

Interview with Anna Murray, author of *Born on Friday 13th*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Anna Murray, who is here to talk about her new book “Born on Friday 13th.”

Anna was born and brought up in Kenya and South Africa and was orphaned by the time she was 15. She went to England to train in hotel management and catering, following in her mother’s footsteps. She fell in love with the first man that came along and had a child by him, born on Friday 13th, as she was. Struggling to support and bring him up alone, eventually life seemed to be on an even keel and they were both happy when tragedy struck and Anthony was killed in an accident aged 15. Anna wanted to give up living; she saw no reason to be here, but with perseverance and help from her friends and relations, she eventually moved to France to start a new life. This was her healing period; still with many ups and downs, but she got through them and she felt that nothing was as challenging as losing a child. Eventually she saw happiness on the horizon and moved to America, where she has made a great life for herself and has stopped longing for all that she lost.

Tyler: Welcome, Anna. I’m glad you could join me today. To begin, I understand “Born on Friday 13th” is a memoir. Of all the possible titles for a book, why did you choose the one you did?

Anna: I chose that title because I was born on Friday 13th November, and my son, Anthony, was born on Friday 13th February, and he was tragically killed on the 13th but not a Friday.

Tyler: Tell us about your childhood a little. Did you have bad luck right from the start because of the day on which you were born?

Anna: I wasn’t aware of it, even when my father died when I was six and I blamed myself for his death. I didn’t tell my mother that my father was sick, but it was a matter of ten minutes, and several years later when I confided in my mother, she assured me that ten minutes would not have made any difference and would not have saved him. I remember having an idyllic childhood but I did grieve the loss of my father with whom I was very close. At the time, I never related any of the awful things that happened to me to Friday 13th.

Tyler: What was it like living in Kenya? Why were your parents living there?

Anna: I had the most idyllic childhood with my brother and parents. My brother and I were born on the coast at Malindi, one year apart, and the first three years were spent swimming and playing on the beach. The Mau Mau emergency began when I was three and my family decided to move to Tanganyika (Tanzania) where they ran the Lawns Hotel. My brother and I were introduced to riding at a very young age and spent much of our time with the ponies and riding in gymkhanas. Eventually our family moved back to Kenya to be near my father’s sister’s family, as my father was becoming ill. He died in Nakuru and I never forgave myself for not telling my mother sooner that he was ill. My mother tried to pick up the pieces and moved up country to run the Highlands Hotel. Again we had horses and a wonderful farm with cattle, sheep, turkeys, chickens and pigs, a nine-hole golf course and several

hundred acres of crops and the hotel. My mother was noted for the fare on the table and people travelled for miles to come for Sunday lunch. My childhood was very happy, it was little wild maybe, but I never seemed to want for anything. I played on the golf course with the African children and rode to school and back, I had a special friend, our nearest neighbor Bella, and we had very domestic interests. Entering the local shows with fudge and cakes, and the vegetable section with hedgehogs or teddy bears made of vegetables. Sewing dolls dresses for the sewing competition and knitting sweaters for the knitting section.

My father first went out to Kenya during the 1st World War to protect it against Tanganyika, which was German. After the war when he returned to Scotland, he decided to return to Kenya as he had really fallen in love with the country. My mother was born in Kenya; her great grandfather had gone out to Kenya to test the country in the early 1900's, leaving his wife and four children in England. His wife died in England and he sent for his two elder sons and then his daughter and youngest son came out in 1906, but his daughter died in Aden and his 14 year old son had to bury her and had no way of telling his family the bad news, as the mail was on the same boat he was on. My grandmother went out to Kenya in 1910 as Beryl Markham's governess and found herself in trouble with Sir Charles Clutterbuck, Beryl's father, and my mother's father who was the youngest son, married her to give the child a name. After they were married Evelyn (or Reg as we knew him) was born and then my aunt Lois, and my mother was the youngest.

