

## **What Love Feels Like**

### **Interview with Sheila Bender**

**Sheila: Writing a novel collaboratively must have been fun. How did this idea come together?**

**Dave:** This is a story based on our own real experience as single folks finding love in our so-called golden years. We had written long “letters” — emails — in the process of getting to know each other because it was sort of a long-distance relationship. I don’t recall which of us came up with the idea of writing a book, but I do know I kept all our letters because they felt so special. This is a love that almost never happened because of my own foolishness. I learned a very important lesson during the process, and it had a happy ending. But I didn’t know if the romance in the story had enough drama to hold up as a novel, so I took a stage play I had written several years ago about a man who has his consciousness uploaded into a computer shortly before he dies of brain cancer. By mixing in the cyber sci-fi story — which also dealt with questions about love — I hoped it would appeal to readers of all ages, particularly those who like romance and/or sci-fi.

**C.K.:** Page one of our book begins with a description of an actual conversation between Dave and I. What began as a simple thought about what love feels like evolved into a playful idea about writing a book together. We believed our story about discovering love in one’s golden years had a message that would appeal to readers of all ages.

**Sheila: When in the process did you realize you would be exploring what love feels like?**

**Dave:** On our third date, C.K. quietly told me, “I’m thinking this is what love feels like.” And I couldn’t say if I had ever in my life pondered what love “feels like.” It made me think about what love really is. Just brain chemicals that prompt us to reproduce the species? Or is it poetry and destiny and magic? To answer your question directly, the quest for what love really is, and what it feels like, predated our decision to collaborate on a book, but that simply *had* to be at the heart of our love story.

**C.K.:** Exploring what love feels like was at the core of every aspect of our book from the very beginning. Lucas and Dawn never took their love for granted, and the way they cared for one another was apparent throughout their story, including the science fiction chapters. I think this was easy for Dave and I to write about because it is reflective of the way we love one another in real life.

**Sheila: How did you find your main characters?**

**Dave:** Although the main characters are based on ourselves, I had a bit of a challenge mixing that story with the characters in my original stage play, "The Dawn of Human 2.0." The female protagonist in the play was nothing like C.K. Tyler, and some of the minor characters in the play had to be altered in gender and personality to fit the story we finally decided to tell. Many of the characters in the book are based on real people, but all the names have been changed.

**C.K.:** The main characters of Lucas and Dawn are based upon us and our true-life experience of meeting one another and falling in love. The other major characters involved in the science fiction chapters were conceived at an earlier time by Dave. He was in the process of writing a science fiction stage play, and we thought it would be interesting to blend the two stories together -- one true, the other, science fiction.

**Sheila:** **How did you work out the timeline for a book that deals with the past and the characters' unusual present as well as the evolution of the AI project they are involved in?**

**Dave:** That was a bit of a challenge, too. In alternating chapters, we have flashbacks to the time before the male protagonist died. I wasn't sure it would work, and we did do a bit of rewriting to make it flow better. Near the end, we have multiple consecutive chapters in the flashback past — the story told by the love letters — but it feels better to us that way.

**C.K.:** I totally credit Dave for finding a way to blend the two stories together in a way that was easy for the reader to follow. He began by downloading many of our actual love letters in chronological order and then integrating the science fiction chapters into our love story. He also found a way to effectively bridge both genres by beginning many new chapters with the words, "When you last left our story. . ." As you might guess, there were many discussions and edits throughout the writing process. Each of us had our own distinct writing voice and wanted it to be accurately conveyed to the reader.

**Sheila:** **I have a special place in my heart for the epistolary form in literature. A significant portion of your book is told in letters emailed between the lovers. How did you organize the timeline of the letters? Did you collaborate on the letters or assign one author the Lucas' letters and the other Dawn's?**

**Dave:** I have a special place in my heart for the epistolary form as well. The timeline of the letters in *What Love Feels Like* was easy to organize: those are the actual dates of the letters that C.K. and I wrote to each other. I wrote all the letters by Luke, and C.K. wrote all the letters from Dawn.

**C.K.:** It was really quite easy for us to collaborate on the letters because our personal love story actually began through the exchange of the letters that were shared in our book. Getting to know one another through the old tradition of letter-writing is at the heart of our story. The only difference is that we used email instead of the postal service. I must say that finding a letter from Dave in my Inbox was just as exciting as receiving a letter in the mail!

**Sheila:** You also use memorandums and blog entries and other modern forms of writing--for instance, you refer to Match.com emails. Using these forms becomes an economical way of filling the reader in and in the letters evoking the relationship of the two lovers. I'd love to hear more about how these forms worked for you as authors.

**Dave:** Because I wanted the story to be relatable to readers — and lovers — of all ages, we needed to be somewhat up to date with the tech world. It's obviously a story about love in one's golden years, so Baby Boomers may find a connection with it, but hopefully, younger generations will find it interesting as well. My son is a software engineer, and I try to learn what I can from him about artificial intelligence and tech stuff, but there's no doubt that I'm still behind the times in terms of the latest and greatest tech stuff. We used Match.com and blog entries in the book because those are things we used in the process of living this story ourselves.

