

Interview for Diana Kay Publishing

How long have you lived in Florida?

I've lived in Florida only a few years - since November 2002 - but I first visited St. Augustine in 1989. I immediately fell in love with the city and knew I had to live here!

Where did you live before?

I moved to Florida from Richardson, TX, a suburb of Dallas. Before that I lived in Tulsa, OK.

Do you write under any other name besides Nancy Haddock?

Not at this time. I hope to sell another series or two, and I may need to adopt a pen name for a different genre.

Would you tell us about your series, especially *Last Vampire Standing*?

The series centers on Cesca Marinelli, a woman born in St. Augustine in 1780 of an Italian father and Menorcan mother. Cesca was independent, tomboyish, and also psychic, which attracted the notice of a French vampire living north of the city. In 1800, Cesca was captured by the vampires and turned. In 1803, she was betrayed by another vampire and buried as a punishment, on the same night that the villagers burned out the vampires. She's forgotten in a half basement for more than 200 years until Maggie O'Halloran buys the rundown Victorian house that stands over her tomb and accidentally discovers Cesca. Since Cesca is unearthed in a time when vampires are a protected species and artificial blood is sold in 6-packs, Maggie becomes her mentor and friend, helping Cesca to catch up to the 21st century.

In *La Vida Vampire*, Cesca's job as a ghost tour guide gets off to a rocky start a tourist is murdered and Cesca is accused. She must save her skin and solve the case by joining forces with Deke Saber, a preternatural crimes investigator, a man who insists she should act less human and more vampire.

In *Last Vampire Standing*, Cesca's been out of the box for a year, and has her afterlife back on track until Jo-Jo the Jester crashes a party and begs for sanctuary. Jo-Jo wants to be a stand-up comic, but the master vampire in Atlanta is holding him back. Cesca and Saber agree to help, not knowing that Jo-Jo's brought more than bad jokes in his wake.

Can you give us a sneak peek at what you're working on now?

I'm working on the 3rd book in Cesca's series, and one of the most asked-about characters makes his grand appearance in this one. Triton, Cesca's shape-shifting childhood friend, needs help fighting the menace from *Last Vampire Standing*, but Cesca resists uniting her powers with his because she fears he's a cold-blooded killer.

What inspired the series?

Two things inspired the series. The first was a misheard line in a peanut butter commercial – long story! The second inspiration was the city of St. Augustine itself and its history. Once the idea took hold, I thought, planned, researched the local history again, researched names, thought more and created the background and current world of the characters. The plot lines came after the characters were born.

What do you enjoy most about writing?

I love going “out” to play with my characters! I also love the layering of the revision process - tweaking clichés and generally enriching images. But the most enjoyable aspect of writing is hearing from readers.

What do you enjoy least about writing?

I don't enjoy writing when the characters go quiet or give me guff about where we're going in the story. Sometimes they simply aren't cooperating, but more often I'm not listening – or not hearing – them. If I get out of the way, I can usually make progress again.

What has been your favorite book to write?

So far, *Last Vampire Standing* has been my favorite to write. The character Jo-Jo was a hoot, and the story revealed new aspects to established characters. There was a surprise for me in every chapter.

Do you have a favorite character?

What about them makes them stand out from the others?

To name a favorite character would be like picking my favorite child. I love hanging out with the main character, Cesca. Jo-Jo always makes me smile. I didn't like Saber much until I got to know him, and know what motivates him. The same goes for Neil. The Jag Queens are fun, and Maggie feels like the big sister I didn't have. Triton and Cosmil and Pandora come more to the fore in the third book in the series, the one I'm working on now.

How many (and which) books/stories have you written with St. Augustine as the setting?

I've written two books with St. Augustine as the setting so far, *La Vida Vampire* and *Last Vampire Standing*. This entire series will be set primarily in St. Augustine, and I'm also working on two more series that are set in the city. Those are yet to be sold.

