

BEHIND THE BOOK - GOLFING WITH GOD

The winter of 2000-2001 was a difficult one for us. Our older daughter had just been diagnosed, at age 3, with cystic fibrosis. We were at the low end of the up-and-down roller coaster that is the financial picture of most self-employed people. And the season had started off with an extra helping of snow and cold. All this was complicated by the fact that Amanda, age 44, was pregnant with our second child. I wanted that pregnancy to be as stress-free as it could be, given the recent diagnosis and the fact that we wouldn't know if our second child had CF until Amanda gave birth.

What I wanted to do was to take Amanda and Alexandra out of the winter for a bit and go south, but I did not have anything like the money needed to do that. So, from the orchard of well-meaning desperation I plucked the fruit of one crazy idea: I would write golf resorts in the Southeast and ask them if they'd host us for a while at a reduced rate. I'd tell them the truth - that I had an idea for a golf book, non-fiction, about making such a trip with the family - and see if any of them were interested.

What made the notion so crazy was the fact that winter is their high season. The idea that they would give us a room and some golf for little or no money, in the months when they need to bring in the most cash, was preposterous. I think I sent out something like 40 letters or emails and, sensibly enough, 36 of these places either said no or didn't bother to respond.

But, to my surprise, four of them said yes. We put together an itinerary based on their availability. My mother joined us. I remember packing up the car and then setting off down the driveway with snowbanks as high as the car's roof to either side.

We stayed at Ford's Colony in Williamsburg, Virginia, for one night, thanks to a kind man named Charles Pysker who handled public relations for them. A nice meal, a cold morning of golf, and then we headed to Pawley's Plantation, at the southernmost end of Myrtle Beach. Jann Walker, another exceptionally kind P.R. person, had invited us to stay there for two weeks. We paid a small daily fee and had free golf at the magnificent Jack Nicklaus course that runs along the estuaries there. I took notes, we took walks, had some good southern food, kept our expenses down.

From Pawleys we went to Chateau Elan in Georgia for a week, courtesy of another public relations angel named Larry Mayran, and I had the pleasure of playing golf on their three courses, including (one of my worst rounds ever, from a playing standpoint) with the grandson of the famous golfer Eugene (Saraceno) Sarazen. Then, thanks to a woman named Lynn Swann, we had two nights at The Greenbrier (expensive even at the reduced rate!) in West Virginia, another piece of heaven. There, I met and shook hands with the late, great Sam Snead, a real thrill. As had been the case at Chateau Elan, the pro-Robert Harris took time out of his day to play a round of golf with me and talk about the golf operations. We ended the visit with a family splurge - a ride along the Greenbrier grounds in the horse-drawn sleigh - and came home refreshed and better able to face our new challenges.

I spent a lot of time writing up the story, which I called "Every Golfer's Dream." I thought the title fit: it had been a dream-come-true to be able to go to those places with the people I loved most on this earth, to play golf in sunshine in mid-winter, to have found a way to lift us out of the bad-news doldrums and make Amanda's pregnancy a bit easier. My mother was a wonderful travel companion, Alexandra was at a beautiful stage of life (enjoying books, hitting golf balls, changing by the hour), and I'd even had one lesson at Pawleys that would end up lifting me to another level of golf.

Juliana was born in July, our second great joy. Summers are beautiful here in western Massachusetts. I had a contract for another novel. All was well. . . except no one wanted "Every Golfer's Dream."

A cloud of guilt hung over me. It hadn't been easy for me to ask for what boiled down to a resort hand-out. The people who'd invited us - especially to Pawley's and Chateau Elan - had extended an amazingly generous hand, and I'd promised to do something for them in return: write a book in which they were mentioned. But no one wanted the book.

After a string of unenthusiastic rejections that stretched over a period of more than a year, I decided to fictionalize the story, but keep the real places and real names of the PR people who'd been so generous. As is often the case, I started the novel with no idea in mind as to where it would go, plot-wise. I knew I wanted the characters to travel to the four resorts, but that was it. I came up with a first line: "There are 8,187 golf courses in heaven, and new ones being built even as I write this." And just went on from there.

I finished the novel - by now it was 2003 - and sent it off. But my agent, not a golfer herself, was unenthusiastic. She held onto the manuscript for a long time without sending it out and when I discovered that, I ended the relationship and found a new agent.

In one of our early conversations, Marly Rusoff, the new agent said, "Do you have anything lying around that I might look at?"

"I have this funny little book called *Golfing with God*."

"Nice title. Send it to me. I'll take a look."

She liked it, suggested a few important changes, sent it to Chuck Adams at Algonquin and he bought the book almost right away. When it was published-2005 by now-it had the great good fortune to be chosen by Dick Estell for his Radio Reader show. This was a program, aired on 100 NPR stations nationwide, in which he read an entire book from start to finish. He'd been doing it for 30-some years and had a large following. It was tremendous publicity and *Golfing with God* sold more copies in hardcover than any of my other books have sold to this day. Even *Breakfast with Buddha* had only about a third of the hardcover sales of *Golfing with God*.

I sent copies to my 'angels' at the golf resorts, with my thanks. We've returned to Pawleys three times since then - still a favorite spot. Several years after it was published I met a remarkable dynamo of a woman named Meg Montagnino Jarrett when I was giving a reading at Writers in

Paradise, a conference run by authors Sterling Watson and Dennis Lehane. Meg had been involved in film projects for a long time and with her husband, Keith Jarrett, she optioned *Golfing with God*, then re-optioned it, and they've just re-optioned it again. I think the chances are good that we'll see it on the big screen one day soon.

To this day I sometimes send out a silent word of thanks to Charles Pysher and Lynn Swann, and especially to Jann Walker and Larry Mayran. It was a dark, cold hole we were in that winter, and they lifted us out of it, and I'll always remember them, and our time in places close to heaven, and I'll always be grateful.