

Interview with Tyler R. Tichelaar, author of "Narrow Lives"

Today, Irene Watson of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Tyler R. Tichelaar, who is here to talk about his new book "Narrow Lives," a historical fiction novel taking place in the Marquette area of Upper Michigan.

Tyler R. Tichelaar is a seventh generation resident of Marquette, Michigan, the setting for his historical novels. Tyler has a Ph.D. in literature from Western Michigan University and Bachelor and Master's Degrees from Northern Michigan University. He has lectured on writing and literature at Clemson University, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of London. He is currently the Vice-President of the Upper Peninsula Publishers and Authors Association. Besides his new novel, "Narrow Lives," Tyler is the author of "The Marquette Trilogy" composed of "Iron Pioneers," "The Queen City," and "Superior Heritage." He credits the roar of Lake Superior, mountains of snow, sandstone architecture, and family stories as the inspiration for his writing.

Irene: Tyler, it gives me great pleasure to interview you today. Welcome to Reader Views! First of all, congratulations on publishing your 4th book in the Marquette Series. Why did you choose to write a series of books on the Marquette area?

Tyler: Thank you, Irene. I'm very happy to join you. The obvious reason why I chose to set my novels in Marquette, Michigan is that it is where I grew up and the place with which I am most familiar. In fact, I'm the seventh generation in my family to live here. My ancestors arrived here starting in 1849, the year the city was founded. I grew up listening to my grandfather tell me stories about Marquette's past, even telling me details of what his parents and grandparents had told him. Plus Marquette has a lot of wonderful sandstone architecture from the late 1800s and early 1900s that also triggered an interest in history for me.

Besides the historical reasons, I love the cool climate, the rugged forests, and magnificent Lake Superior, which is only a five minute walk from my house. The scenery is breathtaking. Winter is amazing despite the cold. And life here is simpler than in the big cities. It is the only place I've ever wanted to live.

Willa Cather, one of my greatest literary influences, said it best when she chose to write about Nebraska:

"I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, and heroism and strength of courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil, and I did not find them. And so I wrote *O Pioneers!*"

My first novel's title, "Iron Pioneers," was chosen as a tribute to Willa Cather, who proved regional fiction could be effective. In writing my novels set in Marquette, Michigan, I wanted to tell the world what a significant role this area played in American history, and I wanted readers, by reading my words, to fall in love with Upper Michigan, even if they had never visited it.

Irene: "Narrow Lives" isn't part of the Marquette Trilogy, yet you bring some of the characters from the trilogy into it. Why did you choose to do that?

Tyler: My Marquette Trilogy covers 150 years of Marquette's history. That was a lot of ground to cover in three books, even though each one is nearly five hundred pages long. There were some characters whose stories did not have room to be told in the trilogy. These characters, especially the villainous Lysander Blackmore, were also much darker than the major characters in the trilogy. I felt they deserved to tell their own stories, and I wanted a place for their voices to be heard.

Irene: Are any of your characters based on lives of real people?

Tyler: No, not in “Narrow Lives.” The Marquette Trilogy has many characters who have similarities to some of my family members and ancestors, but none of my characters are intended in any way to be accurate depictions of real people. In “Narrow Lives” all the main characters are completely fictional. That said, I don’t believe I have created a single character who is not in some way part of me. I find myself so intensely trying to become these characters as I write them, to understand their thoughts and motivations, idiosyncrasies and flaws, that if they are based on anyone, it is me. In the case of Lysander Blackmore, that is a scary thought. He is the one character I admit I do not understand.

Irene: It is obvious with this book, as well as your trilogy, you’ve done a lot of research into the historical aspects of the area. This seems a very important facet of any historical novel. What and how much research did you actually do?

Tyler: That is a hard question to answer—I have no way of knowing how much time I actually spent researching—which sounds like work, and much of it was just joyful—and so many of the details arose from living in Marquette and capturing in words what I had experienced. As I said, I was interested in the history of the area from an early age. I started collecting articles of historical interest from the local papers from about the time I was fourteen. That was long before I conceived of writing these books. I am also fascinated with genealogy and for years had been digging into my family’s history in Upper Michigan.

Because I was so interested in history, a lot of the research was easy to do. When I first had the idea in 1999 to write a series of novels set in Marquette, I realized all those newspaper clippings would be a great help as well as my family stories. I spent hours organizing and filing those articles, and I read countless history books about Upper Michigan as well as pouring over county birth, death, marriage, property and immigration and naturalization records on microfilm. From 1999-2001, I wrote small parts of the books, but that time was primarily devoted to researching and organizing the books, and sadly having to decide on many historical events and fascinating side notes I just did not have a place for in the novels.

Irene: Lysander Blackmore is your key figure in the stories in “Narrow Lives.” Tell us why you chose him to be the main character and what his role is in all the vignettes.

