

The Star-Ledger

Hopeful romantic

Novelist works hard to become a success

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STORY BY PEGGY O'CROWLEY / PHOTOS BY JENNIFER BROWN

Star-Ledger Staff

On a recent Saturday, Lois Winston had her hair done and drove from Westfield to the Borders Bookstore in Bridgewater to talk about and sign her latest book, "Love, Lies, and a Double Shot of Deception," a mystery romance novel.

The next day, another signing at another bookstore, this one on Route 10 in Ledgewood. The following Thursday, she was at a bookstore in Marlton in South Jersey. In between, she was holed up in the office of her cozy Westfield bungalow, writing for hours at a time.

While the drop-dead gorgeous heroes of her novels sweep their heroines off their feet, sometimes literally, and live pretty much happily ever after, real life is different, including for romance writers.

Romance, it turns out, is not for the faint of heart. Romance, in fact, is actually a lot of hard work.

That hard work is finally paying off for Winston: A second novel just out, a committed editor and a slew of proposals in the works, she's on a roll after toiling for years on manuscripts that saw their fair share of rejections.

As good as her writing is -- and she's won dozens of contests -- it's also the writing workshops, learning the nuts and bolts of the publishing world, updating her Web site, participating in blogs that have helped her become one of the few whose work actually becomes a book.

Getting published

"I look at this as a business," says the pragmatic Winston of her work. Her five-year plan? "To be on the New York Times best-seller list," she says with a smile, brushing her auburn hair from her brown eyes.

That's a tall order in the romance book biz. Of the 10,000 members of the Romance Writers of America, about 1,700 have been published, according to Gail Freeman, president of the New Jersey Romance Writers, of which Winston is an active member.

"If you go to Harlequin or Silhouette," she says, referring to two of the largest romance publishers, "you'll see a slush pile of unsolicited manuscripts, 6-foot stacks along the hallways, thousand of submissions a month.

"Lois has been honing her craft for years. The woman is so persistent and so professional. She's hard-working and takes it very seriously," says Freeman, of Neptune City. She herself has been writing for 10 years, in the genre of "paranormal historical" -- one of her manuscripts involves an undead 1,000-year-old Scots warrior who finds love with a modern woman -- but has never been published.

Finding a niche in the multi-bracketed romantic market is important to success. There's historical, paranormal -- usually involving vampires or werewolves -- historical paranormal, contemporary and a hot new genre, erotica, which features more, and more graphic, sex scenes without crossing over into pornography.

These categories have their loyal followings. "There are readers who will only read Scottish historicals," Winston says.

Probably the most successful Jersey romance writer, Eloisa James, aka Mary Bly of Summit, a Shakespeare professor at Fordham University, has sold millions of copies of her Regency and Georgian era English historical romances. Eager fans attend her readings and join her chat rooms to dish on her dukes and duchesses.

Winston is comfortable in the "contemporary" category, which includes elements of chick lit and suspense romance. Besides being able to dispense with researching 18th-century undergarments, it allows her to brandish her decidedly contemporary wit.

Here's an excerpt from her first novel, "Talk Gertie to Me" (Dorchester, \$5.99, paper), published last year:

I motioned to my laptop dangling at his side. "You were reading my files."

To his credit, Mac flushed with guilt. At least he was man enough not to lie his way around the flagrant violation of my privacy. "Yes, well, actually, I want to talk to you about that."

I stiffened. "Talk about the height of hubris! You read my diary and then expect me to discuss it with you? I don't think so."

Mac blanched. "Your diary!"

"What did you think you were reading, a download of "Crime and Punishment"?"

"I thought it was e-mail correspondence you had saved to a Word file. Are you telling me that you're Gertie? Damn! This is too good to be true."

"What?" I grabbed my computer, shoving his at him. "You, Mackenzie Randolph, are a pervert."

He grinned at me. "And you, Nori Stedworth, are the answer to both our prayers." Then, instead of taking his computer and handing me mine, he placed his palms on either side of my face and kissed me.

I should have yanked myself out of his grasp. Kicked him in the shin. Spit in his eye.

One of the above.

Some of the above.

All of the above.

Instead, I did none of the above. Instead, I kissed him back.

Winston is also "branding" herself by including crafts, such as embroidery, in each of her novels. It allows her to adhere to the old adage to write what you know, since crafts were her career before she began to write in her 40s.

