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Local author casts mystery in 'Dead of Autumn'

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Sherry Knowlton



Posted: Wednesday, December 10, 2014 6:00 am

By SCOTT WOOD / VTS Correspondent | 0 comments

Growing up, Sherry Knowlton was an avid reader — reading under bed covers by flashlight, practically living at the public library, reading with a friend while both lolled away summer afternoons on the front porch of the friend's house in Chambersburg.

Now, years later, Knowlton recently came out with her own — and first — book, a novel entitled "Dead of Autumn," published by Sunbury Press of Sunbury, Pennsylvania.

The book is available at Sunbury Press Bookstore in Mechanicsburg, Whistlestop Bookshop in Carlisle, and the Carlisle Arts Learning Center in Carlisle. According to Knowlton, the publisher is working with additional local independent book stores to stock the book, but it can be ordered at any bookstore, including Barnes and Noble. Additionally, the "Dead of Autumn" can be ordered for Kindle from Amazon and in its print version from Sunbury Press, Amazon and Barnes and Noble online.

The novel is a suspenseful mystery set in south-central Pennsylvania, riving with social issues and featuring "historical twists," Knowlton said.

According to the author, "Dead of Autumn" is a "unique mix," joining conventions of popular suspense genre with "compelling social issues." A few of the themes running through the book are that evil can take many forms and that extremism contains the seeds of danger. On balance, as an antidote to that danger, is another theme: "That women can best protect themselves when they recognize and develop their strengths," she adds.

"I feel a real sense of accomplishment that I actually did write a book. The fact that Sunbury Press decided to publish the novel and that most of the feedback from early readers has been positive — that's icing on the cake!" Knowlton said. "The first few times I went to the Sunbury Press page or Amazon and saw my book for sale, I had to look twice to make sure it was really there. I now have a webpage, a Facebook Author Page, and a Twitter account for the book, so it's starting to become real."

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"What are most gratifying are the reader reactions to the book," she continued. "Although it's just been out there for a short time, 'Dead of Autumn' has an average review of five stars (out of five) on Amazon. And people have been telling me that they 'couldn't put the book down.' I was at a book signing event recently where a gentleman asked to shake my hand. He said, 'I've never shook hands with an author before.'"

Local inspiration

Two local historical events were the sparks that ignited the plot of "Dead of Autumn," according to Knowlton: the decades-old murder of Russian immigrant Natalia Andreevna Miller (found dead in a forest outside Carlisle) and the famous Babes in the Woods case, in which, during the 1930s, three young girls were found dead in the woods near Pine Grove Furnace, not far from where Knowlton has lived for more than 30 years.

"Although my account of the Babes in the Woods road trip draws on actual events, the story told by young Dewila Noakes in 'Dead of Autumn' is fictionalized," another product of my imagination," Knowlton said.

All characters of the novel are products of her imagination, Knowlton emphasized. With one exception — the dog, Scout, is based on three beloved English mastiffs that have been part of the Knowlton family for years.

That said, Knowlton does suspect the some of the characters display characteristics of people she has encountered in her life, even, perhaps, of herself.

"Friends tell me that they see some of my own opinions and preferences in my protagonist, Alexa Williams. But she is not intended to be a younger, more attractive and interesting version of Sherry Knowlton," she noted. "She is a fictional character that I created for this book."

In addition to the Babes in the Woods story, the novel touches on several historical events important to the area, such as the Civil War and the Underground Railroad.

The manuscript

Knowlton began working on "Dead of Autumn" about three years ago; the actual writing took about two years. In the past, she had made a couple stabs at writing a novel, but time constraints and the demands of living and making a living forced to set her attempts aside.

Now, "semi-retired," from the healthcare insurance field, she can focus on writing.

"For the last 20 years of my career, prior to retirement, I had executive positions in the health insurance industry and state government that required much more time than the typical 40-hour workweek, with no time for writing a novel. When I stopped working full-time, I told myself that it's now or never if I was going to write that book," she says.

Like most accomplished writers, however, Knowlton has been writing and playing with words since childhood. She won a couple of awards for her verse and stories back in elementary school, edited her high school newsletter and yearbook, and worked on the college newspaper during her stint at Dickinson College in Carlisle.

