

Creative Living

celebrating all good things

A world of words

Chris Orcutt brings his cast of characters to the Millbrook Literary Festival. *by Kate Goldsmith*

Editor's note: This is the last in a series of articles about authors participating in the Millbrook Literary Festival on June 21.

What makes a book so good you can't put it down?

The process of creating worlds from words may seem magical (and it is, in a way), but look behind the curtain. There's a writer back there, laboring in solitude to share a story, scribbling in longhand or typing away on a keyboard, striving to perfect the language in every sentence and flowing each sentence into the next. If the goal is achieved, the effort will be invisible but the craftsmanship will shine through.

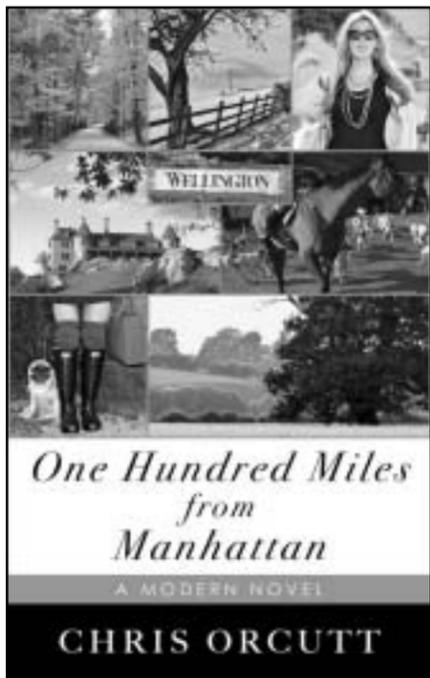
Chris Orcutt has written professionally for more than two decades. He's learned from the masters as well as his unique life experiences, and he savors the work performed behind the scenes.

"Giving the reader a good story, that's the first thing I'm after," Orcutt said last week during a visit to Creative Living's office. "Dialogue, plot, all of those elements. But the other thing I'm going for: I want readers to have a pleasant aesthetic experience of the language itself."

Like Gustave Flaubert, Orcutt is passionate about finding "le mot juste," the right word.

Anyone who appreciates the beautiful use of language will enjoy "One Hundred Miles from Manhattan," Orcutt's latest novel. Those attending the Millbrook Literary Festival this Saturday can get a sample during his Author Spotlight from 11:15 to 11:45 a.m. in the Gallery at the Millbrook Free Library (3 Friendly Lane).

The book cover describes an upscale rural community called Wellington, NY, "where the hills and the seemingly quaint village conceal lives of love, lust, adultery, tragedy and small wars."



The reader meets several denizens of Wellington, including a trophy wife, a doctor, a teacher and a single mother, among others.

"It's the story of a community told from 10 points of view," said Orcutt. "Each chapter tells of [the character's] experience of Wellington [so] the reader can get a multiplicity of views."

Some of the chapters started out life as short stories, "but once I had written a dozen of these chapters I realized they weren't short stories at all; it was a novel," he said. "They're inextricably linked, because what the characters do in one chapter comes back later on."

Comparisons between Wellington and Millbrook have been inevitable as Orcutt has deep ties to the area, going back to the 1950s when his grandparents lived there. Orcutt himself was born and raised in Millbrook, and worked his first job as a journalist at The Millbrook Round Table.

"There's no doubt that Millbrook's landscape influenced the landscape as I present it in 'One Hundred Miles,'" he said. "Is the place Millbrook? No, it is not."

Orcutt said he borrowed elements from Millbrook but also from the countryside of Derbyshire, UK, where he and wife Alexas visited last year.

"I see Wellington actually as being a step above Millbrook in wealth, status, etc.," he said. "I see the estates [of Wellington] coming closer to those of the peerage in England."

As part of his Author Spotlight at the Millbrook Library, Orcutt will present a 15-minute reading in which he will act out the characters, complete with voice changes and hand gestures.

"This was something very common to Charles Dickens," he said. "The characters are very real to me, so I'm able to act them out, because I can see every aspect of them."

Orcutt said he did a warm-up of sorts on May 24 at Merritt Bookstore in Millbrook.

"I actually had a couple of people say that my reading was one of, if not the most entertaining one they'd seen," he said. "It wasn't just the writer reading his words."

During the festival, Orcutt will be available to sign copies of his books in the tent on the Library lawn. In addition to "One Hundred Miles from Manhattan," Orcutt has published two books in the Dakota Stevens Mystery Series, "A Real Piece of Work" and "The Rich Are Different"; and a collection of short stories titled "The Man, The Myth, The Legend." All are available in paperback or Kindle format.

A "research trip" through Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana last month provided inspiration for Orcutt's upcoming fiction. Making the 30-hour journey by rail from Penn Station to New Orleans—passing through every Southern state along the way—fulfilled a longtime desire.



Chris Orcutt, author of "One Hundred Miles from Manhattan," will be a featured author at the Millbrook Free Library on June 21, during the Millbrook Literary Festival. *Courtesy photo*

"One of my favorite movies has been 'North by Northwest' with Cary Grant," he said. "I had always wanted to take a train with a sleeping compartment."

Because Orcutt wanted to step foot in each state, he asked his attendant to wake him up at any time to accomplish his goal. This resulted in the writer snapping selfies in his pajamas at 2 a.m. on the train platform in Charlotte, NC, which he posted on Twitter.

He ran into his first-ever tornado in Alabama.

"The best place I had for shelter was basically a rundown old filling station," he said.

Orcutt noted a different pace of life in

the South, brought to his attention by a friend in Louisiana.

"She remarked at how fast I walked, how fast I ate," he said. "I wasn't insulted by any of this; it made me see the importance of slowing down."

Orcutt said he enjoyed Southerners' turns of phrase, "the little tropes, the expressions they know."

He illustrated by relating an encounter at a Mississippi waffle house.

"I remarked to the grill cook, 'Not such bad weather, not too hot, no humidity,'" he said. "The grill cook looks over his shoulder and says, 'Don't worry, she'll get there.'"

Visit <http://orcutt.net> for more information about the author. ❖

See our front page feature for more information about the Millbrook Literary Festival.