Tyler: Anna, for those of us especially in the U.S., who are not familiar with Kenya and the British presence there, can you explain what you meant by the Mau Mau emergency?

Anna: The Mau Mau emergency was when the Kikuyu tribe were bored with white rule and wanted more land and were not prepared to be patient and wait, as their elders had done. They obtained firearms and hid in the forests and attacked the white farms and farmers. They would hamstring the cattle and leave them in terrible pain until the owners found them in the morning and had to shoot them. They attacked white farmers and their families and slashed them with pangas, the machete-type knives most Africans owned. They also attacked other tribes and killed them. Many tribes would not agree with the Kikuyu who were an aggressive tribe, so they were attacked and many thousands killed.

Tyler: How did your childhood change once your father died?

Anna: I felt a terrible loss and wished I'd realized how grieved my mother was, but it was something that was never talked about. My mother was an amazing woman and made sure we did not dwell on our loss. I felt very guilty for years, before I admitted to my mother that I should have told her earlier, that my father was ill. Even with the loss, I really did have a charmed childhood.

Tyler: Tell us about your marriage—did that also seem affected by your being born on Friday the 13th?

Anna: I never felt there was anything wrong with Friday the 13th until after my son was killed, and then I really blamed his death on my aunt who had sworn "no good would come of a child born on Friday 13th." In fact when my son was born on Friday 13th, I thought it was a good omen, despite my aunt's ranting and raving, telling me it was bad luck to be born on Friday 13th. I have little to say about my marriage, other than it was a big mistake, and in those days it was really frowned on to have an illegitimate child, and in my naïve way, I thought it would all be alright if I married the father, but in fact it only lasted 10 months.

Tyler: I understand your son was also born on Friday the 13th? Did he share the bad luck you felt you were experiencing?

Anna: No, I never felt there was bad luck at that time. And strangely enough I was totally unaware of having any bad luck. It was really being so naïve, strong willed and headstrong and wanting to prove myself as being able to cope in the big world, that I barely noticed things that went wrong as bad luck. I was basically not superstitious.

Tyler: Anna, to what extent do you really think Friday the 13th made a difference? Are you a bit tongue in cheek, thinking it was ironic simply that you were born that day, or do you think what are considered as superstitions by many have some basis in reality?

Anna: I thought my aunt very superstitious when she insisted that I give up my baby for adoption because he was born on Friday 13th, but I did not feel these superstitions at all, not until the day he died. I was hoping he would be

born on Valentine's Day, but because of a snowstorm he came early on the 13th February. I think it was ironic that so much could happen to me, when all the big events in my life happened on the 13th.

Tyler: I understand your bad luck followed you on September 11th, 2001? Will you tell us a little about that day in your life? Was it really bad luck for you considering how thousands of people had negative experiences that day?

Anna: Strangely enough it is everyone who knows me who decided that because I was born on Friday 13th, it was just my luck that I would be on a plane to Dulles on September 11th, 2001. I left Paris on the 6.30am flight for London, where I had a three hour stopover and met my brother and niece for breakfast before leaving for the USA for good. My brother waved me off, and on the flight we were offered drinks and then lunch and I watched a movie then dozed off. I was awoken by the loudspeaker announcing that due to a technical hitch we would be landing in Gander. In my half sleepy mind I was wondering why they were flying over Africa? I thought he had said Uganda, having never even heard of Gander, NF. We were told to fasten their seat belts and check where the nearest exit was. That rather frightened me as I gazed out of the window to see marshy land below, and thinking, "Well, at least it will be a soft landing!" When we eventually landed, the plane was maneuvering around planes until it came to a standstill. The Captain announced that if we were wondering whether all these other planes had technical hitches (planes were landing every minute) he had just heard the terrible news that a plane had crashed into one of the Twin Towers, and a few minutes later he announced that a second plane had crashed into the other Tower. He told us that the US air space had been closed and he would let us know developments. We were fifteen hours in the plane waiting to disembark, with only our tea snack and then water. The doors of the plane were opened but it was 20 feet down to the ground. Eventually it was our turn and school buses were there to take us to the customs, where packets of sandwiches, fruit and drinks were given to each person as we boarded the buses again to take us to the school where we would call home for several days. Televisions were laid on in the school and everyone was glued to it, realizing how lucky we were on this flight and not the one that hit the Pentagon. There were masses of computers in the schools so it was easy to contact friends, who kept saying "You poor thing." Well, I considered myself the lucky one. I was alive.