Knowlton says that much of her career, she has written for her professional positions. For many years, she worked in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare, where she wrote regulations, policy, proposals and other various documents. When she left the state government to work in the commercial insurance field, she wrote more proposals (for example, for state Medicare programs), speeches and policy statements.

Outside her professional field, she wrote only one piece that saw publication — an essay for WITF's "This I Believe" series.

"Writing 'Dead of Autumn' was certainly a learning experience. First of all, I've spent years concentrating on professional writing (regulations, proposals, legislative testimony...). This type of writing has its own style, which is very different than what is needed for a suspense novel. The transition in writing styles was challenging," she said. "Another area that came as a surprise is the discipline involved in creating a fictional world. "I had to name and describe every character in the book, no matter how minor and keep track of all that. I had to create a very specific timeline and refer back to it throughout my construction of the plot. Despite my attention to detail, my editor still caught a few slip-ups: a woman's hair was blonde in an early chapter and red later on..."

Knowlton reports that she constructs and relies on a detailed outline to establish plot points and organize the innumerable movements of narration. The details of the story come to her as she writes. Often the process is not as tidy and straightforward as that sounds.

"I often work through plot points, scenes, or dialogue while I am driving or sittings in a doctor's office waiting room or on a walk. I keep a small pad of paper with me to jot down the results," she noted. "When I get back to my computer, I have to sort through all these pages and handwritten notes to incorporate into the manuscript."

Knowlton names Ernest Hemingway and Jane Austen as two favorite authors among countless others. The influence of authors and their work on her life and writing is difficult if not impossible to neatly summarize.

"Reading has influenced me in a number of ways. It certainly helped grow my vocabulary. My love of travel was fostered by reading Mary Stewart's "The Moonspinners," Boris Pasternack's "Dr. Zhivago," Robert Ruark's books based in Africa, James Michener ... I could go on and on," she said. "I think my favorite genre has always been mystery and suspense. When I was a kid, I loved the way Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys solved mysteries. When I was in elementary school, I would ride my bike to the library in Chambersburg where I would often run into my grandfather, Herbert Rothenberger, in the mystery section. I think I've read every Travis McGee novel ever written by John D. MacDonald."

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Looking over the field of contemporary suspense fiction, Knowlton says she is a big fan of Preston and Child's "intriguing protagonist Aloysius Pendergast" and anything by John Grisham, Ridley Pearson, Sara Paretsky, Michael Connelly, Greg Iles, Lee Childs and Thomas Cook.

"I believe readers of Greg Iles's 'Natchez Burning,' John Grisham's 'A Time to Kill,' books by Sandra Brown and Mary Higgins Clark — or people who just like mystery and suspense — will like 'Dead of Autumn,'" she said.

During most of the composition of the book, Knowlton wrote sporadically, weeks of diligent, concentrated work set off by weeks, even months of time away, usually the result of a medical insurance consulting project or travel abroad.

"But the closer I came to completing the manuscript, the more committed I was to finishing the book," she said. "Of course, finishing the first draft just meant that I had to go back and polish it a second time and then a third time."

Knowlton received feedback and readers' responses about her book during the construction phase. She tested a few passages out on a writers' critique group, received some "very helpful input from a teacher in a writing course," she took while she was working on the book.

"But my biggest review came when I asked a small group of family and friends to review the final draft," Knowlton recalls. "They had some very good feedback, which I incorporated into the version of the book that I submitted to Sunbury Press. Finally, a wonderful editor at Sunbury Press, Jennifer Melendrez, worked with me on polishing the manuscript, finding inconsistencies, and rounding out a few plot points," she adds.

Knowlton's own advice to aspiring authors is simple and straightforward: Don't give up! "Just keep plugging away and things will eventually come together in a readable manuscript," she said. "Accept constructive criticism with an open mind. Gladly accept the expert advice of an editor."

She has taken the advice and is writing away. Knowlton says she is deep into writing her second novel.

"I have just completed the first draft of the second novel featuring Alexa Williams, tentatively titled 'Dead of Summer,'" she said. "The second book explores Alexa's reaction to the events of 'Dead of Autumn' while plunging her into another mystery."

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