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The story of her life

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THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted Jan 09, 2010 @ 11:01 PM

Last update Jan 10, 2010 @ 12:27 AM

Over the past 18 months or so, Laura Bynum moved from her native Illinois to Virginia, her grandmother died, she was diagnosed with cancer, and she made a childhood dream come true by selling a novel to a major publisher.

Here's to a less stressful 2010.

"I'm going to have a nice, big glass of Champagne to a brand-new start," Bynum said two days before the new year began. "It has been hell" — everybody says this, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone. But I realize how significant each of those things were."

Bynum's debut novel, "Veracity" (Pocket Books), was released last week. She returns to her Springfield hometown at 7 p.m. Wednesday for a book-signing at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 3111 S. Veterans Parkway.

Just a few years ago, Bynum was doing the "safe" thing — working in the corporate world, raising her daughters with second husband Eric, and ignoring the lifelong yet risky urge to write.

"I was really in a quandary," she said. "I made decent money as a corporate department builder. I knew I could make money for my family. As an artist, it's a crapshoot."

But in some ways, Bynum was preparing for "Veracity" — the word means truth — her entire life.

Provoking thoughts

Bynum described her childhood self as an introverted tomboy who enjoyed being outside (and who still enjoys fishing). She graduated from Springfield High School and earned degrees at the University of Illinois Springfield and Eastern Illinois University.

Although she won an art award at SHS and long harbored a desire to write, she is frank about not exactly being a teacher's pet.

"Authority was not something stamped into my head. Even as a child, if you haven't earned authority ... I spent a little bit of time in detention hall," she said.

Bynum remains skeptical of authority. She studied communications in college and blogs on www.laurabynum.com about ways authority figures manipulate language. She says many people don't even notice marketing anymore and allow others to think for them.

Bynum says she's especially concerned that people seem willing to trade civil liberties for security, and that they don't know enough about their liberties to notice their erosion.

"It's hard to get educated, but we have to take responsibility for knowing what our opinions and morals are and where they come from," she said.

That belief permeates "Veracity," set roughly midway through the 21st century. The U.S. government bears little resemblance to the current democracy. Following a deadly pandemic that has wiped out half of the U.S. population, the government takes back civil liberties in exchange for heightened security.

A huge casualty of the new world order are free speech and the free exchange of ideas. The government controls the media and bars certain words from being said aloud, lest they arouse dissent. The government attaches "slates" to the bodies of people to monitor expressed thoughts and to mete out painful punishment if a forbidden word is spoken.

"You either lined up ... or you were proved a traitor," one character says.

And the government makes people disappear if they don't fall in line. "Compliance became another word for 'patriotism,'" a character notes.

One day, Harper Adams, a woman who can perceive other people's thoughts and feelings, leaves her government post and joins a resistance movement that lives underground. Harper learns she'll play a vital role in resistance plans to restore democracy.

Most of "Veracity" occurs in a place that resembles central Illinois. The story refers to Springfield and Interstate 55. Harper's hideout is under a farm that isn't unlike the home of her grandmother, Irma Long, in Chesterfield (near Carlinville).

Notably, the central character lives much of her life avoiding the riskier yet more satisfying move until she can't put it off anymore.

'I got here'

"I was living in Champaign-Urbana, and I did work for three companies. I knew I was evading what I was supposed to be doing,"

Bynum said. "I believe you get cosmic taps on the shoulder: 'Are you ready for your calling? Are you ready to put on the hat you're meant to wear?'"

With an idea for a novel but unsure whether to proceed, Bynum took a short getaway trip to Captiva Island, where Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote "A Gift from the Sea," a book of inspirational essays. A locksmith there who helped Bynum get the keys out of her vehicle said, out of the blue, that he felt the need to tell her to follow the path she's supposed to follow.

So Bynum registered for the Maui Writers Conference (Bynum says there was little time to enjoy Hawaii's scenery, however). She made invaluable contacts in the publishing world, and learned she won a writing contest with a \$5,000 prize when a conference presenter began reading aloud from "Veracity."

"I think I cried a little — it was dead silence in auditorium, and this beautifully powerful voice was using my words, presenting them to a crowd of exceptionally talented people," Bynum said. "It was unreal."

One person who gave Bynum writing advice, Dan Conaway, became her literary agent. But because "Veracity" didn't fall into a clear category — Science fiction? Action-adventure? Satire? — it took awhile for a publisher to bite.