Tyler: Would you say bad luck continues to follow you around? To what extent do you think bad luck is the result of your personal outlook on life?

Anna: It does seem to, but when it does I never feel that it is because I was born on Friday 13th, it is other people who tell me that it is the bad luck of Friday 13th.

Tyler: What ultimately made you decide to write a memoir? What do you feel you are able to share about your life that will interest readers, or what do you hope readers will gain from reading "Born on Friday 13th"?

Anna: It was 1985 and Anthony was 15 years old and doing so well at school, I had a wonderful job and we had a fabulous home and for once in my life I felt blessed. Nothing had seemed to go right for me most of my life. Every which way I turned it was the wrong way. It had been a struggle from the day my mother died, at least when my father died, I still had my mother to lean on. Anthony had set his heart on going to Sandhurst, the Military Academy, but he also wanted to play cricket for England, but knew he really had to be one of the top 11 in the country. I decided to write about all the ups and downs of my life; so much had happened and we had come through it and my book was called "Against all Odds." I used different names as I didn't want Anthony picking it up one day and saying, "Is this you, Mum?" I had taken notes of different events in my life and now I put them together in my book. It was laborious work as I did it in a notebook, no computers. Then the terrible accident, when Anthony was killed. The book was put away and not forgotten but put well back in priorities. Several people mentioned I should write about my experiences and several years later, when computers were around, I transcribed the book with the real names and wrote bits and pieces as the mood got me. I could not write about Anthony, but with computers that was okay, because I could write all the other bits and come back to that when I felt able to. Only in recent years have I been able to write about Anthony and only very briefly until I showed my work to a close friend who also knew Anthony well, and she said, "You haven't mentioned such and such..." or "Do you remember when Pip and Anthony did so and so..." that I really thought more about it and decided I would have to expand more on Anthony, who had been my whole life.

What has really boosted me to get on and finish the book after all these years are my friends, the customers where I work and people I has met along the way, who have said "You have to write a book about your life. You have had such an interesting life, and we want to hear it all."

Tyler: Would you tell us more about the different names you had for the book? What made you finally settle on "Born on Friday 13th"?

Anna: Originally I called the book “Against All Odds” because considering the background I really should have been in the poor house, or a mental institution and my son lost to me forever, adopted by another family, but I was thriving, I had a wonderful job and my son was doing so well at school and excelling at sports. And we lived in a beautiful home. Life was too good, so good I felt I had to write about. Then on 13th August 1985, he was tragically killed in a farming accident. My first thought was what my aunt had said to me when she first saw him and said “no good will come of this, being born on Friday the 13th”. I felt she had killed him with her witchy ways, she was 300 miles away and had no idea he was dead, but as far as I was concerned, it was her fault. I had to blame someone; I was distraught. When my brother eventually came to stay with me, I told him to keep Lois (my aunt) away from me as I would say something I regretted. I remember I kept my distance from my aunt for many months, I had to let my system cool down and become reasonable, which I knew it would, but initially I had a lot of hate for my aunt. I had three years of not wanting to live, I had lost all purpose to life, I couldn’t carry on writing the book, I had no interest in anything. I didn’t want to get up each morning. With the help of family and friends with whom I pretended all was well, I eventually moved to France, where I had to learn a new language and I had to make efforts to make new friends, and I think that challenge gripped me until I was actually enjoying myself. Bringing up a child on my own had been a challenge and when I lost Anthony, I really needed something else to challenge me, but I didn’t know what. I acquired a PC and then decided to transcribe the book from my notes and change the names to the real names and when the mood took me I wrote, but never about Anthony. I also had to change the name of the book and decided that 13 was obviously not as lucky as I originally thought and because he and I were born on Friday the 13th, I thought that was an appropriate name.

