

This article by Suzanne Guldumann was first published in the October 2016 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

You can find Suzanne's PDFs at www.harpcenter.com/Guldumann



I grew up in a house full of books. Perhaps it's not surprising that I first encountered harps not in a recording or a concert hall but in the pages of our household library. There were harps among the breathtakingly beautiful illustrations and in the stories in the old volumes of fairytales, and I lingered long and often over the old Irish tale of how the Dagda defeated the enemies of Ireland with the three magics of his enchanted harp. Thorin Oakenshield brings a harp to Bilbo Baggin's Unexpected Party in *The Hobbit*, and later there are magical "golden harps strung with silver" in the dragon's treasury under The Mountain that never need tuning. In Elizabeth Janet Gray's Newberry Award-winning novel

Adam of the Road, the protagonist is a young medieval harper, and in Nancy Bond's *String in the Harp* an ancient tuning key connects modern day children with a legendary harper.

I was 12 when I read Patricia McKillip's *Harpist in the Wind*. I wanted more than anything a harp like the harps in that book, a harp strung with the wind. However, even a more conventional Celtic-style harp strung with nylon was a tall order in the era before the Internet.



My parents were supportive. They ensured that my brothers and I had the opportunity to take piano lessons and encouraged my interest in the harp. After months of searching and making calls all over the country, we found Triplett Harps, then located in Santa Barbara. The wonderful concert harpist Carmen Dragon was my first teacher. I was her first Celtic harp student. We learned a lot together.

I began studying with Sylvia Woods during my first year in college, driving nearly 100 miles round trip each week in a contrary car nicknamed the Mule for lessons at her studio in the little yellow house in Glendale, California. I loved my first harp, but you couldn't exactly throw it on your back and head out the door in search of adventure. I was ecstatic when I finally acquired a "lap" harp -- still too big to be a lap harp for anyone smaller than a giant but small enough for traveling. That harp went everywhere with me. However, I swiftly found there was almost no sheet music available for small harps.

Although piano never caught my imagination the way the harp did, all those years of lessons proved tremendously useful. With Sylvia's guidance I learned the nuts and bolts of music theory, building on my piano background, and began to create my own arrangements tailored specifically to the range of smaller harps.

I published *Green Grows the Holly*, my first collection of Christmas carols arranged for lap harp, in 1998. It was an entirely home grown effort, assembled on my first Apple Macintosh, and decorated throughout with my own woodcuts and pen and ink illustrations. When I was little I wanted to be a writer and illustrator when I grew up. I didn't know it then, but that book was the first step toward my childhood ambition, if not in the way I had visualized. Perhaps that's why I chose the name *West of the Moon Books*, in part for the fairytale about the red haired girl and the Great Bear of the North and partly for J.R.R. Tolkien's poem that goes:

*Still round the corner there may wait
A new road or a secret gate
And though I oft have passed them by
A day will come at last when I
Shall take the hidden paths that run
West of the Moon, East of the Sun.*



Seven more books of music followed the first in fairly rapid succession. After a detour that included a master's degree in fine art painting and a seven year sojourn as a journalist, I returned to music, publishing my ninth harp book in June of this

year. It's a tribute to Jane Austen and the music of her era titled *Music for the Netherfield Ball*, and connects back to a lifelong love of books.



Netherfield Ball was my first title to appear as an ebook as well as a print edition. Sylvia, who encouraged me to publish my first book back in 1998 is now encouraging me to reformat my earlier books and make them available as digital downloads. I opted to start with two of the oldest books *Green Grows the Holly*, and *Cold December Winds*, a technical challenge because the software they were created with is nearly as old as the dinosaurs and equally extinct. The ebook editions are a careful reassembly of all the original elements. The reconstruction will enable me to keep the print editions in print, as well.

I am currently working on my 10th book of harp music and my first novel: a children's book about a harp. I hope one day it may inspire others to dream. I also recently started a blog to share some thoughts on harps, music, writing, and art: www.westofthemoon.org.

There's an indescribable magic in playing the notes in a faded manuscript for first time and hearing the music they preserve live again. As harpers and harpists we are the keepers of an ancient and remarkable musical heritage. I'm glad to be part of that tradition and part of this creative, amazing, and ever-evolving community. -- *Suzanne Guldemann*

The photos in this article are:

1. Self portrait. I like to do my arranging on my old Triplett Celtic. It's easier to juggle harp, pencil, and manuscript paper if I don't have to balance a lap harp.

2. Pip, West of the Moon Books resident muse, guards my wire-strung lap harp.

3. A print from the original woodcut that I carved for the cover of *Green Grows the Holly*.

4. The "harpy" I drew for the cover of *Music for the Netherfield Ball* was inspired by the harp image on the Regency era Irish farthing coin.

5. The Christmas spirit on the cover of *Cold December Winds* is one of my most popular illustrations, turning up in an astonishing number of locations on the internet, including on a website of tattoos.