Meanwhile, Bynum's husband, Eric, took a job in Washington, D.C., and Bynum, then 40, stayed in Champaign to sell the house.

As she was preparing to head East, Bynum, who had had a mammogram, learned her doctors wanted her to get a biopsy. Four weeks later, the procedure was done ... and two publishing companies expressed interest in "Veracity."

"Two days later, I found out it was cancer, and I accepted the bid from Pocket Books," Bynum said.

She edited "Veracity" while enduring surgery to "take a swatch out of my left breast"; undergoing chemotherapy and battling related illnesses; starting over in a new state; enrolling her kids in new schools; and supporting Eric as he put in long hours at his new job.

And then her grandmother, Irma Long, fell ill because of a brain tumor. That meant flying back to Illinois, editing on the plane, to spend as much time with Long as possible while hitting Pocket's deadlines.

On the day the final edit of "Veracity" was due in New York, Bynum said she returned to her grandmother's hospital room at St. John's Hospital in Springfield. "I whispered to my grandma, 'It's all done.' The day 'Veracity' was finished being edited, my grandma graduated from this life."

That was on July 9, 2009. Bynum added Long's dates of birth and death to the dedication.

Bynum's life has calmed down in some ways. She calls herself cancer-free and says her oldest daughter, Alex, took on more responsibilities than any 15-year-old should.

In other ways, though, she's swamped. Bynum is doing a book tour to promote "Veracity" and has ideas for two more novels. One is about how people with low-tech skills are valuable when all the power goes out. The other examines how "you can sleep in the same bed and be in the same room, but that does not mean closeness," she said.

And, at long last, Bynum is a novelist for a major publisher — even if she took the path of most resistance.

"It was not pleasant in many, many ways, but I made it. I got here."

Meet Laura Bynum

- o From: Springfield
- o Lives in: northern Virginia
- o Family: husband, Eric; daughters, Alex (15), Tea and Sammy (both 7); mother Trudy and stepfather Harold Watson of Springfield; father Walter and stepmother Bev Clark of Edinburg.
- o Education: bachelor's degree, University of Illinois Springfield; master's degree, Eastern Illinois University.
- o Before becoming a full-time writer, Bynum ... managed a hair-care product business; worked as a massage therapist; built departments for corporations.

More interview excerpts

Following are excerpts from our interview with author Laura Bynum, who grew up in Springfield. Her first novel, "Veracity," is in bookstores.

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"I believe extreme partisanship is what's keeping us from coming to the table to talk ... 'Veracity' is about thinking critically. It's very hard to be dispassionate about things ... to come to the table with an open mind. Everyone likes to think about the good ol' days. Before now, it was more (like) we didn't want to get all riled up and angry, we wanted cooler tempers."

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"I absolutely don't believe in restricting language. There was something in Indiana where the ACLU had to stand up for protesters, some hate group or something, that wanted to speak at a rally. Do I find it disgusting? Absolutely. But as long as it falls into the legality of the Constitution, we have to preserve freedom of speech. I don't think we need to shut anybody up."

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“Dan Conaway (Bynum’s literary agent) wrote me the best bit of advice as a writer. He said (to) simplify your storyline and message. Pare it down ruthlessly. And for some reason, pare down ruthlessly, a light bulb turned on in the attic of my noggin. I ran into the studio in the garage, edited the first 50 pages of manuscript, and just completely got it at that time.”

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“I did massage school, and worked as a massage therapist for seven years. I consider it one of the best things I ever did. Many other places outside of Western philosophy believe in a force. ... I got into that, and found it was not just a place to go. ... It was one of the few things I could do, and people would open up to me, and I could tell they were getting (something for their) emotional and physical well-being out of it.”

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(As a child) I was more physically active than other girls. It helped me. I had fewer boundaries that sexually stereotyped other girls. I was usually outside until I got cold and playing tag in the front yard with other kids. I lived between Springfield and the family farm (in Chesterfield, west of Carlinville), and that farm to me was my magic zone. I think the farm house is close to 150 years old – multiple buildings that fused over the years to become a big farm house. There were crawdads, and cats outside to keep the mouse population low. I spent every summer and weekend at Grandma’s farm.”

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Good for her. She followed her dreams.

trueconservative

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You must be logged in to report abuse.

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Congrats Laura! You followed your dreams, made sacrifices to achieve them, got through loss and illness and still achieved. Good for you. This is what separates the successful from the not so successful, drive, ambition, determination and guts. This should be a lesson for everyone.

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