Tyler: Each story is told in first-person by someone whose life is affected by Lysander. Some of the characters never meet him or even really know who he is. Other characters include his wife and two of his children. Lysander himself is never given the chance to say much of anything. I wanted to depict how one person’s life can have such an enormous influence on other people, and at the same time, how impossible it can be to know a person. Lysander is not a pleasant person to put it mildly. He cheats on his wife, has illegitimate children, uses his status as vice-president of a bank for his own profit, and from his behavior, it appears he has no guilt about any of this. Then the morning after the great stock market crash of 1929, he is found dead in his office, having blown his brains out. Why? Did he feel guilt over his actions? Did he learn something about himself that he could not live with? Was he just frightened by the sudden loss of his wealth in the stock market crash? These are all possible reasons, and the other characters speculate about it, but none of them know him well enough to be sure. Even I as the author do not know. He was the one character who refused to become a voice in my head. He would not let me write a section for him where he could vindicate himself.

At the same time, a reason for his behavior is not really necessary. Those whose lives he influenced live “Narrow Lives” because they trap themselves in trying to overcome the legacy of this person they had a connection with, when to some degree, even if he were a character’s husband or parent, what he did should not affect the lives they live, especially long after he is dead.

Irene: Your description of Lysander Blackmore sounds much like a person who could be living in our society right now. Do you feel our society now parallels the society nearly 100 years ago when your story takes place? If so, in what ways?

Tyler: To some degree, but what I think makes the world of a century ago most interesting for me as a writer of fiction is that people were much more limited in what they could do because of the way society frowned upon those who acted against what society prescribed. Society was highly concerned with morality and manners and what was proper behavior. That is not to say illegitimate children were not being produced, that people were not having extra-marital affairs, but these things were much more hushed than today. Women back then would not want to lose their virginity, and if they did, they would keep it a secret for fear it would destroy their reputation and

ultimately their lives. Today, the numbers of people who hold those kinds of concerns are in the minority. It was the social hypocrisy of that time, and the need to keep secrets that really creates that relish I have for Victorian and early twentieth century literature. Our society is so much more open about everything today, which I think is primarily a good thing, but it doesn't leave room for much of the emotional exploration that was available to earlier novelists like Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, or E.M. Forster—they were the pioneers of the novel of manners—a literary form that is now largely dead except for in historical fiction, and much of that today is centered on writing spin-off novels of Jane Austen or the Brontes. I think you have to write historical fiction now to get that kind of character exploration. At least, I find it easier to write such fiction.

Irene: Earlier you mentioned all your characters just couldn't fit into the trilogy so you created "Narrow Lives." As a writer, you must have a vivid imagination that keeps creating characters. What is your process to create them?

Tyler: I don't know that any writer has a defined process—to use the word "process" makes it sound neat and planned out. It's far messier. I just try to get into the character's head. "The Marquette Trilogy" was written in third person, but much of it is written as exploring the characters' thoughts. I find even if I am writing a book in third person, I will try to write some of the character's thoughts out in first person to allow him to speak for himself. I also think I am just too sympathetic. I don't believe anyone can be completely evil. I try to find the good in all my characters, and I feel sympathy for their flaws. Sometimes they are stupid or make stupid mistakes, but you can't say that you would have done differently unless you've been in their shoes. I try to put myself in their shoes and to ask myself, what would I have done if I were in that situation.

Many of the characters I have created more recently were minor characters in other books where someone was needed, such as a best friend for a main character so she would have someone to talk to about the decision she would make about who she would marry. The best friend is just there to help move the plot along but is a tool rather than a developed character. Then, five years later, I'll find myself wondering, what ever happened to that best friend. Did Mary stay friends with Kathy? Did Mary ever find a husband herself? What happened to Mary's obnoxious little sister, Florence? What about Mary's nice older brother John? What were Mary, Florence and John's parents like? Where in Marquette did they live? Who were they related to? How would Mary have felt if Florence married but she remained an old maid? How would Florence have felt if Mary married and she remained an old maid? What if John got married but his sisters didn't? These characters showed up in my first novel "Iron Pioneers" in the section that takes place in 1883-1884, but what about in 1934? Were they still alive? Were they dead? Where were they living then? Sometimes I may be writing a story about a completely new character, and I find out that character just happens to move in next door to a minor character from an old book, or that new character is a cousin to those minor characters. You get the idea. And yes, I know the answers to those questions. Mary, Florence, and John's story is not over yet. They will show up as minor characters again in my next book, and I have plans for another book where they will have a role.

Irene: Stories, even fiction, usually have some underlying message to the reader. From your description, the characters had a lot of lessons to learn. What message is portrayed to the reader through your writing?

Tyler: All the characters in "Narrow Lives" have lessons to learn. Some of them fail to learn them. In most cases, however, they all deep down know what they should do, but they are afraid to act. They talk themselves out of it. In the first story, Cecilia is a grandmother. She made a mistake as a young woman, a mistake that has turned her into a bitter angry old woman. Part of her mistake she was unable to rectify because of the restrictive Victorian world she grew up in. But at the end of the story, she has the chance to redeem herself by stopping her granddaughter from making the same mistake. Instead, she lets her bitterness get the better of her. In a sense, she chooses to punish her granddaughter by not helping her. She is afraid to act, afraid to open up that human side of herself she squashed so many years ago to protect herself.

