

Q: How did you come to your life as a writer? Have you always written?

A: I have always liked to write. You would have to ask someone else if I have always been a legitimate writer. My love of writing began in Nancy Liles' third grade class when we were asked to write a poem. I somehow cobbled together four rhymed couplets, which I still remember and can still recite. I was hooked from that moment.

Most of my professional life required writing: proposals, market research summaries, strategy documents, and marketing plans. I wrote a couple of nonfiction books (*How You Make the Sale*, *The Golden Rules for Managers*) for the business market, and they were well received.

I keep up an active personal correspondence. I am extraverted and writing is – to me – just conversation on the page. I love to write.

Q: How did you begin the book?

A: *Life on the Line* had its beginnings in a class taught by Lynn York at the Duke Writers' Workshop in 2007. The first scene was the incident in Chapter One where Franklin surprises his football coach and knocks him down. I had no idea what would happen next.

Q: When you began the book, did you know how it would end?

A: Heavens no! I didn't even know it was a book. I just knew the first page and a half were pretty engaging, and I wanted to know what happened next. I wanted to see how the characters developed.

Q: What surprised you most about the book as it unfolded?

A: I was – and still am – surprised how layered and rich and complex the book became.

Who knew there would be a funeral, or a religious conversion in the middle of a summer tent meeting? Who knew there would be an undefeated season, two concussions, or the Brawl of the Century?

The only character I knew when the book began was Franklin, so I thought it was his story. But this story also belongs to Bart, and to Ricky, Doris, and Coach McInnis. And it belongs to Betsy, Harold, Coach Wittenburg and the myriad other characters who inhabit the tale.

Q: Your biography indicates that you played football. How true-to-life are the football scenes in the book?

A: They are as real as I could make them. Everything in the book either happened to me or to someone I know. Most of the things I did myself. I had a friend read the final draft of the book – this is someone who really *knows* football – and she was stunned by the violence of the football scenes.

Football is a great game for learning many lessons – it taught me (a weepy, chunky, clumsy, poet of a kid) to get up when life knocks you down. And it teaches teamwork in a way that most games can't. (Where else do eleven people have to do *exactly* what they are supposed to do, at exactly the same time, to have success?) But it is violent, and the potential for injury is very real. I especially worry about the potential for head injuries.

I played football seriously from 1965-1975, and sporadically up through 1981. Players are so much bigger now than they were when I played. I couldn't make a good 1-A high school team now, given the size I was in high school. And I was big enough to be a (lightly) recruited college prospect when I graduated in 1970.

Q: Are you Franklin Gibson?

A: No. Franklin and I have some things in common (*write what you know, they say*) but I **am not** Franklin Gibson.

Q: Are any of the other characters based on real people?

A: No. This is work of fiction. I have used names that occurred to me in the writing, and I actually know people with some of these names. But this is a work of fiction. In particular, there is not – nor has there ever been – a real-life version of Bart Wagram or of any of the people in Bart's nuclear or extended family.

Q: Who is your favorite character and why?

A: This is like asking a parent to choose a favorite child; it's not a fair question or one I can answer. I admire Bart's grit and envy his athleticism. Franklin reminds me of myself – a fat kid with a pretty good brain, but not much facility with sports. There is, I am sad to say, some of Doris Wagram in me and in most of us. Betsy Gibson is like many people in that she worries too much and catastrophizes to the point of madness. I have compassion for all of these people, and there is probably a bit of each of them in me.

Q: What do you think *Life on the Line* is about? Did the focus of the book change as you wrote it?

A: When I began the book, the first scene was about football. So I thought the book was going to be about football – and probably would be pitched to a middle-grade demographic. As the book grew, it also *grew up*. The theme expanded far beyond sports to encompass male adolescence and coming-of-age, family relationships, religion, and the pain that human beings experience and inflict on one another.

In the end, I think the book is about redemption, as I hope most of life is. And it seems to me that this book is appropriate for all adults and for students in late middle school or above.

Q: Do you have other projects in the works?

A. I came to writing first as a poet and continue to write and submit poetry occasionally (and with little success.) While writing *Life on the Line* there was a season when I was stuck and didn't know what to do next. During that time I began a second novel entitled *A Creeping Certainty*, which explores the deepening faith journey of two middle-aged men.

I like to write and will probably write – if only for myself – until they are shoveling dirt onto my coffin.