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Meet *The Elusive Immigrant*

Orinda's John Benzie Publishes First Novel

By Lou Fancher



Accountant-turned-novelist John D. Benzie Photos Lou Fancher

Meeting with an accountant normally doesn't leave a person gasping for air—except perhaps, when contemplating the wide berth between one's ways and one's means—but interviewing John Benzie, retired accountant and Orinda author, is breathtaking.

Accompanied by his wife and editor, Cherry, it's like a Wimbledon match, played out in a kitchen. Words fly back and forth between the two and there's no referee to call "time out!"

"We moved to Orinda in 1972," Benzie said.

"January 1972," Cherry added.

"I did some research on the world: where would I like to live? I learned that some people liked New York, some liked Houston, but everybody liked San Francisco."

"In six months we immigrated, bought a house, found a job and had a baby," Cherry summarized.

The Benzies, arriving from England, lived in San Francisco and Montclair before

finally settling in Orinda. Their ranch house on a hill was small, but thirty-five years later, remodeling has transformed it into a scenic oasis. Quirky, artistic touches, like the authentic cast iron British phone booth (with life-size mannequin "Fiona" forever waiting for a lover's call) hint at Benzie's humor and heritage.

The Elusive Immigrant, Benzie's first novel, is a Scotsman's yarn. It's a mystery about an accountant, Sawyer Fawkes, who becomes inexplicably entangled in an arson investigation. When Scotland Yard zeroes in on him, he flees the country. This sets off a tumbleweed of events, with Fawkes assuming a new identity in America.

Along the way, the author spins a rich, detailed history of international commerce, immigration, travel, business accounting, corporate corruption, and Bay area history.

Benzie worked on the book off-and-on for four years.

"Some weeks I'd do nothing because we'd travel. And I

didn't do the chapters in sequence either. I'd do a chapter, knowing where it would fit in later. It was sort of sketched out in my mind."

"The problem is, later on, you'd look back and think, 'Did I write that?' because it was no longer good," Cherry jumped in.

"I had a very tough editor," Benzie said, half-joking.

"I use my red pencil a lot," Cherry admitted. "It's a wonder we're still married."

The Benzies have been married 49 years and have two sons, Gordon and Andrew. Cherry was always the artist, drawing and writing, until one day, when she invited her husband to join her writing class.

Together, they tell the story of how Benzie found his writer's voice.

"It was at a one week conference in Santa Barbara. There were numerous instructors. Once you paid your fee, you just moved from one to the next. The last morning, we were thinking to leave early, but the Scotsman in me said, 'I paid for breakfast,' so I'll stay for the meal.

They were giving prizes, and we were not really listening, but then we heard my name. I didn't even know I'd entered! Then Ray Bradbury said, 'Come on up here.' Suddenly, before 400 potential writers, I was reading my story."

The experience boosted his confidence.

Benzie wrote mostly in the mornings, fitted around whatever else he was doing.

"Sometimes I could spend one hour on a paragraph. The first page would get the most corrections. I'm not a romantic writer, so my editor would comment on that."

Benzie eyed his wife, exchanging smiles, before continuing.

"I like writing. When I was Vice President of Finance for Transamerica Realty, I'd sometimes try to slip a little humor in an annual report. I think those got x-ed out," he added, his dry tone speaking volumes.

"I think the general image of an accountant is that we are extraordinarily precise. Very narrow minded and right-brained. The fact that an accountant could write an interesting book is as likely as a dog ordering a beer in a bar," he joked.

When it was complete, the Benzies chose to self-publish the novel.

"We heard from many agents that the number of books they'd accept would be less than two percent. Of that, publishers would accept less than ten percent. The numbers weren't very good," Benzie concluded.

Trusting his accountant's expertise, Benzie used CreateSpace to print 100 books. The first print run sold out and 100 more have been produced.

"We're doing print on demand right now," he said, the gleam in his eye suggesting a hidden plot. "But there are 360,000 CPA's in the United States, and if I can reach even a portion of those...."

The Elusive Immigrant, by John D. Benzie, is available at www.elusiveimmigrant.com.



This cast iron British phone booth stands in the Benzies' yard

Cartoonist Barry Hunau revisits some of Lamorinda's more controversial issues of 2010.

