



Novelist Nancy Hammerslough explores 'sisters and secrets'

Written by Adele Annesi

Thursday, 23 December 2010 11:58

Weston-based anthropologist, writer and publisher of award-winning young adult fiction Nancy Hammerslough brings her considerable background to bear in crafting her debut novel, *Almost Lost, Nearly Found, A Novel of Sisters and Secrets*.

Set in Indiana at the close of World War II, *Almost Lost* tells the story of 11-year-old Peggy Rubinson, who shoplifts Christmas presents, hopes someone tall will ask her for a date and befriends a girl whose family escaped the Holocaust. It's also the story of her older sister, Janice, a homecoming queen with a secret life who suffers a disaster that shouldn't have happened.

"The inspiration for the story was 'what if,'" Ms. Hammerslough said. "The narrator is 11 and dealing with being 11. Her older sister is the perfect girl. This is about what happens when the perfect girl comes in contact with an awful situation. It's about the demands of her mother and the world she lives in. It was a different world then, and I was thinking about what life was like, and what if something happened to this perfect girl."

Though she has won awards for writing and her company, Brown Barn Books, has published award-winning titles like *Under A Stand Still Moon* by Ann Howard Creel, this is Ms. Hammerslough's first novel. The process blended experience with deep creative thought. "Every writer of fiction and biographies has to rely on what they make of something they've seen or something they know. The characters were fairly formed, but I still had to do a lot of thinking. You have to see the story in your head."

She developed the story for *Almost Lost* on the premise that unwritten societal demands remain, and people don't change. Yet, as an anthropologist who has worked on digs like Petra, Tikal and Cahokia in the southeastern U.S., she found it easier to research her journal-style novel. "One thing that is so marvelous is that I listened to a radio program on Google — because the announcement that the war had ended went across the country, and you could hear that."

She also found writing groups helpful. "I would recommend this to anyone — being in a writing group where you have to write. For me, the process is thinking and thinking and thinking about the story. Writing is what takes place while you're walking the dog."

The challenge came from an emotional place. "It was from the things I know, some of which are quite painful. But if you're a writer and you're honest, you've got integrity. You're not in control, yet the pleasure of the outcome is quite substantial."

Prior projects, like the Emmy-winning documentary *The Outlivers*, had substantial outcomes, too. "Nancy wrote a devastatingly brilliant, historically accurate script," said program director and TV producer Harvey Bellin. "Nancy's brilliance is equally evident in her new novel, *Almost Lost, Nearly Found*, which is not only a deeply moving historical story of family bonds, but also a tour de force of extremely well-crafted narrative structures and character voicing,"

Ms. Hammerslough's foray into publishing and writing began after she founded Pictures of Record, which provides photographic images to the academic market, while she was teaching at City College of New York. "It was an elite school for people who couldn't afford Harvard. Then open admissions came, and there were no standards. None of us knew how to teach students who couldn't read. Since we had taken pictures at [archaeological] sites of things like drainage, we showed pictures. Teachers began borrowing them, and we thought it would make a good business."

Once resources became available on the Web, Ms. Hammerslough researched publishing and the young adult market and found it a good niche. "But 'YA' has become a very blurry genre," she noted. "A lot of books that used to be considered adult — *A Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* — are now considered 'YA.' The vampire books and the *Hunger Games* are being read by adults. But a good 'YA' story is a well-written story. That's what anyone will like."

Though an experienced trend observer, she doesn't try to guess how publishing will fare. "I don't know the future of books; nobody does. But stories are still important. It's built into human beings to like stories. Back when people were barely people, someone was telling about a hunt, how the sun got made, and in every generation people tell stories in all kinds of ways. They sing, they illustrate. People use stories to explain themselves to themselves or the world, or they use stories to take them places outside that world. People are always curious — that doesn't really change. It just comes in different media."

For more about *Almost Lost, Nearly Found, A Novel of Sisters and Secrets*, visit Amazon or Brown Barn Books at www.brownbarnbooks.com.

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