Growing up poor in the Weequahic section of Newark -- she and her parents and three siblings shared a two-bedroom apartment -- Lois Siebel loved reading as a child, but her talent bloomed in art. She graduated from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, the city where she met her husband-to-be, Rob.

"My kids always tease me that I married for a green card because, if we got married, I would be eligible for in-state tuition," she says with a laugh.

She began designing kits for the burgeoning craft industry. The couple moved to the suburbs and had two sons, Christopher, now 32, and Scott, 29. Back in the '70s, working women had few child-care options, so Winston worked at home while her sons were in school.

She designed kits for cross-stitch projects, such as samplers; for cloth dolls, for every kind of needlework except knitting and crocheting. A design for an afghan inspired by early American samplers won an award.

It was after a meeting of the trade group that she began to dream, literally, of romance writing.

"I was at a conference of the Society of Craft Designers (now the Craft and Hobby Association), and I dreamed a chapter every night, a romantic story that just started unfolding," she recalls.

Convinced that she had a book in her, she wrote a 50,000-word manuscript that spanned 35 years. "It was unpublishable, although I didn't know it at the time," she says.

The experience taught her that she needed to work on her writing, so she plunged into workshops and networking with other romance writers, many of whom she has helped, as well.

She learned techniques such as point of view. But her dialogue, snappy and witty, comes from herself, her friends agree.

"I guess it didn't surprise me that's the genre she likes because of her sense of humor," says long-time friend Ruth Vogel, a clinical psychologist in Manhattan.

"She has a very dry wit, a funny, quirky sense of humor," says Charity Scordato of Edison, a lawyer who has published 15 romances, including a paranormal series, under the pen name Caridad Pineiro.

Of all her characters, Winston says the one most like her is Gertie, the caustic, critical but warm and witty alter ego of heroine Nori Stedworth, a girl from Ten Commandments, Iowa, transplanted to New York. Nori, channeling Gertie, becomes the host of a hit radio show.

Unlike many romances, Winston's work is very plot driven, with deft twists and turns to keep the reader guessing. In "Love, Lies and a Double Shot of Deception," the tension rises as her heroine, newly widowed socialite Emma Wadsworth, is framed for the murder of her evil husband, as she meets and falls in love with a Trump-like real estate developer (with much better hair, of course). The action takes place in the tony Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia and includes a romantic winter weekend in deserted Cape May.

She consulted with a city police officer to make sure the legal and criminal details were right.

Of course, there are the obligatory sex scenes, which Winston, grandmother to Jack, 3, and Zoe, 1, said she's not crazy about writing. But what would a romance novel be without them?

And, of course, there are the inevitable questions about the reactions of her family members to the steamy couplings. At least, she says dryly, "that's what they ask me at my husband's holiday parties."

Son Scott, an animator who built her Web site, confesses those scenes are the reason he hasn't read the books from start to finish.

"I think her writing romance was more shocking than the fact she wrote a book. I don't want to put my mom and the subject matter in the same frame," he says.

Nonetheless, he adds, he's immensely proud of her and attests to her work ethic.

On a visit to her son Christopher and his family in the Bay Area, she and her husband drove six hours north to attend a wedding, Scott recalls. "She stopped at every single Borders and Barnes and Noble to sign stock (books). I've gone to book signings where they didn't promote her and two people were in the audience, and she will sit there and convince those two people to buy it," he says.

Like most family and friends, Rob, her husband of 35 years, didn't know what she was doing until she was well into the project.

"I was surprised because it was covert at first," he says. "She wanted to be sure she was going to be successful. When she found her first agent, and she knew this was not going to be a hobby, that's when she shared with me what she was doing."

Now he's her biggest fan. One of the couple's castles in the sky is that Winston will become successful enough to buy a place in Manhattan -- Sutton Place or Park Avenue -- where they can indulge their passion for theater.

What does he think of his wife's second act as a middle-aged writer of sexy romance novels?

He doesn't exactly answer the question.

"She's a young woman! She's got a lot of life left; we both do!," he exclaims with a touch of indignation.

He might not be a hero in a novel, but if that's not romantic, what is?

Favorite books: The "Stephanie Plum" series by Janet Evanovich; suspense novels by Sandra Brown; the romance novels of Susan Elizabeth Phillips

Last Broadway show seen: "110 in the Shade"

Favorite musicals: "Wicked," "The Producers," "Ragtime"

Fantasy careers: Astronaut, only she has motion sickness, or a Broadway star, only she can't sing or dance

Peggy O'Crowley may be reached at pocrowley@starledger.com or at (973) 392-5810.