What specific locations (buildings, streets, landmarks) did you use/mention in your book?

Wow, how much space do you have for the list? My copy edit specs for LA VIDA VAMPIRE alone runs two full columns of place names – and most of them are real!

Because Cesca is a ghost tour guide, I used much of the downtown area, roughly from the Plaza de la Constitucion, north to the Huguenot Cemetery, and from Cordova east to the bay front. I mentioned any number of ghost sites downtown, including the Tolomato Cemetery, the Spanish Military Hospital, and the old drug store. I also used uptown all the way to the Main Library and the merry-go-round, and I used various parts of Anastasia Island.

I mentioned St. George Street, King Street, Cathedral Place, Avenida Menendez, San Marcos, Cordova, Cuna, Hypolita, and Spanish Street, as well as A1A and US 1. I mentioned or featured the Cathedral, what is now the Wachovia bank building, Matanzas Bay, the Bridge of Lions (and the temporary bridge), the Castillo, Scarlett O'Hara's, the Mill Top Tavern, Flagler College, Crescent Beach, and Flagler Hospital. And cliché as it might sound, the list truly does go on.

I've also mentioned Hastings, Palatka, Ormond Beach, Daytona Beach, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, Miami and Gainesville in my books.

Did you walk the streets your characters 'walked' to get their perspective? (Did you do so at different times of the day or evening?)

What were you looking for as you did this?

Oh, absolutely I walked the streets to get perspective for my characters! I also took ghost tours, and riding tours, and took hundreds of pictures. I've had the advantage of living here, so I'd visited downtown day and night and in every season and every month of the year, but I walked the streets again and again. In addition, I have stacks of books on St. Augustine, and more stacks of maps, tourist site information brochures, and several binders filled with newspaper clippings about everything from architecture to history to local activities and festivals.

What did I look for as I walked the streets? I put myself in my characters' shoes to see St. Augustine as it is now, and to project my vision to the past – largely based on old photos. I searched for the places I thought resonated with the characters to build their backgrounds – especially Cesca's background. There were times when I felt led to certain places, and that was super exciting because it indicated I was perceiving through my character's eyes, not merely my own!

What was the most challenging aspect of using St. Augustine as a setting?

The most challenging aspect has been to be true to St. Augustine's history while taking literary license with some facts. I've had a number of readers who live in or know the city ask if there are really condos in the upper floors of the Wachovia Bank building. To my knowledge, there aren't, but it's thrilling to know that I made that bit of fiction believable. The challenge I didn't expect continues to be uncovering obscure facts, or reconciling bits of history that are reported differently in various books.

How intertwined within the plot and other story elements did the setting become?

The setting became so entwined with the story that St. Augustine became another character, especially in the first book. For instance, Cesca is a ghost tour guide, which integral to the plot, so I showcased the city's ghost tour sites and ghost tales. She's a surfer, so the beaches are story and plot features. I don't set scenes in certain locations because they are there. Rather various locations lend themselves to being the perfect site for scenes.

How did using St. Augustine as a setting compare to using any other real or fictional setting that you've used for other books/stories?

Considering that I think of St. Augustine as a laid back town, there is incredible energy here. That energy fed my creative juices like no other setting has managed to do. I've written books set in Tulsa (a city I adore), and I've set books partly in the Dallas area. While I connect with those areas (and many more locations), St. Augustine has a unique ambiance of both a European city and a beach community. The combination plays perfectly for all my projects.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about using St. Augustine as the setting of your story?

This may sound odd, but one of the terrific things about using St. Augustine as my primary setting is that, if I need to refresh my memory about a location in person, I can get to that location fairly quickly and easily. Another plus is that everyone I've ever called with a research question has been wonderfully helpful. From an interior design I spoke with to the outstanding folks in the sheriff's department, I get incredible amounts information. I'm most grateful for research assistance, and for the support of the community – even if I do need to take some literacy license with facts now and then.