

An Interview

with

Marnie Mamminga



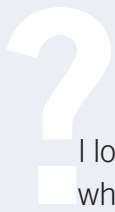
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Wisconsin Historical Society Press Why and how did you decide to write *On a Clear Night*—did it start as one essay or did you gather essays together? Why did you put them in a book?

Although I did not know it at the time, *On a Clear Night* stems from the first essay I ever wrote which turned into the lead chapter for my WHS Press book *Return to Wake Robin*. So in a sense, these two books

started together, each branching off into their own direction. As a freelance writer, enough essays began to accumulate over the decades that I wondered what they would look like if gathered together as a whole. Although these essays were not originally intended for a book and were written at different periods of my life, I found it fascinating to discover how they fell naturally into categories of similar underlying themes and emotions.

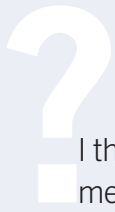


WHS Press Where and how do you find inspiration for your writing?

I love to take long walks along a river near where I live and also on a forest road when I am Up North as I find a lot of inspiration while out in nature. I also love to study the sky. Sigurd Olson sums up these moments

perfectly: “Unplanned contemplation comes softly as falling mist, or the first snows of autumn.” It is as if an event I have experienced is calling me to write it down and see where it leads. I don’t always listen to that instinct, but I wish I would. On more mundane occasions, sometimes the quiet of a country ride or just washing the dishes by hand works wonders.





WHS Press When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?

I think a love of reading as a young girl lead me on the path to becoming a writer. Oddly, I especially loved writing book reports as a child, particularly biographies, and I also enjoyed expressing myself through poetry, but that did not last long. Although I was an English major in college, I really did not think about becoming a writer until my late 30s. It never occurred to me as a possible career as most women of my generation were not exposed to

writing opportunities or encouraged to write professionally. I became a teacher so I could share my love of reading and writing with children, and also because I needed to make a dependable income. It wasn't until after my own children were launched into grade school that I began to seriously pursue writing opportunities. Perhaps I needed those life experiences before I could start. Facing fear and uncertainty to step out and embrace a new beginning no matter where you are in life is one of the best lessons I've learned on this writing journey.



WHS Press Is there one essay in particular that really captures what the "heartland" is to you?

The "Sound of Peace" especially strikes a heartland chord for me as it not only represents the loyalty of a community coming together year after year in a traditional ceremony to honor our veterans, but also amplifies the historical significance of

dedication, friendships, sacrifice, and patriotism. Merging these elements together in one simple moment at a Veterans Day tribute speaks to the depth of who we are in the Midwest. Perhaps more importantly, there is something profound about a youth playing taps in honor of earlier generations who gave their lives for our country; it is a heartfelt reminder of our continued longing for peace on Earth.





WHS Press How can this book serve as a guide to Midwestern history?

These essays bridge the turn of the millennium from the 1990s to the present when the Midwest and the entire country were on the cusp of rapid societal changes such as the proliferation of cell phones and the Internet. All these societal advancements will be clearly apparent historically; but what was happening

on a deeper, more personal level in our daily lives? *On a Clear Night* explores the events of day-to-day living and offers a glimpse to some of our shared thoughts and feelings. To that degree, these snapshots provide a historic framework of individual experiences that resonate with universal emotions. For often it is not the big dramatic moments that transform us, but the unexpected, simple events that transcend into the extraordinary.



WHS Press How can this book increase our understanding of Midwestern values and experiences and how they are the same, and different, from other parts of the country?

Having lived in the Midwest all my life, I have experienced and observed these Heartland values on an up close and personal basis over and over again: neighbor helping neighbor; deep, sustaining friendships; love and respect for the natural world; cherished family traditions; continual nurturing and support of our youth. By writing about these moments,

I hope to create a common bond with others no matter where we live.

No doubt, many other areas of the country share these same values as well. Perhaps the difference is that we in the Heartland (the so-called flyover zone) appear to not be as exciting or trendy as other parts of the country. Yet, as the country's middle child, being overlooked for our more flamboyant siblings can sometimes be a very good thing. The perception may be that we Midwesterners are not in the fast lane, but that is because, in actuality, we prefer the scenic route.





WHS Press One essay talks about the nostalgic pleasure of watching the Cubs at Wrigley Field. Now that they are World Champions does the nostalgia shine even brighter or has something changed?

Oh, the nostalgia shines brighter! No doubt about it. The decades of devotion, loyalty, perseverance, and joy have only been magnified. In addition to being such an exciting season, the Cubs' World Series

win historically served to illuminate all the dedicated fans who carried the torch before us. In one of the most spontaneous and moving celebrations, thousands of people flocked to Wrigley Field with colorful chalk to write the names of their deceased loved ones on the stadium's outside brick wall in honor of those fans' faith. It was as if 108 years of hoped for happiness from the past burst out in one glorious moment. Cubs fans will definitely carry that light forward!



WHS Press This book complements your book *Return to Wake Robin*, about your family's cabin in Wisconsin's Northwoods. Do we get to go back to Wake Robin in this book too?

Yes, but in a broader sense. A lot of the essays reference Wake Robin or take place

on or around the lake, particularly in the section "Under the Milky Way." Those who read *Return to Wake Robin* will find a surprise in the first essay in this section. The times have definitely changed, but much has stayed the same. What we still cherish most—the beauty, family, friends, and fun—continues in both humorous and poignant moments.



WHS Press As anyone can imagine, writing a book is a deeply personal experience. How has writing *On a Clear Night* been a personal experience for you?

To write so openly about myself, family, and friends is indeed a very personal experience. It is a very risky and vulnerable endeavor. But by exposing my thoughts and feelings so publicly, I hope to discover and learn some

truths as to why these simple moments touched my heart, and in doing so, connect with others who have felt the same. Despite the isolation and not knowing where one's writing will end up, I find the process to be a labor of love. To have *On a Clear Night* published is a dream come true. Like a true Cubs fan, elements of perseverance, patience, and hope always make it a joyful journey!

