

CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHOR CHANNELS GRIEF INTO ART: *A STORY OF THE HEALING OF THE SOUL*

by Leesha Austin, '02



Hunter Darden, '80

“I love words! I love the power of beautiful words even more, especially if they are words that can heal a hurting heart,” explained Hunter Dudley Darden, '80.

Darden questioned her faith when she lost two beloved family members, but rather

than being overcome by her grief, she drew inspiration from these painful experiences and used it to realize her long-held dream of becoming an author.

According to Darden, she had always wanted to be an author, though she had not originally planned to write children's books. One night as she rocked her son to sleep, Darden reflected on her life and how she felt that it was too late to become an author. She remembers thinking, “I'm supposed to be an author by now.”

What Darden didn't know then was that she would realize her dream of becoming an author and that her inspiration would come from the loss of her father, Council Dudley. Darden wrote her first book, *The Everlasting Snowman*, in 1996, as a way of explaining to her own children the death of their grandfather.

The book, Darden said, “gives a general explanation of the natural cycle of life using the melting of a snowman family who return in the form of happy raindrops in soothing watercolor illustrations.”

“I wrote *The Everlasting Snowman* in the hopes of helping other parents and teachers who face this same challenge,” said Darden.

The Everlasting Snowman is Darden's best-seller to date and has sold 16,000 copies, including regional and national orders from bookstore giant Barnes & Noble.

While she has published mostly children's books, Darden, who lives in Statesville, N.C., recently published a novelized

autobiography called *Tapestry*. Named after her father's favorite poem, “The Weaver,” Darden said that *Tapestry* offers “a message about the importance of friendship.”

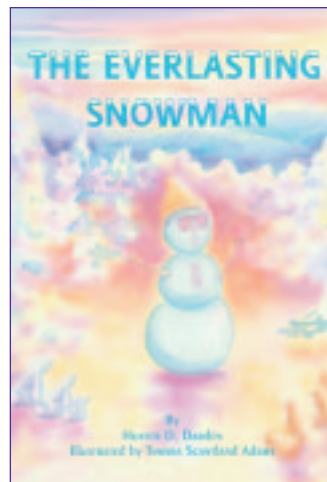
Darden explained that she began *Tapestry* after the “unnecessary death of her sister,” who died two years ago of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS). Darden now works to educate other women about the dangers of TSS.

Following her sister's death, Darden said that she lost her faith and began writing *Tapestry* in an effort to reclaim it. She hopes that *Tapestry* serves as a “quick, powerful read for someone whose heart is hurting from loss—an aid in grief resolution.”

In an essay about *Tapestry*, Darden wrote that “the main character, Olivia, journals at the end of each chapter. The journals are where she articulates the power punch emotions of grief...She writes out a Grief Survival Plan.” Darden explained, “This is

actually the same plan I mapped out methodically for myself. I...hope that people who are grieving will know that some of the emotions they are feeling are normal.”

During her grief process, Darden appreciated the support of family and friends and the “Meredith spirit” that she experienced when she lost her sister. “Several of my Meredith friends drove up from various areas of the state to spend the night with me the night my sister died,” shared Darden. “I was not surprised at all being that our Meredith friends are our friends for life.”



Hunter Darden's first book, *The Everlasting Snowman*, uses a melting snowman as a metaphor to help explain the concepts of death and eternal life to children. Darden published the book in 1996 following the death of her father.

In addition to writing books, Darden also writes a column for *The Charlotte Observer* (Iredell Neighbors) and describes it as “instant gratification.” She shared that her friends are always afraid to tell her anything for fear that it may end up in her column since she is “always looking for ideas.”

continued on page 16

The "Reel" Thing a story of hope and joy



written by Hunter D. Darden
illustrated by Nicole Arnold

The Reel Thing tells the story of Charlie, a young boy determined to catch Madame Mossback, the oldest fish in the town pond. Darden, who wrote the book after watching her son try to fish for three days, says she hopes Charlie's story inspires "joyful perseverance, eternal hope and optimism."



Darden also started her own publishing company Sunfleur Publications, Inc. in 1996 because she wanted to have control over the look and feel of her first book. Along with the challenges of establishing her own publishing company, Darden found all of the self-promotion involved with book sales to be a major challenge.

As for the challenges of her personal losses, Darden shared that her mother has been a strong influence on her. When Darden questioned her own faith and how her mother could stay so strong in the face of so many tragedies, her mother responded, "Would you have preferred that this had happened to someone else?"

When asked what advice she would offer to current Meredith students, Darden responded, "If you have a dream, don't ever let go of it until it is fulfilled. If you have the drive and the will, you can make it happen." Darden revealed this tip and others when

"Several of my Meredith friends drove up from various areas of the state to spend the night with me the night my sister died," shared Darden. "I was not surprised at all being that our Meredith friends are our friends for life."

she was featured in the article "16 Successful Authors—

The Inside Scoop," published in the December 2003 issue of *Writer's Digest Magazine*.

Additional advice that she offers to other aspiring writers is to "read voraciously. Practice the skill of writing by journaling. Listen to people and observe the world around you. There's always a good plot begging to be hatched. Go to book signings and pick the brains of the authors."

Darden credits her Meredith psychology degree as another strong influence on her writing. She relied on her degree to write her second book, *Pete's Angel*, a story about a child with low self-esteem.

She added that she especially enjoyed Jack Huber's psychology courses while a student at Meredith: "I was always intrigued about how the mind works, and it has a lot to do with my writing."

For more information about Darden and her books, visit her web site: www.booksbyhunter.com.