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Writer based novel on her fiction class

By **Dennis Lythgoe**

Deseret Morning News

Published: February 24, 2008

Twenty-five years ago, Susan Breen, who used to report on mines for Fortune Magazine, was married and had four children. As her children grew up, she started writing short stories and longer fiction.

For several years she has taught fiction at the Gotham Writers' Workshop in Manhattan. She has now taught 1,000 students. Meanwhile, she has written two novels: "Courting Disaster," the story of a woman who has been engaged 14 times and then falls in love; and "Pitch," a story of a woman who feels possessed by the ghost of Alexander Scriabin, a peculiar 20th century composer.

Neither has yet found a publisher — and she has spent the better part of 10 years working on them. Suddenly, she conceived of a novel called "The Fiction Class," based on her experiences teaching 14 students at a time for 10-week terms.

It took her only four months to write the novel, and it was quickly accepted for publication by Penguin Group. She was passionate about it. "Every day I was trying to see how it would come together, pushing myself to get it done," said Breen during a phone interview from her home in Queens. "I included teaching tips about writing very deliberately. I always give my students writing exercises and most of them excel in that assignment."

It's ironic because when Breen was getting rejection letters for her novels and short stories, several editors wrote that they liked her writing but they saw her as a bitter person. "So they made suggestions as to how I could improve. Still, I was perplexed, because I don't think of myself as a bitter person."

But when Breen began writing "The Fiction Class," she felt the passion that apparently had been lacking in her previous work. "I imagined telling it to my students, and I think it worked." Her agent told her this is "the most accessible novel" she has written.

Because the teacher in the novel visits her mother in a nursing home after class each week, Breen could also draw on her own experience with her mother. Virtually every week she and her mother ended up in an argument. "It's very difficult to have a mother in a nursing home," Breen said. "But I knew who I was talking to. One of my books was about a classical pianist. Not everyone relates to a classical pianist, but everyone has to deal with a mother."

Arabella, the teacher in "The Fiction Class," started sharing stories with her mother about her class, even telling her about the writing exercises, and soon her mother became interested in writing. Finally, Arabella learned that her mother had written a short story and she wanted her daughter's criticism.

Breen remembered a short story she had written a decade earlier, and she realized when re-reading it that it would work perfectly for the story the mother wrote in the book. "I read it and it was as if it had been written by someone else. Pure serendipity."

Breen's novel is peopled with diverse, interesting characters who initially offend each other and the teacher, but after they have engaged in several conversations and exercises in writing, they all begin to identify with each other.

According to Breen, that's the way her classes are.

"Sometimes people cry throughout the whole class. I even talked to my boss once and he said, 'People feel vulnerable when they go to a writing class' and he's right. I teach advanced fiction now and some of the people have been with me a long time. It's like a support group or a bunch of friends getting together."

Both Arabella and Breen talk in a light, witty, down-to-earth style. In the novel, Arabella subtly charms Chuck, a member of her class and starts to date him. Breen can't utilize the same charm toward men in her real class because she is happily married, and her husband is thrilled about her novel.

"I also speak the book out loud when I write. I'm not exactly Arabella, but there's enough of Arabella in me that if you know her you also know me," Breen said. Her mother had died by the time she wrote the book, so she gave her brother a copy to read to see if he saw the same mother that she did.

"He loved it. The fact that he validated it made me happy," Breen said.

Currently, Breen is at work on another novel about some teenage boys who are traveling actors. "My son was in such a group. I enjoy teenage boys. I think they're crazy and love hearing them talk. So far I've written a whole synopsis, something I've never done before. I've never known how a book would end before. But it feels easier because it's like taking a trip with a map.

Will her earlier books ever be published? "Hopefully some day," Breen said. "But I know that every writer has a bunch of 'learning books' in the closet that may *never* be published."

E-mail: dennis@desnews.com

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