**C.K.:** We wanted our love story to provide a message of hope to the reader, especially those involved in the dating world. By referring to a familiar dating site like Match.com, online dating was approached through a slightly different lens. Dawn and Lucas demonstrated how meaningful it could be to slow down and communicate with one another while still being on a dating website. This is contrary to the sense of urgency that most experience when dating online.

**Sheila:** Were there discoveries for you as authors about love along the way of writing the book?

**Dave:** I discovered a great deal about love as my relationship with C.K. grew and blossomed, and much of that is in the story's love letters. I learned lessons that embarrassed me when I realized the truth was so obvious, and yet I missed it for most of my life ... for example, one shouldn't use physical traits — hair and eye color, body type, etc. — to eliminate a potential mate. And yet, many of today's newer dating apps do just that, with the temptation to "swipe left or swipe right" on a person simply because of their looks.

**C.K.:** Very much so -- writing a book together is not for the meek of heart! It involves courage, patience, honesty and lots of ongoing communication. In many ways, a loving relationship could not be sustained without those very same qualities being present. When

Dave and I took the risk to write a book together, we were delighted to discover that we continually learned more about one another throughout the process. And, when we hit a snag or voiced different viewpoints, we had the opportunity to successfully partner through those moments. Personally, I think my greatest discovery was learning that love has the potential to continually grow, if both people are willing to be open to one another's ideas and thoughts. Letting go of old mindsets and being vulnerable to personal growth is truly liberating. I continually ask myself why it has taken me 65 years to learn such a basic life truth!

**Sheila: How did you go about finding a publisher for the book?**

**Dave:** We went the usual route, sending query letters to agents first, knowing full well that getting an agent is harder than getting a publisher. We got some positive comments, but no agent offered to represent us. Then we pitched the book to publishers, including John Hunt Publishing, Ltd., in Great Britain. Hunt had published a non-fiction book I co-wrote with Jamshid Hosseini called *Travel Within: The 7 Steps to Wisdom and Inner Peace*, in 2008. We didn't pitch them first because they only published non-fiction, but when we found out they were now accepting fiction, I sent them the manuscript, and they said yes.

**C.K.:** Thank goodness for Dave and his former experiences as an author! I think finding a publisher might be one of the greatest challenges for most writers. Dave personally contacted many different publishing agencies and I was surprised to discover that many did not respond at all. Fortunately, he had worked with Hunt Publishing in the past and they voiced an interest in our book. As a novice myself, I would personally suggest that anyone dipping their toe into the writing world should be prepared to work very hard and continually look for small opportunities to write and publish, even if it's taking the risk to submit an article to an online blog or website. Like love, writing involves lots of patience and courage!

**Sheila: Do you have advice for others who are inspired by the idea of writing collaboratively?**

**Dave:** I wish I could say I am great at collaboration, but because most of my life involved writing newspaper and magazine stories all by myself, I struggle with it. I write alone, then send chapters to the collaborator for their input. With *Travel Within*, Hosseini told me his thoughts and stories, I recorded them, and then I wrote the entire book based on that. He was sent each chapter as it was finished for his approval. For *What Love Feels Like*, I assembled the actual letters, mixed in the sci-fi stuff from my stage play, cleaned it up as best I could, and sent it to C.K. for her input. She found enormous

sections of content that needed to be fixed or deleted, and she wrote new dialogue for many of the characters in the sci-fi part of the story. And, of course, all the “Dawn” letters are her writing. If the manuscript is palatable to the reader, it is because of her magic touch.

**C.K.:** That’s a great question. I would suggest talking with your co-author and exploring ways that might work best for both of you, *before* beginning the writing process. For example, Dave had a career in the news business and was a solo writer most of his life. In contrast, I was an educator and was used to collaborating on a daily basis. I naively thought that we would simply sit down together and explore ideas and collectively write together. That didn’t work for us, and we came up with a plan using a shared Google document that allowed us to suggest and explore ideas collaboratively and peacefully. We have found technology, particularly shared documents, to be incredibly helpful in the collaborative process.

**Sheila: Are there questions you wished I had asked?**

**Dave:** I think you did a comprehensive job and asked all the right questions. Thank you, Sheila.

**C.K.:** Here’s are two questions I think the audience might be interested in:

**What audience does *What Love Feels Like* appeal to?**

Dave and I sincerely believe that the book’s message is universal, but fans of romance and sci-fi books may find it particularly interesting. Baby Boomers may connect with the story’s theme of discovering new romance in one’s golden years, and young adults also may connect with the themes of honesty and taking your time to communicate and speak your truth while navigating the online dating world.

**Can anything new be learned about love during this unique time of Covid-19 and a global pandemic?**

Absolutely! We began writing this book prior to Covid-19, but as the pandemic progressed, we learned that people of all ages were searching for meaningful connections, love, and creative ways to communicate while being quarantined at home. Rediscovering the gift of becoming acquainted with each other by using the old tradition of letter-writing is at the heart of this story.