though he was glad to have steady work during a period of recession, it failed to challenge him.

"The problem was that I was getting bored

with writing the manuals," Greg says. "In an effort to make them more interesting, I invented a couple of fictional characters enjoying a fast food lunch together. In my story line, they were sitting in Hardee's chatting away about

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- Greg Lilly

how computers would make their jobs easier. Then a supervisor arrived with a young sales associate and my characters began speculating about a possible affair." Greg's boss said he appreciated inventiveness, but encouraged him to restrict his fictional efforts to short stories.

This suggestion took root, leading Greg and a few like-minded friends to form a critique group. With his logical mind, Greg couldn't see

starting with a novel when his initial attempts might never be published. So, as his boss had advised, Greg began with short stories. After he wrote about twenty, he realized they had the potential to be marketed as a novel.

"I gained confidence and skill as I wrote, and a publisher was actually reading my book, *Devil's Bridge*, when I decided to leave Charlotte and move to Arizona to accept a new position," he says.

Greg had vacationed in Sedona, Arizona for years, so when the opportunity arose to become Managing Editor for *Sedona Home & Garden* magazine, Greg jumped at it.

"That job turned out to be a crash course in writing articles," Greg says. From there, he moved on to become the operations manager for a local art gallery.

"After about five years, family ties began tugging me back to Virginia, so I returned and have lived in Williamsburg for the last three years," he says.

Greg's most successful novel so far, *Under*



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a *Copper Moon*, is a work of historical fiction set in a western mining town in the 1890's. It is selling briskly, especially in the Sedona area. While Greg was living in Arizona, his series of Derek Mason mysteries began publication. The series kicked off with *Fingering the Family Jewels*, and continues with his current *Scalping the Red Rocks*, published in July, 2010. His latest novel is again set in Sedona and the plot involves an unscrupulous developer bent upon ruining the land for his own profit.

"In my books, the setting is always such a significant part of the story that it becomes a character," Greg says. His next novel will be a Virginia-based story about the persecution of a young woman known as 'The Witch of Pungo'.

In 1706, Grace Sherwood's neighbors accused her of witchcraft. She somehow survived a ducking in the Lynnhaven River, but since innocence was only proven by drowning, she was subsequently imprisoned. Grace's ghost is said to haunt the present Witch Duck Point area of Virginia Beach, Virginia.

"Centuries later in the lives of her fictional descendents," Greg says, "my story will illustrate how society still forces people to con-

form."

From witches to weddings, there is little boredom in freelance writing because there's variety in what you do.

"It keeps you learning," Greg says. "I'm currently working on a piece for a wedding guide, so ask me now and I can tell you all about rings - gold versus platinum, which styles are hot today, and how to find a good buy. Next month? I'll have forgotten it all!"

Greg's present avenues of interest include teaching for W.A.L.T., the Williamsburg Area Learning Tree, a public education program offering reasonably priced classes that is sponsored and organized by the Williamsburg Unitarian Universalist Church. At the moment, Greg is teaching a four-week course on the short story.

"I take my students through the different elements of character, setting, plot, and conflict, and at the end, they'll have a completed story," Greg says.

Greg's most publicly visible job is Editor of this publication, *Williamsburg's Next Door Neighbors*, which has a direct mail circulation of 37,000 homes. Greg works closely with the Publisher, Meredith Collins, to constantly im-

prove the content and style of the magazine. His role has expanded as the magazine has grown and there are now four departments that are Greg's special fields of interest: Health, Home, Arts & Entertainment and Business. He makes content decisions, determines who he will interview and writes separate pieces for each of these departments every month.

Writing professionally requires discipline, vision, and, in most cases, a willingness to sacrifice the higher income levels associated with the corporate world. Despite the challenges, Greg wouldn't go back to that steady paycheck for anything. He can't imagine a life that doesn't include bringing to life characters that live only in his inventive mind.

"I really love the freedom!" Greg says.

The late author, William Saroyan, summed up his profession this way: "Writing is the hardest way to make a living, with the possible exception of wrestling alligators." Using that statement to measure Greg's career arc, you might say the Williamsburg author, editor and teacher is somewhere on the road between gators and glory, but definitely headed in the right direction. NDN

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