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Siobhan is reading *Why Women Should Rule the World* by Dee Dee Myers.

"Book Talk" provides authors' perspectives on libraries, books, technology, and information. If you have any suggestions of authors you would like to see featured in Book Talk, or if you are interested in volunteering to be an author-interviewer, contact Kathleen Hughes, Editor of *Public Libraries*, at the Public Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611; khughes@ala.org.

From the Suburbs to the Congo

An Interview with Dave Donelson

After many years as a successful consultant and entrepreneur in the broadcasting industry, Dave Donelson fashioned a second career as a writer. His most recent book is *Heart of Diamonds*, a romantic thriller about diamond smuggling in the Congo, to be published by Kunati Books in September 2008. In addition to this fast-paced commercial thriller, his diverse portfolio includes everything from a humorous novel to issue-oriented journalism. His first book, *Creative Selling: Boost Your B2B Sales*, is a non-fiction prescriptive. His second, *Hunting Elf*, which began as an online audio podcast novel, is a comedic adventure about a dog with a taste for freedom and a home with a hapless couple in the suburbs. Dave also writes for some thirty-five national and regional publications ranging from the *Christian Science Monitor* to *Westchester Magazine*. His website, www.davedonelson.com, has more details about his life and work. He's also a trustee and past president of the board of the Westchester Library System (WLS), a cooperative with thirty-eight member libraries serving Westchester County, New York.

Public Libraries: You had a long career in business before you became a writer. What brought you to writing?

Dave Donelson: Considering my age when I started writing professionally, there are those who might say it was some sort of strange midlife crisis, but that's not true. Writing has been my lifelong dream, even though I enjoyed the various other things I did along the way. I was in the television business for a long time. I sold advertising, founded several related businesses, even

owned part of a couple of really small TV stations. But my true life's ambition has always been to leave something behind, to communicate with future generations as well as my contemporaries. I get immense pleasure thinking of someone one hundred years from now pulling one of my books off the shelf in a library somewhere, blowing off the dust, and seeing what I had to say.

PL: In the interest of full disclosure, you are a trustee for the WLS, where I am executive director. How did you get involved and what's serving on the board about?

DD: It's about a lot of very rewarding work! A few years ago, not long after I began writing full time, I felt the need to give something back to my community. I also had a skill set from my years in business that I felt might be useful to some worthwhile organization. Since I've always been a big library patron, volunteering to help out was a natural. Coincidentally, my library's seat on the WLS board was coming open, so they asked me to step in. It's been a lot of fun. It's also been a heck of a learning experience. I've been privileged to see how WLS and our member libraries—and other libraries around the country—serve their communities, often in ways the public at large doesn't realize. Then there's the whole advocacy side of things. As an old salesman, I love visiting legislators and other public officials as well as potential donors, and telling them about the great things we accomplish in library land. Besides, I've made a whole new set of friends who love books! By the way, one of the acknowledgments I make in *Heart of Diamonds* is a "thank you" to the Westchester Library System and our member

libraries. That wasn't just being nice, either; I pored through our collections for a year as I was researching the book.

PL: Before we get to *Heart of Diamonds*, let me ask you about your writing career. Your first two books, *Creative Selling* and *Hunting Elf*, were completely different from *Heart of Diamonds*. Your magazine articles and blogs seem to cover everything under the sun, too. Why such diverse subjects?

DD: Sometimes I think it's because I'm easily bored, but that's only partly true. It's mainly because I'm darned curious. I absolutely love the research phase of writing, digging into records, interviewing experts, talking to the man on the street, just learning something I didn't know before. I really enjoy just diving into a subject and seeing where it takes me, whether it be for a serious magazine article, like the one I wrote about the battle between environmentalists and developers over land use along the Hudson River, or for a comedic novel like *Hunting Elf*, which is about the goofy things that go on in the world of dog shows. I write about golf, small and large businesses, public affairs, home building, travel. It could also be, of course, that I'm easily distracted.

PL: So what prompted you to write a book about the Congo?

DD: That started with a series of articles David Fay wrote for *National Geographic* where he trekked on foot across two thousand kilometers of the Congo River Basin. It caught my imagination and I started reading about the region and got caught up in it—the history, the violence, the drama, the beauty. The more I read,

the more I fell in love with Africa. And then, when my wife and I visited the first time, I was really hooked.

PL: Does your new book fit neatly into a genre?

DD: I don't know how neatly it fits, but *Heart of Diamonds* is a high-concept thriller. There is intrigue at the highest levels of government, criminal masterminds, a crusading journalist, and an altruistic doctor. There is also a very strong love triangle, so perhaps it fits into the romance category, too. Let's call it a romantic thriller.

