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ELLSWORTH AMERICAN, ELLSWORTH, MAINE

Author of CIA's Pollifax Lives on Newberry Neck

By John R. Wiggins

The CIA's most likable agent, perhaps its only likable agent if one considers recent news stories, is a 63-year old widow in Brunswick, New Jersey, who occasionally takes time off from attending garden club meetings to match wits with international ninjas and master spies in distant corners of the world.

Mrs. Euday Pollifax, who is usually lending her geraniums when visited by the clair-gobbling CIA official who issues directives that send her into the maelstrom of intrigue and high adventure, is the creation of Dorothy Gilman Butters, a writer who moved to Surry from Nova Scotia last June.

Where Mrs. Pollifax sprang from is Mrs. Butters's memory of a vanished generation.

"I grew up in a paragraph in Brunswick where there were lots of elderly people who were just fascinating characters. Do they make them like that any more? There were eccentric and widows who traveled to Timbuctoo and women with noses who had nothing else to do. I remember one who always wore a raincoat and carried an umbrella to matter what the weather was. They were fascinating and unique and they were just there. Mrs. Pollifax is drawn from them. Probably she is a substitute mother, too.

"My father was a minister, but he had done all his traveling before I was born, and I grew up in Brunswick. He was in that age group with all those characters, too.

Mrs. Pollifax first appeared in print in 1966 in a book called THE UNEXPECTED MRS. POLLIFAX. In that epic she survived the worst that Albania and Communist China could inflict and bobbed to safety on a raft in the Adriatic, if memory serves.

Then came THE AMAZING MRS. POLLIFAX, laid in Turkey. THE ELUSIVE MRS. POLLIFAX, where she won the secret heart of a Bulgarian premier; and A PALM FOR MRS. POLLIFAX, where the scenario was Switzerland.

The latest is MRS. POLLIFAX ON SAFARI, in which our heroine disposes of an international assassin, a hard blonde white supremacist from Rhodesia, and several lesser opponents who recklessly tangle with her in a game park in Central Africa. It sometimes dawns on the Brunswick widow that not everyone in this world means well, but readers can be sure that she will meet those lapses of behavior with impeccable gentility and common sense. Being a gentleman, she resorts to karate only when a villain proves immune to the ordinary calls of decency and obvious) deserves a neat chop on the neck.

"I wrote the first Pollifax book when I was in a very difficult time in life. I had been writing children's books and I had always wanted to write an adult book. I was feeling trapped, and I had her do all the things I had always wanted to do: travel, adventure, and the rest of it. It was pure escapism.

"I started very depressed, and as the book went on I had therapy and left my husband and went through several crises. By the time I was through writing the book, a great many things had happened to me.

"It was a real surprise. It was my first adult novel, and they bought it for a movie with Ronald Russell. They made a horrible movie of it and they eventually yanked it. They went through four scriptwriters and finally Rex Haas did most of the script herself under her mother's name, Clara McKnight. It came out on Broadway in 1966. Then it played a few drives and just sort of disappeared. My son, who was 11, read it the night before I took him to the Broadway opening. I remember that halfway-through it I turned to him and said, 'Who are these people?' I just can't recognize the story I had written."

No matter what Hollywood did to her, Mrs. Pollifax is still alive and well in the bookstores. All five volumes are still in print, the first one has just been reprinted, four of them have been bought and reprinted by READER'S DIGEST, and sales are steady if not spectacular.

"I don't know how many they sell," says Mrs. Butters. "Maybe 10,000. They stop letting you know after the first few months in hard cover. Then it goes into paperbacks. But she has been very kind to us. She sent my two boys through college and has kept the house warm."

Dorothy Gilman Butters came to Surry last June after spending almost three years in a little fishing village 30 miles out of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. It was a small village of only 150 people, small enough so that you could buy lobsters at the wharf and listen to the lobsterman and learn about their lives. I loved it, but sort of collapsed. The third postal strike in Canada lasted six weeks, which gave me a desolate feeling. The only oldest someone up to visit me and got stuck with an airport strike. Some people I had been fond of moved away about then, and I was getting a bit isolated. I thought that in Maine I could hang on to the same life style and still get to know some people.

"To my sons, I am just a mother who writes. For a long time they never read my books. Children take things for granted. They have begun to read them now.

"Writing something that is supposed to be funny is the hardest thing in the world. It doesn't flow. You have to construct it like a crossword puzzle.

"Since I have been here in Surry, I have written 120 pages about a woman living by herself in a Nova Scotia fishing village. It just flowed, like poetry or philosophy; but with Mrs. Pollifax you sit down and write dialogue and then switch it around enough to get it off balance. You have to write it twice. First you write it straight and then you go back and juxtapose things to get them off-center. It is a different kind of writing, and it takes a heck of a lot more craft."

MRS. POLLIFAX ON SAFARI Dorothy Gilman



In two of her tales, Mrs. Pollifax tolerated the brink of romance. In the last one, she has taken up with a retired judge who is a most suitable companion and who would undoubtedly with the approval of the other members of the garden club back in Brunswick.

"They will probably stay together. Mrs. Pollifax will probably get married. I am running out of fresh approaches. If she had somebody else to travel with, assuming I can handle it, it would take some of the pressure off of Mrs. Pollifax. I get tired of writing within a formula. I took off and wrote two other detective books. One was A NUN IN THE CLOSET. I had fun doing it, but you'd be amazed by the number of letters I get, and some of them were hate letters castigating me for dropping Mrs. Pollifax. Readers find something they like and they want you to produce more of it, while the writer wants to grow and change.

"I haven't thought of the next Mrs. Pollifax adventure yet I don't think about it. I just blithely assume it can be done if I work hard enough at it. It takes me between a year and a year and a half to write one of her books. It all depends. I did one book in a year. The first one was all invention, but lately I have been able to afford to travel and become familiar with a place before I write

about Mrs. Pollifax's adventures there. For some time I was tempted to visit a notorious mountain pass between Chile and Argentina where all the smuggled goods are trafficked. My son lately sent me a clipping of a news story mentioning that there have been 1,400 killings there, and now I am glad I didn't go. It sounds a bit too dangerous.

"Mrs. Pollifax was 60 in her first book. She hasn't changed. She should be 68 now, I suppose. When I started her, I was a completely different person. Now I am free, my two kids are almost through college, and I can start toling around a little and see what else I can do. When I began with Mrs. Pollifax in 1967 I was a submissive little housewife, suppressed, and hadn't traveled anywhere. Now, 13 years later, I am just a different person. Now I have raised two kids by myself, I have traveled, and I can make decisions.

"I wouldn't say that I don't enjoy Mrs. Pollifax, but I find her a bit confining for the things that I want to say, and I reserve the right to say them from time to time.

"I feel very very lucky and fortunate and grateful to her. Is that love? I don't know. Everytime I begin a book, I have to go back and rethink her. She no longer bubbles out spontaneously."



Dorothy Gilman Butters