



## 'You have to believe you're a writer'

By Melody Groves

William Least Heat-Moon has a couple of bookshelves in his house. One stores the books he cherishes, such as Shakespeare's works and Steinbeck's. The other holds 80 movies. No more, no less. These movies are his favorites, ones he watches perhaps annually, semiannually or even monthly. When he finds a movie he loves, one of the 80 is removed to make room.

And, he said, he always watches the credits. He even knows what a gaffer is.

But writing and massaging the English language is his first love. Heat-Moon, who holds a bachelor's in English and photojournalism and a master's and doctorate in English from the University of Missouri, gave insights into his writing techniques during the convention's keynote address.

*Blue Highways*, he said, started at 800 pages, but he cut it to 295, partially by changing the margins. Finished, it runs 180,000 words. It took a four-year search for a publisher, as he was told his book was breaking new ground and many publishers wouldn't take the

chance. He compared *Blue Highways* to Steinbeck's book *Travels with Charley: In Search for America*. In both books, the authors traveled America's perimeter, wanting to experience their country on a personal level. Unlike Steinbeck, Heat-Moon spoke to people along the way, interviewing them as well as simply chewing the fat. Controversially, he sent the manuscript to each person he had interviewed, allowing them to correct their part.

In his talk, Heat-Moon listed 10 tips for published writers.

1. "Get ready to write," he said. "That's the hardest part of the work." He touches the manuscript every day, that way going from nothing to something. At age 16, he received an Olympia typewriter and used it for years. "Write in pencil, at least the first draft." By going slowly, he says, it gives your brain time to pause and get new ideas.

2. His latest book, *Celestial Mechanics: A Tale for a Mid-Winter Night* (2017), is based on a 98-page journal. He recommends keeping notes and ideas

in a journal, and also cutting out photos and various turns of phrase writers come across.

3. Layering is crucial to good storytelling. "Slowly build it up."

4. Dictionaries and a thesaurus are a writer's tools and friends. He recommends Merriam-Webster's 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1955, and Roget's International, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1962. Synonyms and antonyms build layering. Don't rely on spellcheck.

5. "Reading great works helps me write better," he said. "Shakespeare opens up possibility of language."

6. He recommends reading a lot of 19<sup>th</sup> Century literature to study how they handled the language. "There are readers who want to be educated," and writing with those people in mind helps elevate your level of writing.

7. Pay attention to your words, he said. Look at the word "only." Where it's placed in a sentence changes everything.

8. Every writer needs an editor who can fix the issues. "You always need another pair of eyes." However, until you've reached the final stages, you've got to be your own copy editor, he said. "Watch your punctuation."

9. Rewriting is your friend. He said he made 24 changes over four years to the first 91 words of *Blue Highways*. The secret of good literature is rewriting. "Don't stop in the first draft. Stopping impedes the flow. Just write." Revise later. And beware of your internal editors – they intimidate.

10. Rejection causes dejection. Don't succumb to the depression. Keep trying. *Blue Highways* was rejected 12 times – "We don't see an audience for this." Well, they were all proved wrong.

William Trodgon, who writes under the penname William Least Heat-Moon, has authored several books, including *Blue Highways: A Journey Into America* (1981), *Prairyerth* (1999), *River-Horse: The Logbook of a Boat Across America* (2001), *Columbus in the Americas* (2002) and *Writing Blue Highways: The Story of How a Book Happened* (2017).

As a parting comment to the warm, packed room, he said, "Go forth, pilgrims. Open books, open minds."

William Least Heat-Moon delivers the keynote address. All photos by Johnny D. Boggs

