

# ForeWord

Reviews of  
Good Books  
Independently Published

M A G A Z I N E

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN MADDEN LANKFORD

**When did you start reading, and what did you like to read as a kid?**

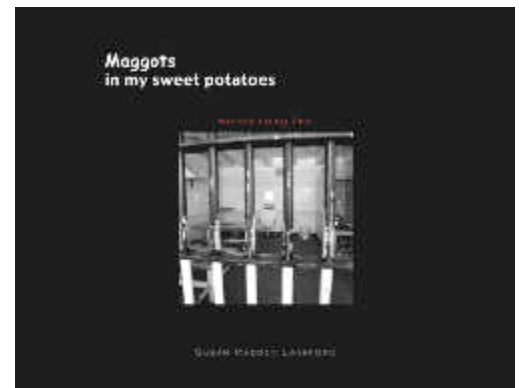
I was four years old when books became a passion. I had all the usuals—the *Dick and Jane* series, stories about ducks, lambs and puppy dogs—and soon graduated to *Black Beauty* and *Alice in Wonderland*. I was fascinated by the horror of nursery rhyme books, particularly the illustrations. I would study the shoe in “The Old Woman in the Shoe”—how could they possibly live in there? “Hansel and Gretel,” with the terrible witch. All those greats.

**When you were growing up did you have books in your home?**

Absolutely. Everywhere. My mother, an English major and educator, was obsessed with reading. She knew Shakespeare by heart and quoted sonnets, “Out, out, brief candle,” and other gems whenever she wanted to change the subject or was washing the dishes. She sold *World Book Encyclopedias* to earn two free sets for our home.

**When did you think about becoming a writer? Was there someone who got you interested in writing?**

I wrote journals as a child, secretly, and read them to my dolls and stuffed animals. I wanted to tell stories as vividly as the authors I loved. As an adult, my first passion was photography, but I was inspired by the homeless people I photographed, and I became interested in interviewing them. I also kept a journal about my experiences in the jails and on the streets. For *Downtown U.S.A.*—my book on the homeless—I asked the street people to write for me on many subjects, and their contributions form a vital part of the narrative.



**How do you write? Do you have a daily routine? What’s good about it? What do you hate about it?**

I write as I complete a collection of interviews, such as the work on women in jail or the work on the homeless. I transcribe the tapes, reliving the moments with the person I interviewed, often hearing things on the tape that I missed during the interview, small revealing details. I spend a great deal of time reconnecting through the taped material and applying those words to the images I took during the conversations.

What do I hate? The fact that the publishing world is so complicated and expensive today.

### **Any particular story to tell concerning the writing of this book?**

The journey was unbelievable. I was in and out of the Las Colinas Detention Facility 80 times, always trusting that I would complete the book. In the end, it took me almost ten years of research as follow-up to my interviews before I could comprehensively create the book I wanted to make available to the public.



**What's some good advice that you've received concerning writing? What's some advice that you could offer young writers?**

Create a reasonable timeline for completing your project. Follow your passion and plot out the story before tackling the voice behind the writing.

**How did you find the publisher for this book? What has your experience as a publisher been like?**

We presented the first two chapters at the BEA two years ago. Five big houses showed serious interest and told my literary agent to send them the book once it was finished.

When I finished the book, I was concerned that publishing with a traditional publisher might cause inmates or staff—all of whom had voluntarily signed waivers and developed a level of trust with me—to be tracked down by media or TV with promotional objectives. As a result, I created a publishing entity, Humane Exposures Publishing, LLC, and brought out *Maggots in My Sweet Potatoes*. It's a very expensive way to write a book! I've learned a great deal and don't regret the decision. My daughter, Polly Lankford Smith, is the graphic

designer for all three books. She's learned how to deal with overseas printing companies and PR teams we choose to represent our efforts.

### **What are you working on at the moment?**

Two books are in the making: *Downtown U.S.A.*, which explores the lives of the homeless in San Diego, and *Born, Not Raised*, which addresses the challenges of at-risk youth serving time in juvenile hall.

### **What are you reading?**

I'm working my way through research material for the next two books. I'm also reading two of John Updike's novels—*Couples* and *Terrorist*—plus *A House for Mister Biswas* by V.S. Naipaul. And I'm rereading of Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*.