

## Agenda:

1. Announcements.
2. Self Introductions
3. Guest Speaker: Elaine Russell, on [Bringing Other Countries and Cultures to Life.](#)

Present: Anderson, Beyers, Darrow, Grainger, Hamilton, Kando, Moy, Rogers, Thornton, Villa.

1. Announcements: There were announcements by President Michelle Hamilton and Mary Lou Anderson regarding upcoming workshops about self-publishing, formatting, the Social Media and Websites. For information about these, call Mary Lou Anderson or email her at [mledsonanderson@yahoo.com](mailto:mledsonanderson@yahoo.com)

President Hamilton gave many useful tips for overcoming writer's block. For example, go work on something else, revisit another project, read someone else's work, visualize your story as a movie, watch a movie, do some craft (make sure you keep a notebook close by!), look at a picture, take a walk. When you don't know where you are going with a story, first figure that out.

2. Self introductions: This time, each attendee was asked to tell the group one pre-writing tip, for example listening to music, or reading a poem, etc.

3. Guest Speaker: Elaine Russell got her BA in history from UCD and her Masters in economics from Sac State. She became a writer when she decided to stay home with her son. So far she has published seven books, including children's books (for example the award winning *Montana in A Minor*, 2014, and *All About Thailand* 2017) and several adult novels. Her most recent book - *Like Minded Women* - is being released this month.

Her books are (also) on *NetGalley*, a site where reviewers and other professional readers can read books before they are published.

Elaine's passion consists of traveling and writing. Her books essentially turn travel into historical fiction novels. In other words, they are stories, not just travelogues.

Her novels (so far) take place in Peru, Southeast Asia and Scotland. She has traveled to Laos, Thailand, Scotland, Sweden and elsewhere. So far she has not been able to travel to Peru, because she suffers from altitude sickness. However, generally, to write a story which takes place in an exotic place, it is important to have been there, she says, to have researched the place, to know it well. For example, for her book *Across the Mekong River* (2013), she traveled extensively to Laos and Thailand.

When necessary, she has a guide, but she often does not. She often travels on her own, sometimes she rents an apartment and lives in the local neighborhood, mixing it up with the local people. She always goes to the local English book stores, talks to the manager, goes to the local museums, libraries, archives and gift shops. She connects with local teachers, authors, etc. She reads the local English-language newspapers, goes to local book fairs (for example in Bangkok).

Elaine shared many slides with us. They showed the local landscapes and settings in places such as Laos; lakes, villages, native peoples such as the Hmongs. She spent considerable time discussing the horror of thousands of unexploded cluster bombs that remain buried and continue to kill many Hmong people. This is one sad legacy of the Vietnam War. Many Hmongs were supportive of the US in that conflict, so they have been persecuted. Many died, and many fled. In order to escape, they had to cross the huge Mekong River, at great risk.

During the Vietnam war, the US dropped 2 million tons of bombs on Laos alone. The Plain of Jars, (of which Elaine showed us pictures) is still full of buried, unexploded ordinance, and pockmarked with thousands of bomb craters. Since the end of the Vietnam war alone, such unexploded ordinance has killed 20,000 Laotians.

Elaine writes about this in her books. She has also served on the board of the U.S.-based NGO *Legacies of War*, traveled to Laos several times in that capacity, and spoken at the European Southeast Asian Studies Annual Conference in Gothenburg, Sweden.

Elaine's *All About Thailand* is a children's book which takes place in that country. Then there is the Martin McMillan series: *Martin MacMillan and the Lost Inca City* (2012) is an adventure taking place in Peru. *The Secret of*

*the Ruby Elephant* (2013) takes place in Thailand. *Martin McMillan and the Sacred Stones* happens in Scotland.

Currently, Elaine is working on a book about the Métis people of Laos: These are the mixed-race children of French fathers and Laotian mothers, born when that country was still a French colony. As children, they were placed in orphanages and only learned to speak French. The French authorities did not recognize them legitimately. Trying to research this problem in Laos is nearly impossible. The government does not allow access to archives. It is Communist, and very corrupt. There are French colonial archives in Paris and in Aix-en-Provence, and Elaine has traveled to those places to do research for her this project. To that end, she is currently perfecting her French.

All in all, a fascinating presentation, and an impressive body of books! Check out Elaine's website at <http://www.elainerussell.info/>

Tom Kando, Secretary

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