

# In his writing place

**F**or Vincent Wyckoff, it all started with a dinner party years ago.

A question was posed: “If you could do anything for a living, and education and money didn’t matter, what would you do?”

An insurance agent expressed a desire to be a professional dancer; a stay-at-home mother said she’d like to work with the Muppets. When it was Wyckoff’s turn to answer, he said: “If I could do anything, I would probably write books.”

The Minneapolis, MN Branch 9 member’s teenage son said, “Well, why don’t you do that? You always tell me that I can do whatever I want.”

Wyckoff took up the challenge, completed some adult education classes and started writing. He began by writing about what he knew—being a letter carrier. It stemmed from conversations with his family.

“Around the dinner table, you try to get the kids to talk about their day, and nobody would have anything to say,” he said, “so I would generally tell them a story about delivering the mail.”

His wife told him, “You’re writing now, you should write some of these stories down.” After some initial hesitation, he did.

The carrier had the same route for years before retiring in 2014, and delivered mail close to where he lives. “Everybody knew me,” he said. “I used to write for my lunch breaks. I’d stop at the local coffee shop and write.”

Once he finished writing a good number of stories, he reached out to the Minnesota Historical Society, which is also a publisher, to pitch a book.

“This is a neighborhood in Minneapolis, and this is what it looked like, and this is how we delivered the mail, and this is just a snapshot in time,” he told them. “Because in 50 years, or 100 years, we won’t deliver the mail like we do now. This is a way you can look back and you can see a specific place in a specific time, and this is the way it was.”

They wanted to read more, and they soon sent him a contract to publish the book, *Beware of Cat: And Other Encounters of a Letter Carrier*, through the historical society’s Borealis Books in 2007.

“It got that title because, in all those years of delivering mail, when I meet people, one of the first things they ask is, ‘How many times were you bitten by a dog?’” Wyckoff said. “I never got bit by a dog. I did get beat up by a cat one time really bad.”

The customer had a sign stating “Beware of cat,” which he thought was funny—until the cat lunged at him and dug in its claws. Though Wyckoff *did* shed a little blood, “it was mostly just my dignity that was ruined,” he said, adding that everyone had a good laugh when he got back to the station.

The book gave him a little local fame as well as support from longtime customers. “Pretty much my whole route showed up for the first book event,” he said, and when introducing himself to new carriers, he’ll get, “Oh I know you! You wrote that book!”



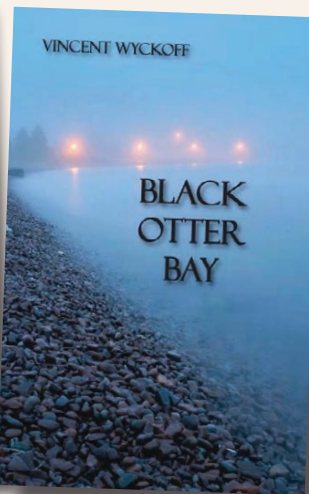
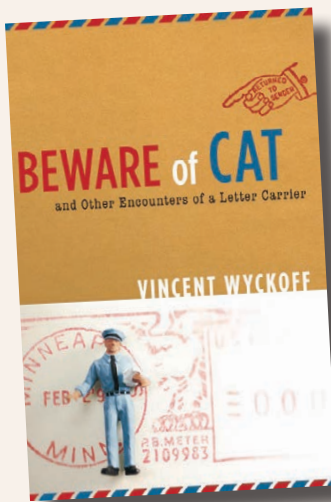
Vincent Wyckoff

*Beware of Cat* remains popular 15 years later, with one reader calling it “a slice of American life.”

Following retirement from the Postal Service after a quarter century, he pivoted to writing fiction and finished his first novel—which didn’t end up getting published. Some of the feedback he got was that he should try to write a book that appeals to a larger audience.

