

My Best Friend, Claire Gulliver
By
Gayle Wigglesworth, Kingwood, Texas

I met Claire in my imagination while developing a heroine for a mystery series I wanted to write. In the beginning I intended her to be a nice but colorless middle-aged single woman, given to living a safe life. But Claire refused to be categorized the way I planned. I pictured her as a school teacher, someone who clung to the safety of her formative years. I don't mean to suggest school teachers are usually that kind of person but everyone knows at least one. And some people look like stereo-typical school teachers whether they are or not. That was how Claire had looked since she was a teenager; fortunately, as she matured she grew into her looks so now in mid-life she was finally considered attractive. And she refused to be a milquetoast, instead having a lot of grit. Maybe because I was a single mother, who became a successful bank executive during a time women were considered adequate bank tellers, I just couldn't get in the head of the kind of woman I had initially conceived as my heroine.

Since Claire refused to be a school teacher she became a librarian. Now I'm wondering if deep down it wasn't because I would have liked to be a librarian or at least worked in a book store. The quiet atmosphere in the library surrounded by thousands of tomes of wisdom and imagination, as well as hours spent assisting the public pursue knowledge, creates an environment which nurtures the soul.

And Claire doesn't require much excitement. Raised by a mother who thought caution and care were exceptional virtues, she led a rather sheltered life; her only adventures came from the mystery novels she was addicted to.

But life is full of surprises. In Claire's case it was a simple favor she performed for her mother's longtime friend which put her life in jeopardy. After the second botched attempt on her life, when the police could find no answers, she decided she had better find the answer herself. After all, she read every mystery which came to the library. She thought she could find the answer to this puzzle or, she thought grimly, "She would probably die trying."

And solving the mystery changed Claire forever. The first change was apparent in her sudden revulsion of the mystery books she had loved. She no longer found the genre entertaining; they seemed just a little too real to her now and way too scary. So she started reading travel books thinking she would prepare now to travel the world after she retired.

And she started asserting herself more, willing to take some risks. Just small ones at first but it was definitely an indication of a significant change in her approach to life. Now she realized her mother's theory of living a cautious, careful life did not guarantee safety. Now she knew that bad things sometimes happened to good people.

When her Great Uncle Bernie died and left her, his sole heir, his out-dated, musty book store, a small bungalow and his cherished 1953, Cadillac Convertible she was suddenly ready to make a drastic change in her life. No longer a young woman, she finally felt the stirrings of what Gail Sheehy called the *Pulling Up Roots* stage of life. She ignored the general counsel to sell the properties in the booming real estate market

and invest the money. She refused to listen to those who cautioned her to take care as she was obviously starting in a mid-life crisis. She had ideas of her own. She quit her job at the library, withdrew all her savings and retirement funds and moved to the peninsula to revitalize the book store, turning it into Gulliver's Travels Bookshop.

And she found how much she had gained from those years working in the library. Her people, organization and management skills were perfect for a bookstore. And her years of voracious reading filled her head with countless facts and fueled her imagination which she now used in launching her dream.

Her mother, a worrier of all things, had a difficult time adjusting to Claire's change of life but when it was apparent she could not be dissuaded, she succumbed. After all, like most parents, she only wanted her child to be happy.

And Claire was happy. She worked impossibly long hours but since she was trying to achieve her dream she thought she was having fun. When the little shop started to turn a profit she expanded her services to include lectures by travel book authors which drew more customers. Gulliver's had become the place to visit for all wannabe travelers in the area.

By this time Claire and I had become fast friends. She has always been her own person, never my alter-ego. In spite of my original efforts to make her into something she wasn't we now respect each other's differences as well as similarities and we love the adventures we have together.

Claire's first adventure, ***Tea is for Terror***, was published in September of 2004 by Koenisha Publications. The itinerary for her first trip abroad was a composite of about seven trips my husband and I took to Great Britain including places and activities we enjoyed best on those trips. It was fun introducing Claire and her fellow travelers to the joy of traveling. Of course, Claire had more challenges than my husband and I had ever encountered. Still, Claire and I both agree that trip was enriching and fun, albeit fun for me because Claire faced the danger, not I.

Subsequently, Claire was invited to visit Washington D.C. by Vantage Airlines in appreciation for her efforts on behalf of the company. Claire was a little reluctant, her business needed her attention, and to be honest that first trip was a little more exciting than she had anticipated. However, as it was only for a week she let herself be persuaded. ***Washington Weirdos***, published in August, 2005, by Koenisha Publications is the second of the Claire Gulliver Mystery series and a sequel to ***Tea is for Terror***.

Claire returned from that harrowing visit to Washington D.C. shaken but intact. However, a few days at home and 9/11 drove all thoughts of her own disaster from her mind. Not only did she have to deal with a world gone mad, as did everyone else, but her own world was threatened as the bottom fell out of the travel business. She had to employ quick and drastic measures to keep her business from failing.

In April the following year, business started to come back. Claire's mother, Millie, retired from her job to start a second career as a personal chef. She and her friend, Ruth, went off to Italy to attend a prestigious cooking school in Tuscany and persuaded Claire to join them. No, not to the cooking school but in Florence and then on to Venice, both destinations high on Claire's wish list. ***Intrigue in Italics***, scheduled to be published in 2006, is the third book in the series.

The funny thing about my relationship with Claire is that it is continually growing and expanding. Claire is becoming much more confident as an entrepreneur, a traveler and as a person. She accepts that I place her in these situations and if the situation is logical and seems real, she's willing to work with me to affect a solution. Although, between the second and third book she did protest, thinking something was wrong with

her because she kept getting embroiled in plots and intrigue. But I patiently explained it was because she was very aware. After her first experience with danger she remained vigilant, understanding the value of keeping her eyes open so naturally she notices things most people would not. Some people would shrug off strange incidents and move on, not willing to become involved. Claire asks questions and tries to understand what is happening and that's how she becomes involved. She accepted my explanation and relaxed a bit, trusting me to make the plots work. I'm looking forward to further adventures with Claire while I sincerely hope that some day the tables don't turn and I find myself facing dangers which Claire has imagined.