

Christmas Letters, Authors and Other Oddities

Each holiday season for the past seven or eight years, I've received a card from a family we'll call the Craigs. They followed me through a major move with a few temporary addresses in between. And they haven't dropped me from their card list over all these years, even though I have never responded.

Why haven't I responded? Because I have no clue who the Craigs are.

It could, of course, be a memory problem. Except mine's usually fairly decent. Especially since the Craigs send a detailed Christmas letter each year, including pictures. Clear, identifiable pictures.

I swear, I have never met or seen these people.

At first, it was like a small burr under the saddle. I asked everyone I knew if they knew the Craigs - none did. I researched them through public records and Google. (Public records and Google told me a whole lot less than their Christmas letters.)

After a few years, though, I came to look forward to the card. I started making up stories about the Craigs - how I got on their card list, who they think I am, how we *could* have met if in fact we ever had met. Their names are slipping into new works as characters. When their card arrived after the big move, I was delighted. I've grown fond of the Craigs. Still have no idea who they are, but I'm debating sending them a card.

Not only that, I'm considering sending a card to some random person somewhere out there in the country. Maybe two. Just for the heck of it.

I will, of course, include my Christmas letter.

Yup, I do a Christmas letter. Not that I'm smart enough to do a one-size-fits-all letter (except for the year my computer and printer died at the same time and I sent out to a much-abbreviated list.) No, I started many, many years ago hand-writing loooooong notes to various people in the pre-e-mail era. I tried to stop a few times, but got such lovely, sweet responses from some aging relatives and various friends that I didn't have the heart. I have graduated to printing out the letters, but they still are individual. (Some core info repeats, but it's tailored to the individuals.)

One element I've struggled with in the letters is how much to include about my writing and publishing. Where's the line between smarmy self-promotion to a semi-captive audience and failing to tell people who are interested when you have a book out?

I have no clue. Wherever that line is, I feel I've been weaving over, under and around it, without ever feeling I've totally succeeded in walking it.

Along with tormenting me with that non-pin-downable line, my

Christmas letter has produced some good results, even beyond the above-mentioned sweet responses.

Some years ago, I had a book out that was a RITA finalist and winner of a prestigious regional contest, and had sold two more books. Was that the moment I knew I was pretty good at this fiction-writing gig?

Nope. That reinforcement came when a friend responded to my Christmas letter that year saying I had “an exciting life.”

I read that phrase in the note he’d written in his card and first thought “What’s he smoking?” (a definite possibility), then felt a swell of unmatched achievement.

“An exciting life” - that’s what he’d gathered from my Christmas letter. Me. An exciting life. Wow. He’d read what I wrote and that was his take-away. That meant . . . Wow.

That was the moment I knew I truly could write believable fiction.

Happy holiday letters everyone!

And Merry Christmas to the Craigs, wherever and whoever you are!