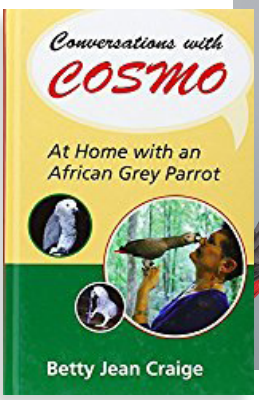
BETTY JEAN CRAIGE
Where's the Parrot?

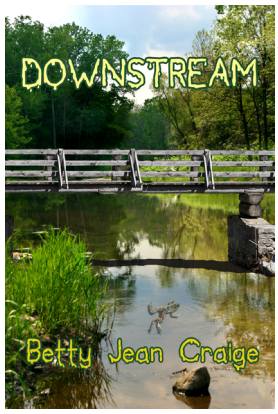


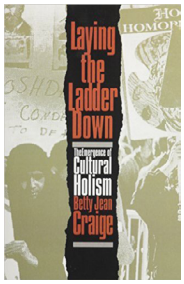
Interview by Susan Reichert

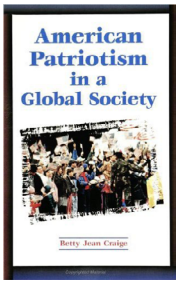
Not your normal question right? Yet it is for Betty Jean Craige, author of the Witherston Murder Mystery series.

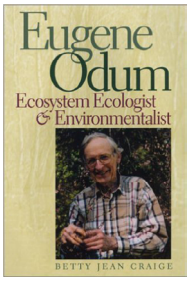
So a fair question would be, how did a successful academic writer switch to fiction and why is she so strongly associated with a parrot?

"When I retired from the University of Georgia in 2011 where I was Director of the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts and University Professor of Comparative Literature," says Craige, "I was invited to write a weekly column in the local paper about my talkative and funny female African Grey Parrot. The column, 'Cosmo Talks,' told amusing stories about Cosmo and related her behavior to many other animals. Cosmo acquired quite a following of animal lovers in during the two years I published the column. Novelist Terry Kay was one of them. When the column was discontinued Terry advised me to write fiction. 'I don't know how to write fiction,' I said. 'It's easy,' he said. 'I can do it.' I decided to try.









"I had been reading mysteries since my introduction to Nancy Drew in childhood, so I decided to write murder mysteries, and since I loved the mountains of north Georgia, I would set my mysteries in a fiction town twenty miles north o f Dahlonega. Somehow, on the day after my conversation with Terry Kay, I conceived the basic plot for *Downstream*, which I initially titled *We All Live Downstream*.

In the story, billionaire Francis Hearty Withers, announces at his hundredth birthday celebration he will bequeath $1 billion to Witherston and $1 billion to the town's 4,000 residents, in recognition of their support of Senextra's pharmaceutical factory. It's a drug I invented enabling individuals to lead healthy lives well into their second century. However, it has some unanticipated consequences. The environmentalists express opposition to the drug and show contempt for him. Withers retorts that he will change his will and disinherit the community. Two days later he is found dead. Who dunnit and why?

"*Downstream*, which is funny (I think), addresses the pharmaceutical pollution of our environment."

Betty Jean, tell us about the second book in that series, *Fairfield's Auction*.

The antique dealer auctions rare Cherokee artifacts, Appalachian antiques, and a young African Grey parrot. A blizzard stops traffic which prohibits anyone's arrival or departure on Witherston Highway. The next day two bodies are discovered in the snow, and the parrot is missing. What happened? How did the chickens escape? Who rightfully owns the remnants of the thousand-year-old Cherokee civilization?

Your third book in that series, *Dam Witherston*, releases in 2017. Can you give us a hint?

It takes place upstream from Witherston. The mayor proposes to build a dam, flood the valley, and create a lake. The highly controversial issue harkens back to an actual dam break in Toccoa, Georgia, in 1977, which killed 39 people. The mayor's activities there in 1977 become part of the murder plot.

Is writing fiction easier than writing your nonfiction?

Writing fiction is more much difficult for me than writing non-fiction. I wrote four scholarly books about the emergence of a holistic way of thinking in our culture—

Reconnection: From Dualism to Holism in Literary Study; Laying the Ladder Down: The Emergence of Cultural Holism; American Patriotism in a Global Society; and *Eugene Odum: Ecosystem Ecologist and Environmentalist*—and I wrote them all with a passionate desire to explain my vision to a broad audience. I still have that passionate desire, but it's now driving my fiction. The big difference between nonfiction and fiction is the locus of the subject matter. In nonfiction I'm constrained by events and developments originating outside myself. In fiction I'm not. In fiction I have total freedom to write about anything I like, to tell any story I can imagine, to influence readers any way I wish. That freedom is really daunting.

Has it been more difficult marketing and promoting your fiction as opposed to your nonfiction?
Yes. I have published a number of scholarly books with academic publishers and they took charge of marketing the books. I have a wonderful publisher for my Witherston Murder Mysteries—Black Opal Books—but I must assume responsibility for promoting the novels. I haven't done a great job of it because I don't enjoy promoting my own work. I would much rather start writing the next book.

How long does it take you to write a book?
Each has taken seven to nine months. I'm working on a thriller now, a very different kind of novel, and I suspect it will take me much longer.

When I'm writing a mystery I don't want to take a break. For the same reason a reader reads a mystery fast—in order not to forget the plot details and the clues—I try to write my mysteries fast.

You have said that you write with a passionate desire to communicate your vision of the world. What is your vision?
I think of the world as a planetary ecosystem in which all of us—animals, plants, waters, winds, and rocks—influence each other with our behavior. We are all interrelated and interdependent, the well-being of any one of us depends upon the stability of the system, which in turn depends upon the well-being of all its components. For example, the health of a human may depend upon the health of the fish she eats, which in turn depends on the health—that is, the biotic stability—of the ocean where the fish lives. When we humans pollute the ocean, which in turn pollutes the fish, we pollute ourselves. There is no "outside" where we can throw our trash. There is no "outside," period. We are all in this together. ■