

Talking Points for *Wet Work* by Donna Meredith

1. You have a new novel out, your first environmental thriller. *Wet Work* sounds like it deals with some pretty serious issues. So what made you choose the thriller genre to showcase them? *Serious nonfiction about water issues is already out there. Cynthia Barnett's *Mirage* and *Blue Revolution*. Michael Grunwald's *The Swamp*. Doug Alderson's *New Dawn for the Kissimmee River*. And Vandana Shiva's *Water Wars*. I wanted to reach a different audience. *Wet Work* has lots of action and conflict. My hope is that readers are so entertained by the story they won't even realize they are learning something new about water issues.*
2. A thriller has to have a hero. Tell me about yours. *Summer Cassidy is a young scientist, a hydrogeology student trying to figure out the best path to achieve her dreams. She's determined to earn a doctorate and to make the world a better place through science. But she's also immature and flawed in many ways, so she has room to grow in this and future stories.*
3. The novel centers on testing of the water in privately owned Aquifer Storage and Recovery wells. What exactly is an ASR well? And why are more and more of them cropping up in Florida? *In the rainy season, excess water is forced under pressure into the microscopic pores of rocks deep underground. Then during droughts, the water is pumped back up. They are in use all over the country and particularly in overly populated areas of Central and South Florida. They are generally safe, but chemicals like arsenic can emerge from the rocks and flow back with the water. And saltwater can intrude into the wells if too much water is removed rapidly, just as it is intruding into our Aquifer because of over-pumping. Engineers know how to extract the water to minimize the problem. My book raises the concern that if private corporations begin to manage water supplies, profit could overtake the need for public safety.*
4. Your novel notes that most Americans don't give much thought to the source of their drinking water. Why do we take it for granted? *Water in this country is very cheap and so easy to access. Turn on the tap and for pennies good quality water flows out. If we had to hand pump the water for doing laundry or dishes or had to haul water from the river or lake to drink, we would be more aware of where our water came from and appreciate the resource more. Drinkable water is much scarcer worldwide than most of us in this country realize. Only one percent of the world's water is readily accessible for direct human use. An example of overuse is the way Florida's beautiful springs are drying up. YouTube has several informative slideshows on the springs that are already gone or in decline. We Americans are the lucky few who can count on cheap, clean water, but that is changing. And it's worse in many countries. Half the hospital beds in the world are occupied by those made ill from water-borne disease.*
5. In your story a corporation and the lobbyist it hires try to influence government regulation of Florida's water. Wouldn't most regulation of that nature be handled at the federal level? *Yes, the Safe Drinking Water Act is designed to ensure our nation's water supply is safe. But state department of environmental protection officials told me our state legislature once looked into passing a law that would override the federal rules. It didn't get passed and probably would have been overturned if it had been. But the precedent is there for states to try to interfere, and in this anti-regulation, anti-government climate, I could see it happening again. Most government*

regulation is meant to ensure our quality of life. Sometimes a rule has unintended consequences or has too many loopholes to work properly. The famous Halliburton loophole that exempts oil and gas companies from the Safe Drinking Water standards is an example. The sequel to *Wet Work* is going to look at hydraulic fracturing, which is used to release oil and gas from shale. Fracking is having tremendous impacts on our economy and on energy independence, but it is also impacting our water and our health in ways people are only beginning to realize.

6. So is this series going to be anti-business? My lead character is very aware of the need to balance environmental concerns and economic needs. I am trying to offer fair portrayals of characters on all sides of issues. I wish our political leaders today were more willing to compromise, to balance competing interests. But when it comes to clean water, we can't live without it. Neither can deer or raccoons or fish. We need to be really careful stewards of this precious resource. It's easier and cheaper to prevent pollution than to clean it up afterward.
7. Your main character's mentor is a female college professor who says, "Someone's career has to come first, and it's always his while yours collapses faster than a sinkhole." Are those fears justified? In the novel, the professor's love interest wants her to leave her tenured position to go to a different university where he will have a better job. Whose career is going to come first is always a problem for modern couples. A wonderful article in *Atlantic Monthly* this past year explored whether women can have it all. It's difficult to manage the fast-track career with family needs.
8. The novel raises ethical issues regarding various studies and university research. What problems are you trying to highlight? Full disclosure of funding sources is important. It's the first thing we should ask ourselves when we encounter a "study" or statistic. Who paid for the study? How was the sample taken? How objective were the researchers? Obviously if an oil and gas company funded a university study telling us hydraulic fracturing doesn't pollute our water, we should question the results more than if an independent group that has nothing to gain from the results funds it. It doesn't mean every study funded by business interests is flawed, but we should examine methodology carefully and see if other studies can duplicate the results.