Finally, a book

As far back as I can remember, I’ve always loved stories – hearing them, reading them and later writing them.

In elementary school, I was a huge fan of the Weekly Reader Book Club and spent as much money as I could buying books with titles like “Call it Courage,” “The Mouse and the Motorcycle,” “Mrs. Coverlet’s Magicians,” and any “Encyclopedia Brown” books, which were about a young boy sleuth who solved crimes and mysteries.

I read and reread all of the “Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigator” books from the school library. I even rediscovered some new books in the series when I was in college so I spent the better part of an afternoon one day in the children’s section of the La Crosse Public Library, devouring them in one sitting.

I devoured “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy in junior high and have read the books several dozen times. The horror master Stephen King has captured me since I first read “Salem’s Lot” in 1977.

In high school, I was once challenged by a teacher who was requiring book reports in class. We were required to read four books of at least 200 pages each for the semester – an assignment I had completed in a couple of weeks.

The teacher said he had a special assignment for me – reading the unabridged edition of “The Count of Monte Cristo.” I had never heard of it, but checked it out of the library and discovered it had last left the shelves in 1965. This was 1980. It was 1,312 pages long. It took me a while, but I loved the tale – even though I got credit for only one book. That teacher knew what he was doing.

My love for stories and story-telling carried over into college and my journalism career, where I wrote and later edited thousands of stories. But despite good intentions, much encouragement from readers and a strong desire, I’ve never put together those stories.

Until now.

Yes – I buried the lede, as my former boss would have said. I have finally published a book. “Back Home: Country Tales Through the Seasons” is now available through Amazon publishing.

The book is a compilation of some of the columns I’ve written over the years, capturing the essence of rural life and the challenge of farming and raising animals in rural Wisconsin. Longtime readers will recognize some of the stories. Some may be new.

I started on this book five years ago and two years ago, I pitched it to a Wisconsin book publisher. After some initial interest, I received a polite rejection letter that said that while my manuscript had many fans among their publishing team, and they admired my credentials and my voice but because they were publishing fewer books, I was turned down.

I pitched the book to another Wisconsin publisher and was told – quite clearly – that they didn’t like the concept and didn’t think anyone would want to read the book.

Ouch. I guess I had been writing stories for years and no one was reading them. I can take constructive criticism, but that reply did sting a bit. But I am a slow learner.

The bulk of the book was done, but it needed some final edits. And so it sat on the to-do list. Until my wife Sherry gave me a nudge. Actually, it was more like a needed kick in the posterior.

Sherry completed the final edits for the book but I had yet to update the copy. That was a year ago. Then recently she noticed another book that had just been published by a Wisconsin author. She bought it and placed it on my desk. I began to read.

If this guy could do it, why couldn’t I?

Well, I could. And I did. In less than a week, I had the edits done, the copy was updated and the book was ready to be published.

Here’s a sneak preview of the description … “Like a good piece of baling twine, these stories weave together nostalgia, humor and a practical approach that will resonate with anyone who has spent time in the country.

So grab a cup of coffee, kick off your boots and get ready to laugh and maybe even shed a tear or two as you read about chasing cattle, fixing fences, baling hay, cutting firewood, birthing animals, battling through frigid winter temperatures and scorching days in the hay barn.”

I realize this column is a shameless act of self-promotion, but … this book also would not have happened without you, my readers. I have received hundreds of emails, letters, personal notes, phone calls and even folks who stop in at our winery to say they enjoy my stories. Your kindness and encouragement has kept me telling stories and writing.

Thank you for reading. And please keep those story ideas and feedback coming. As long as you’re reading, I plan to keep writing.

*Chris Hardie’s book “Back Home: Country Tales by the Season” can be purchased on Amazon. Copies also are available at Brambleberry Winery in West Salem.*