PL: It's a commercial work, yet it touches on many social and political issues. Was that intentional?

DD: Not really, but I couldn't avoid it. The people of the Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC] face so many human challenges that they just had to have a big place in the book. I've also been very moved by the stories I've read, the people I've talked to. From the time of King Leopold to the present day—that's well over a hundred years—that nation has either been at war or subject to stifling oppression. More than five million people have died there since 1998—making what's known as the Second Congo War the deadliest conflict since World War II. And it's still going on! Child soldiers, institutionalized rape, famine, wave after wave of disease. They don't make headlines on U.S. TV, but I can't ignore them.

PL: *Heart of Diamonds* has a strong sense of "place." The settings seem very real. How did you achieve that?

DD: That's one of the things I got from visiting Africa. My wife, Nora,

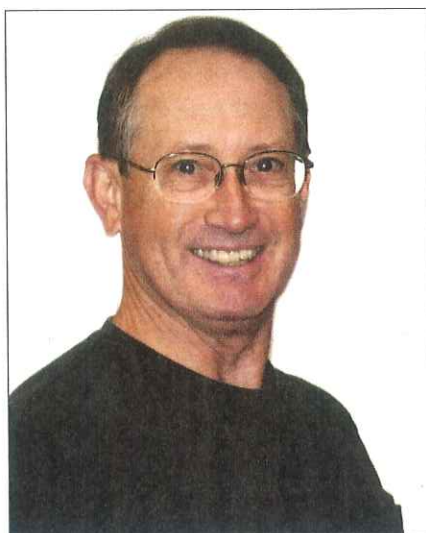
and I went to Zambia and Uganda as tourists—the DRC wasn't exactly a vacation destination at the time—and I took thousands of pictures, hundreds of pages of notes, even hours of audio recordings. I also watched every VHS tape and DVD I could find in our libraries' collections that [were] shot on location. I looked for details that would make the scenes come alive. Things like what a Hamerkop's nest looks like or how a fisherman paddles a makoro (a dugout canoe) while standing in the back. Nora and I spent a lot of time walking through the bush, but also in the markets and villages. One of the friends we made in Zambia took us into his home, which was a mud hut with a thatched roof, fed us some nsima (a thick porridge made with cornmeal), and introduced us to the headman of the village. All those things made it into the book.

PL: How long did it take you to write this book?

DD: From concept to completion was a five-year process, although certainly not nonstop. *Heart of Diamonds* went through five complete drafts, including two major revisions.

PL: Tell us about your writing process and habits. How do you work?

DD: In general, I research before I write. I compile boxes of notes in longhand, long lists of bookmarked webpages, and kind of let everything wash over me for awhile. Then I work up several plot outlines to see if I can find one that moves at a good pace and makes sense.



Dave Donelson

While I'm doing that, I create the characters, write bios for them, try to give them individual tics and habits, speech patterns—sort of get to know them. Many times, I'll find that a given character dictates a plot change. Maybe in my imagination they wouldn't do something I wanted them to do in the plot. The character almost always wins those battles. Once the story and its characters exist, I start putting words on paper. Then it really gets interesting because the story never goes where I thought it would at first.

PL: How much time do you spend promoting your book? Does that take away time from your writing?

DD: Promotion, I'm sorry to say, takes up a huge amount of time. Don't get me wrong; my publisher is great. They're aces with national publicity, distribution, and marketing, not to mention having a great editorial and design team. But

it's still up to me to arrange readings, book signings, and other local events. I also spend at least two hours a day building an online presence. I have over a dozen blogs—not just one. I'm active on Facebook, MySpace, LibraryThing—everywhere I can paste my name. It takes a lot of time.

PL: Let's learn a little about you as a person. Who is your favorite author?

DD: That's an extremely difficult question. I like different authors for different reasons. Ernest Hemingway was undoubtedly my first inspiration and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is probably my all-time favorite novel. When I visited his home in Key West a few years ago, I actually got quite misty-eyed peering into the loft where he worked. I'm also a big fan of John Steinbeck's. I admire the many different kinds of books he wrote. But then there are Margaret Atwood, Jane Smiley, Cormac McCarthy, Peter Matthiessen, Wallace Stegner, Lee Smith . . . the list is truly endless.

PL: What is your next project?

DD: There is a sequel to *Heart of Diamonds* in the works. Valerie Grey is the perfect character to take anywhere in the world to find new adventures. I'm also working on a multi-voiced novel that takes place during the Great Depression. It's based on some of my family's history in the days of live radio in the Midwest. Then there's the next episode in the adventures of Elf, my little dog friend. My plate is very full but I'm having a blast. 🍴