

TAKING FLIGHT

Completing your first novel can be an intimidating task—one that most writers never actually finish—but for southeast Minneapolis author Terry Hokenson, whose first book, young-adult novel *The Winter Road* (Front Street, May 2006), resulted from an unlikely source.

When Hokenson's daughter, Alberta, was 10 years old, he started tucking a little something extra in with her lunch. *The Lunchtime News* was a weekly newsletter that contained everything from "cool facts about frogs and trees" to a continued story about a young doctor, Willa, whose plane crashes in the Canadian wilderness. An inspiring tale of the female doctor's survival during a harsh Ontario winter, the story began to take on a life of its own, and Hokenson, a former lawyer, went right along with it.

After earning a place in 12 issues of *The Lunchtime News*, 58-year-old Hokenson started the framework for what would later become *The Winter Road*. He headed up to Ontario to go winter camping and do research for the book, as authenticity was a definite goal. He met many interesting characters who shared a lot of information—such as what is in a pilot's survival kit—that found its way into the novel.

"I picked [Ontario] because it's a huge, vast wilderness, and I just imagined it as—in the winter—an awful place to get stuck," Hokenson says. "I wanted the story to be set in a winter wilderness, and have the character face the challenge of how to get out. I was especially interested in how a young woman would manage it. Because my daughter is an only child, I wanted to get into her head and not be able to rely on typical male assets like brute strength. She would have to survive by her wits."

Making the novel accessible to its 12 and up audience, Hokenson changed the Willa



A LONG RIDE >

Nearly a decade of work went into Terry Hokenson's debut novel before it hit bookstores this May.

character from the original female doctor role in *The Lunchtime News* to a 17-year-old Willa who is struggling with the death of her older brother, and parents who are emotionally and physically unavailable.

Creating a positive role model for Alberta, now 21, was the motivation behind the Willa character, Hokenson says. "One thing her mom and I ... agreed on was that we wanted to raise her to be independent and resourceful—all those strong things."

Beyond presenting *The Winter Road* and its survival lessons in classrooms and libraries, Hokenson says he's looking forward to beginning work on his second young-adult novel, set in the 1880s, which will investigate the relationship between a Swedish immigrant and his son. "I have an

ongoing interest in exploring the angst of the teenage years—young people coming of consciousness, wrestling with independence issues, authority issues."

Hokenson says his experience as a first-time novelist in Minneapolis has been rewarding, not to mention supported by fellow writers and editors, including Jane Resh Thomas—an author, editor and former children's literature reviewer for the *Star Tribune*—who Hokenson says "is the one person who was responsible for getting this [book] published."

As for advice to aspiring writers, Hokenson keeps it simple: "Keep a journal, make up stories, just write and don't worry about your spelling. That can all be dealt with later. That's what editors are for." ■