“I think everybody reads mysteries, so I decided to write a mystery,” he said, and wrote *Black Otter Bay*, set in the rugged Lake Superior area of northern Minnesota, where he lived for a short while after serving in the Army for two years during the Vietnam War era, and before joining the Postal Service.

On the North Shore of the lake, he spent a lot of time in the woods, and knew people—some of whom his characters are based on—who made a living in the woods. Wyckoff was intrigued by how they know so much about how to get around in the woods and how to survive.



A selection of Vincent Wyckoff's books

Vincent Wyckoff before he retired



"It went really well, and I got a publisher right away," said the carrier, who reached out to North Star Press, a small, independent publisher in Minnesota.

The mystery novel, published in 2016, was well received, so he wrote another in the series called *Night-watchers*, which hit presses in 2020, and recently came out with a third, titled *Refuge from the Sea*. The main character of this latest book finds a journal written by a man who had helped to build a lighthouse 100 years earlier.

"I call it a mystery without a murder," he said, adding, "It's been really fun living with these characters."

He's also written some short stories published in anthologies.

Wyckoff tries to write every morning and he doesn't outline in advance. "I really enjoy the whole process of writing," he says, "and now it's become part of my routine. I sleep on it and in the morning I get up and I kind of have an idea of where I'm going."

For his first novel, he struggled to get a story going about a boy in danger—then, upon waking, realized the character was actually supposed to be a girl. "She told me this whole story," he said.

No matter the subject or setting, Wyckoff said, his books evoke a "sense of place," whether in his own community as in *Cat*, or near a "violent, wild, cold lake" like his mystery series.

The North Shore of Lake Superior is "a pretty brutal climate, it's a rough country, and it's a tough, independent-minded people," he says, "but I

think the relationships, and some of the things that happen, and the way people deal with struggles, it's sort of universal.

"The stories can work anywhere, but they're really rooted to the North Woods locale, and especially Lake Superior," he said, adding, "There's a lot of myths and legends about the lake, and shipwrecks. I try to bring all that into the writing."

Indeed, one reviewer for *Black Otter Bay* said he "appreciated the feel of rock and soil, bark and water, the totally believable rendition of the physical, natural environment side by side with the human community."

Wyckoff credits his son for giving him the push to do something he's passionate about. He hopes to continue writing, with the goal of publishing a book every two years or so. He has ideas aplenty to keep him going. "I'll never get to all of them," he said.

And he still likes to write in coffee shops in retirement. "I need to have some of that energy going on around me, even though I'm not part of it," he said.

Since his latest book came out in September, he's been taking a short break from writing daily, as he gets back into promotional events such as readings and book signings in Minnesota and Wisconsin, something that didn't happen for his previous book due to the pandemic. He's also trying to get an agent.

Once the promotional work of the book dies down, he plans to get back to work on his next novel.

In addition to continuing the Otter Bay series, Wyckoff's next book will be historical fiction "about the demise of American Indian culture," based on the farmer co-ops developed in western Minnesota.

"There is a lot of research I want to get right," he said, possibly requiring an extra year to finish, "but I'm enjoying it. I'm learning a lot and the characters I've developed—I'm just really having a gas writing about them."

There's also a biography about a woman he knows who lived in Italy and fought in the resistance during World War II. "She asked me if I would write it for her before she died," he said, "and she dictated her whole life story to me. It's an incredible, larger-than-life, crazy, wild story of a 100-year-old woman and what she did in her lifetime. I would like to write that sometime."

Wyckoff no longer takes writing classes, but he still is part of a writers group that meets for encouragement and to help each other with publishing and marketing.

One thing is for sure: His letter carrier roots will always show through and inspire him.

"I want to try to write some more about the neighborhood and my relationship with some people, not only the patrons on my route, but other people I know in the neighborhood," he said. "Whether it could turn out to be a mystery set here, I don't know, but at some point, I'd like to do that." **PR**

To learn more about Wyckoff's writing, visit [vincentwyckoff.com](http://vincentwyckoff.com).