Tyler: Anna, you said you wrote the book over many years. Will you tell us more about your writing process and how your perspective on life changed and in turn changed your book as you wrote and rewrote it?

Anna: I think I answered most of that in the last statement. I found it very hard to write about the terrible parts of my life; my marriage, Anthony, and so in France I just wrote as I felt like it or when I had inspiration. I was almost treating it like a diary of events, and still I could not write the hardest parts but with a computer, I knew I could fill in when I needed to. Eventually when I came to the US I wrote skimpy bits about my marriage, not much detail, and then I wrote a bit about Anthony and the awful accident. When I thought I had finished, I sent a copy to my friends Vron and Bella. I knew it had to be edited but I had laid down the bare facts, and Vron mentioned that I had missed out so much and reminded me of some of the awful things that had happened to me, which I was trying to skip around. Bella offered her memories of my mother and a poem she wrote about their faithful African who virtually brought them up. We all loved him so much. So with the help of my wonderful editor who kept asking me to write more about so and so and why did this happen etc, I expanded the book from 33,000 words to just over 60,000 words. I even added more about Anthony and my marriage. I think I enjoyed writing in the last month with my editor pushing me, more than at any other time.

I do feel at peace with myself at long last, and I am glad I have got it all out in a book.

Tyler: You mentioned that many people have said you lived such an interesting life. What about your life do you think other people find fascinating?

Anna: I suppose I found my life quite normal, but when you compare it with other people’s lives it was quite extraordinary. I think the fact that I was born in Kenya and lived in South Africa and England and France, make it quite exciting to the normal person who was born and brought up in Virginia, and spent vacations in Florida for instance. I was fortunate enough actually to live in various parts of the world and experience the different ways of life. Sometimes it has been hard to adapt to new ways, and I am sure my brain is very jumbled up. For instance, if I speak in Swahili and I forget a word I will replace it in French, and when I first came to the U.S. I was very aware of the different spelling of words, and now I am not always sure whether that is the American spelling or English spelling, for instance colour and color, favourite and favorite.

Tyler: Now that your book has been published, I understand you’re already getting an overwhelming response. Will you tell us what that response has been so far?

Anna: Being self-published and doing my own promoting, I have had one book signing and sold 90 books during the evening. I sent 50 books to France where a friend is taking orders for them and he has 45 already sold. On Amazon I have sold 150 and I am selling about 20 a day at the restaurant where I work, all to customers who have known me for years. I am selling them on the bridge site where I play bridge on line. I have another book signing at a vineyard this weekend and hope to get many more sales and the Business Organization in the local town,

Middleburg, VA, where I work and am well known, is organizing an Ad campaign for a book signing early in the new year. Mike Walter from News Now Channel 9 was in the restaurant and saw all the posters for the book signing, and has asked me to be interviewed on his show. A bridge friend, whom I have never met, but I play on line with, has finished reading the book and asked me to give a lecture at their literary group in Scranton, PA. She has already booked me in for May 7, 2009 at 2pm!

Tyler: Anna, do you have plans to write any more books?

Anna: Yes I think so. I already have ideas for them but they will be fiction.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Anna. Before we go, will you tell our readers where they may go online to find out more information about “Born on Friday 13th”?

Anna: The book is on Amazon.com with “see inside” facility, and a new website will be available soon, at www.bornonfriday13th.net. The book contains about 50 black and white photos dating back to 1910 when my grandparents went out to Kenya.

Tyler: Thank you, Anna, for allowing me to interview you and for sharing your adventurous and intriguing life with us. I wish you much luck in the future.

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