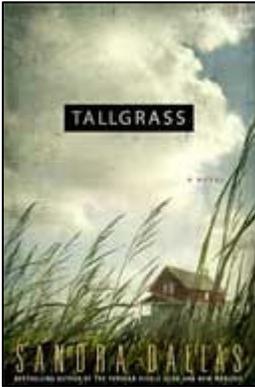


Readin' & Writin' with Lauraine- July 2007



When I grow up, I want to write a book with the punch of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I don't usually read a book multiple times, but *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one that I have read many times over. So when I read the back cover for *Tallgrass* by Sandra Dallas and someone made a positive comparison of the two novels, I couldn't resist the purchase.

Told from the point of view of thirteen-year-old Rennie Stroud, with a setting and event that tears at your heart, *Tallgrass* does share similarities with *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The story takes place in a farming community of eastern Colorado during World War II when an internment camp is thrown up and Japanese internees are shipped in. No one asks the townsfolk or the farmers if they want such an addition, and prejudice quickly raises its dirty head.

Things go from bad to worse when a friend of Rennie's is murdered and in spite of his neighbors' views, her father hires some of the internees to help work his sugar beet fields.

With her mother ill, her sister gone, and her brother in the military, Rennie is forced to grow up quickly and figure out for herself, with her father's help and example, what is really true in life.

I give this book five stars, and heartily recommend it for teens and everyone older.

So what is the writing lesson to go along with *Tallgrass*? I see more than one.

The first lesson is point of view is powerful. A story can be told differently depending on whose eyes you are looking through. Had this been told from the mother's point of view, or through the eyes of one of the Japanese who lived behind the wire fences, the story would have been different.

A second lesson has to do with using an actual historic event for the basis of your story. War is always filled action and conflict (crucial elements for a good novel) and there are shelves and shelves of war books you can use for research.

After saying I'd never write anything on the Civil War, I wrote three books about a young woman getting her family's Thoroughbreds out of Kentucky. But while famous people were mentioned, or had bit parts, I focused on those affected by the war, leaving the battle scenes for others. *Tallgrass* did the same.

Besides war history, what about other events? The mechanization of societies, the return of learning after the Dark Ages, the westward expansion, the aftermath of wars. When you look at how our world has changed in the last couple hundred years, you realize the plethora of stories waiting to be told.

People often share their family stories with me; personal histories that make for marvelous stories. When you think about it, people in your family have been involved in all sorts of history making events. How they reacted and how they changed adds to who you are and might just make a good story. And if you don't write it, who will?

Choose a period of history that interests you and think about all the faceless folks on the sidelines or in the action. What are they seeing, thinking, feeling? What is going on in their lives beside the big or little historical event? Choose a character who has a lot to lose and figure out what he or she wants. The bigger the want or dream the better. How do they survive the natural or man-made disaster? The more your characters struggle, the more readers will enjoy your writing.

In my latest historical, *Sophie's Dilemma*, the year is 1902 and folks are starting to drive horseless carriages. Now that's a bit of history that made huge differences---and lends itself well to humor and heartbreak. Watch for Sophie's story at your local bookstore in early July!

Until next time,

Happy Readin' and Writin' from Lauraine