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## William Kent Krueger

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## Q&A

### A Conversation with William Kent Krueger:

**1) The novels in your Cork O'Connor series are usually set in Minnesota. Why Michigan's Upper Peninsula for this one?** When I began to write the book that preceded *Copper River*, a book titled *Mercy Falls*, I knew it would end with Cork on the run. I wasn't entirely certain where he would go, except that I knew he wouldn't end up back in Aurora, Minnesota. I'd considered Canada because I've always wanted to set one of the books there and call it *Thunder Bay*. (I did just this in the book I've recently completed for Atria, which will be the seventh in the Cork O'Connor series.) Logistically speaking, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan was an easier choice. It has many of the qualities that, in thinking about the setting for the story, I knew I wanted: an isolated and exotic location, a nearby wilderness area, the ability to incorporate Lake Superior -- an incredible body of water -- in the tale, and a small town with secrets. The Upper Peninsula is like Minnesota in so many ways, but still dissimilar. I believed it would allow me to put Cork somewhere different, but not so different that readers who love the setting in the series would be put off.

**2) How much research goes into writing this series? Do you talk to law enforcement officials? Have you ever modeled a character after a real-life person?** Every mystery author I know is always researching. Not many of us are fortunate enough to have a background in law enforcement. So we cultivate relationships with cops at all levels -- local, state, and national -- and we rely significantly on their help to get the details right. Of course, we always make mistakes, but that's not the fault of our sources. I haven't consciously modeled a character after one my sources, though traits of several have found their way onto the pages.

**3) Cork O'Connor is both Irish and Native American. You write vividly of life in and around reservations. What draws you to these settings? Are you of Native American descent?** I have no Ojibwe or other tribal blood in me -- at least that I'm aware of. When I chose to set the series in northern Minnesota, it quickly became clear to me that I couldn't write about that area without incorporating the Ojibwe element. A large percentage of the population of the county I selected as a model for the fictional Tamarack County of my books is of mixed heritage. I knew and admired the work of Tony Hillerman. And in college, I wanted to be a cultural anthropologist. So the idea of researching the Ojibwe culture and weaving the information into the stories was exciting. I began by reading the early ethnographers, William Warren and Francis Densmore. I read works by Gerald Vizenor and Basil Johnson. I read the stories of Louise Erdrich and Jim Northrup. I still research a great deal. But I hope readers of the series don't see me as an expert in any sense. I would never make that claim.

**4) Is the presence of the wounded cougar meant to be symbolic? Do the names of the resort (Thor's Lodge) and the runaway shelter (Providence House) have any significance?** Many elements of a story begin for a specific purpose, but end up suggesting a much broader intent. In the beginning, I simply wanted to have Ren making a plaster cast of an animal track, much in the way I did when I was his age. Once I realized it was a cougar, the question for me was how could I use this further. The idea of weaving the presence and predicament of the cougar into the whole story crystallized. I saw it as a way of interjecting some suspense. But more importantly, I understood it might be a way to bring some emotional power to the tale because of Ren's deep attachment to the hope of saving this wild creature.

Providence House was, indeed, a name chosen for dark irony. However, Thor's Lodge is simply the name of a large cabin at the YMCA camp north of Ely, Minnesota, where my whole family has often vacationed. I liked the name.

**5) You do most of your writing at a restaurant in your town called the St. Clair Broiler. How important is environment when you sit down to write? Is there a special meal you always order?** Although the food at the St. Clair Broiler continues to win awards (Best Breakfast, Best Malts, Best Comfort Food), I seldom eat there. Mostly I drink the coffee, which is really quite good. The atmosphere is the draw for me. Sure it's noisy sometimes, but to me it's all white noise. My home is way too quiet for me to be productive, and my involvement with the environment is too responsible. At home, if the phone rings, I have to answer it. The dishes are always calling out to be washed. I've found myself sitting alone in my house on a perfectly beautiful, still winter morning -- a situation most people would think ideal for writing -- and instead of focusing on my work I'm thinking, "Shouldn't the furnace have come on by now?"

**6) You've said on your website that early on in your career you wanted to be Ernest Hemingway. How has his writing influenced your own work?** When Hemingway wrote a sentence, he knew exactly the effect each word ought to have. He chose his words carefully and placed them perfectly. (He sometimes put large spaces between words as he wrote to better gauge the impact of each.) I'm not sure if he ever used an unnecessary word. Beyond the energy of the story itself is the power of that spare, poetic, rhythmic language. And that's what I love about Hemingway. I may never write as well as he, but I keep the respect for the power of language in the forefront of my thinking whenever I'm crafting a story.

**7) You've written six novels in this series and one stand-alone. What challenges you the most about writing a series? What limits you?** The greatest challenge, of course, is making each story fresh and different. Readers of a series expect certain elements in every book. In my series, this might include evocative setting, complex characterization, or strong suspense. I try to deliver a story that meets those expectations, but that also confounds them in some way. In *Mercy Falls*, for example, I chose an ending that shocked -- even angered -- some readers. I never want a reader to pick up one of my books knowing exactly what to expect. What would be the fun in that?

In terms of limitations, the greatest pitfall in a series is that the more popular it becomes, the less willing readers are to accept a book outside the series. I experienced this rather disappointing reaction with my stand-alone thriller, *The Devil's Bed*.

**8) What exactly is the "Minnesota Crime Wave" and what's your involvement?** The Minnesota Crime Wave is a group of three great mystery authors, all from the Twin Cities, who travel together to promote their work. It consists of me, Ellen Hart, and Carl Brookins. Between us, we've published more than thirty novels and won somewhere around twenty writing awards, regionally and nationally. Mostly, it's just a way to interject a whole lot more fun into the rigorous touring schedule that the business demands of us. We've done three national tours and have been involved in well over a hundred appearances at bookstores, libraries, conferences, book fairs, and workshops. We wear costumes appropriate to the genre and come with props that make the events a genuine hoot. If you have to do the business -- and we all do -- why not have fun with it?

**9) What's next for Cork O'Connor? Any plans for another stand-alone novel?** The next book is nearing completion. It's titled *Thunder Bay* and is probably the most significantly different book I've written in the series. For one thing, it's a first-person narrative in Cork O'Connor's voice. And for another, the story centers on Henry Meloux, the old Ojibwe Mide, who is a series regular. Basically, it's the tale of what happens when a dying Meloux asks Cork to find the son the old man has never seen. It's also sexier than anything I've written before. I'm prejudiced, of course, but I quite like the story.

**10) On page 302, Cork quotes Ojibwe Mide Henry Meloux: "...every falling leaf comes to rest where it was always meant to." Do you subscribe to this theory?** As a leaf who feels he's finally come to rest, I believe it absolutely.

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