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Heart and Soul

By: JUDY BACA, Staff Writer

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Romance writers find just the right words to describe life's most sought-after experience: Love

By JUDY BACA
Staff Writer

Judi Fennell of Worcester and Elizabeth Minogue English of Phoenixville Advertisement freely and unselfconsciously admit that they hear voices all the time.

Rather than seek psychiatric help for this condition, the two women welcome the voices which, they say, originate from the characters in their romance novels. Both are members of the Valley Forge Romance Writers chapter of the Romance Writers of America (RWA). "I walk around all day with my characters speaking to me," declared Fennell, winner of the local chapter's 2005 Sheila Award and hostess to a small representation of the club's approximately 55 members.

Both Fennell and English say their books are "character driven," while fellow-VFRW member Lois Winston describes her books as "plot driven."

Noting that the local chapter began in Philadelphia "under another name," Stephanie Mowery of Shillington, past president and currently in charge of scheduling meeting speakers and acting as liaison to the Published Authors Network (PAN), recalled that the national organization celebrated its 25th anniversary last year. She said the Valley Forge chapter was formed shortly afterwards.

Winston, formerly of Elkins Park and now of Westfield, N.J. (due to her husband's work transfer), remains a staunch member of the Valley Forge chapter.

"When I joined 10 years ago," she declared, "I knew absolutely nothing. I had written a book and wanted to get it published."

Laughing, she continued, "I thought I had written the great American novel. I quickly realized I knew nothing and had written the great American drivel. Actually, I eventually ended up rewriting that book and am now waiting to hear from a publisher on it."

In the meantime, the encouragement and support of fellow club members kept her going and she became a three-time finalist of the Romance Writers of America Golden Heart competition for unpublished writers, a St. Martin's Press Malice Domestic finalist and a finalist in Dorchester Publishing's American Title competition. She also won first place in a cozen writing contests sponsored by various RWA chapters.

Dorchester Publishing is expected to release Winston's "Talk Gertie to Me" April 4. Described by the publisher as "a combination romantic comedy/chick lit/hen lit book with a dash of the paranormal - a tale of love, crafts, and one very unique imaginary friend," the book was labeled "a real gem" by Romantic Times BOOKclub magazine. Fennell, a relatively new member, detailed her own initiation.

"When I joined, in April 2004," she said, "one of the first things I did was enter the chapter's Sheila Contest, in which the finalists have their manuscript sent to New



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York editors.

"I got my feedback from the judges and didn't do very well. Stephanie was kind enough to say, 'It's good but you need to get rid of the first 20 pages.' That was the first 20 out of 400 and I was crushed. But, she was right and I have just won another contest with the same manuscript. It was the first book I wrote!"

English, who also sold her first book through a contest, when she was named a finalist in the Golden Heart competition and got an agent when she was named a winner in the RWA Rita competition for published writers, is the author of "The Border Bride," "Laird of the Mist," and "The Linnet." She also penned "The Prince," published in 2004 under the pseudonym Elizabeth Minogue.

Inspired by college Chaucer and Shakespeare courses, English has researched and written about the border between England and Scotland in the 1360s.

"I've been a member of other national writing groups, in other genres," she noted, "but I've never seen another group with such a wonderful attitude and willingness to share and such interest in seeing that everyone gets published."

Proudly, Winston declared, "We have a couple of members who are New York Times best-selling authors."

She continued, "Most other writers' organizations only allow unpublished writers as associates who have no voting rights, but we admit anyone who is interested. The networking is incredible. I learned what I was doing wrong and I learned to do it right. I improved my craft and if it wasn't for VFRW, I don't think that would have happened."

The club's brochure notes that "Visitors are welcome to attend three meetings before joining VFRW" and "Prospective members receive three newsletters." The club's mission statement reads that the chapter "seeks to promote excellence in romantic fiction by providing help and education for aspiring writers and continuing support for writers already published in Romance fiction."

All chapter members are also required to become members of the national affiliate. VFRW meetings are the second Saturday of each month, unless otherwise designated. They begin at 10 a.m. at the Ardmore Senior Center, 117 Ardmore Ave., Ardmore.

Leslie Lighton-Humphreys of Upper Providence, recently penned "Upper Providence Bicentennial" for her township's 200th anniversary. Yet to be published in Romance, she also writes screenplays and explains that one of her relatives, Louis D. Lighton, was a screenwriter for the 1927 movie, "Wings," winner of the first Oscar for best picture. A former freelance newspaper reporter, she is now a computer auditor at Merck.

"We can't make a living at what we do," lamented Mowry, "It's really tough to make a living writing romance. Some of us work at it for 10 or 20 years and never sell."

Mowry herself works as a freelance reporter and English is a technical writer for the Training & Communications Group in Berwyn.

Winston, a graduate of Temple University's Tyler School of Art, began her career "designing needlework and crafts for craft kit manufacturers, craft book publishers, and craft, needlework and women's magazines," according to her publisher's release. However, along with their homes, families, jobs and writing, the chapter members still make time to plan and attend other VFRW events, such as the upcoming "Jazz Up Your Writing" day-long writers' workshop being sponsored by VFRW and Pocono-Lehigh Romance Writers. The workshop, featuring Dee Davis, Kathy Long, Sarah McCarty and Caridad Pineiro, will be March 11 at the Sheraton Reading Hotel, Wyomissing. The Valley Forge chapter will also participate in the PAN Romance Symposium for Published Authors Saturday, May 6, at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 301 Main St., Exton.

Philadelphia writer Leslie Banks, who writes under the names L.A. Banks and Leslie Esdaile-Banks, as well as other pseudonyms, has written over 20 novels and contributed to eight novellas so far in her career. Her "Soul Food" series, which she describes as women's fiction/romance, became the basis for the cable TV show, "Soul Food," . . . in her words, "a kid of Black soap opera."

Banks switches easily between Romance, Crime and Suspense and the Paranormal genres and belongs to writers' groups in each, including the VFRW chapter.

Speaking from her home, the full-time writer/wife/mother of four said, "I joined the chapter around 1992 or 1993 and had to drop out for a time because the meetings were too far to travel. But, since they started meeting in Ardmore, I rejoined and the group at Valley Forge is so nice. They are very kind and they help one another, both writers and non-writers. There is just great support and community among the members."

For more information on the Valley Forge Romance Writers, send an e-mail to askVFRW@yahoo.com or visit online at www.vfrw.com.

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