As for the characters who do learn and act upon what they learn, they might experience a traumatic wake up call, or they may struggle for years and years and gradually come to an understanding of what they should do. I wanted to warn readers that despite television and movies today, living a dysfunctional life of drinking and meaningless sex is not glamorous. The best drug is belief in one-self.

Irene: Was there a healing process that took place in your own life writing "Narrow Lives"?

Tyler: Now that is an interesting question. Yes, I think in telling these stories, I was trying to find the courage to be myself. As I said before, I wrote my trilogy at the same time I wrote "Narrow Lives." I think I wrote "Narrow Lives" because I was trying to encourage myself to live my dream and publish my books rather than to let fear

control me. Fear is usually irrational, but to publish a book is a terribly frightening experience—rather like what I think a mother must feel the first day her child goes off to school. Once my books were published I could not protect them any longer. I am proud I found the courage to publish them rather than listen to that fear because my life has been blessed in so many ways since then. I had many people tell me it was unlikely anyone would read my books, or that they would never sell. I don't know how I found the courage to believe in myself and refuse to listen to the naysayers, but I am grateful and proud that I did. If I could tell people one thing, it would be to believe in yourself and your dream. Get the naysayers out of your life. Follow that dream and to quote Winston Churchill, "Never give up! Never give up!"

Irene: It's obvious you are a prolific historical fiction writer. Are you writing your next book now?

Tyler: I prefer not to discuss a work I am currently writing because the book can change so much in the process. I will say, however, that I have two more historical novels set in Marquette that are finished and which I will publish in the next year or two. Currently, the intended titles when they are published will be "The Only Thing That Lasts" and "Spirit of the North."

"The Only Thing That Lasts" is the first novel I ever wrote, which I started in 1987. I have revised it several times since then. I was only sixteen when I started writing it. The main character is Robert O'Neill, who later shows up as a famous novelist living in a fabulous Victorian mansion as an adult in "The Marquette Trilogy." This novel is about him coming-of-age between the First World War and the Great Depression. Robert is forced, upon the death of his mother and while his father is off fighting in the war, to leave his North Carolina home to go live with his grandmother and aunt in Marquette. There he soon discovers a new way of life. I wanted to write a very old-fashioned story in the style of the children's novels written by Louisa May Alcott, and the non-Oz books of L. Frank Baum. At the same time, my obsession with "Gone With the Wind" also had an influence on the book. For those who thought "Narrow Lives" too racy, they will find that "The Only Thing That Lasts" is quite wholesome. (And this is where Mary, Florence, and John reappear, if only briefly).

"Spirit of the North" may well be my favorite of all my books. Characters included from "The Marquette Trilogy" are the Whitman family and also the loggers, Ben and Karl. But the focus of the story is on Barbara and Adele Traugott, who come to Marquette upon the death of their father. They are young ladies of marriageable age but no fortune. The only relative they have left in the world is an uncle in Marquette they have never met. They arrive in town only to find that their uncle is dead and their inheritance from him consists of a meager cabin in the woods many miles from town. Despite the approaching winter and many people trying to dissuade her, Barbara is stubborn and independent. She insists she and her sister will survive the winter of 1873-1874 in that cabin. The novel's title refers both to the spirit of the sisters, a Native American spirit, and the supernatural elements that come into play during the novel.

Irene: Tyler, we wish you much success with your writing and publishing. It's obvious writing historical fiction is a real passion for you. Do you have any last minute thoughts you'd like to tell our reading audience?

Tyler: I encourage people to find out their own family histories. You never really know history until you begin to research your own family tree. I am amazed by what I have found—everything from Revolutionary War soldiers to colonial governors to French Voyageurs to nasty medieval kings, as well as farmers, carpenters, saints, and Vikings who claim descent from Norse gods. My point is that I would not be here today if just one of those people had not lived. It didn't matter if that person was a Byzantine Emperor or an Irish potato farmer. Each of their lives was significant. I try to express in my fiction that diversity of the human experience. By studying genealogy, I have found I am descended from people all over Europe. If the documents still existed, I could probably find ancestors in Asia and Africa. That kind of knowledge shows there really is no such thing as race. It makes the human race smaller, and it reminds us that we're all in this together. It shows how ridiculous wars and racism are. I encourage people to investigate history, not just the facts, but the people. Use your imagination to understand the human experience. And if you want to use that imagination to write fiction, get a pen and start writing. Don't let anyone ever tell you that you can't. Today is the best time ever to be an author and to get your book published.

Irene: Please give us your website address and where readers may find more information on your books, as well as purchase them.

Tyler: My website is www.MarquetteFiction.com. Not only can you purchase my books there, but you can read passages from them and some of the book reviews I've received. Among the more interesting features on my site is the "My Marquette" page, a collection of essays I've written about the Marquette area and its influence on my writing. Another page is the "Marquette Timeline" that details historical events in Marquette's history, many of

which are described in my novels. Finally, there is a “Character Family Trees” page for reference. I warn you, however, that looking at that page will give away the marriage plots if you haven’t already read the novels. I encourage people to visit my website often and to join my email list because I’m always updating information. Finally, thank you again, Irene, for talking with me today.

Irene: Thank you very much, Tyler. It’s been a real pleasure talking with you.

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