

Lincoln's Bryant earns national accolade for "Full Bloom" book

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LINCOLN AUTHOR LOUELLA Bryant has received the Premier Book Award for best book of the year in general fiction for her collection of short stories, "Full Bloom." Independent photo/Trent Campbell

LINCOLN — Louella Bryant's writing career — much like the title of her most recent book — is beginning to blossom. Premier Book Awards recently named "Full Bloom," the Lincoln resident's collection of 14 short stories, the Best Book of the Year in the General Fiction category.

"Full Bloom" marks Bryant's fifth published manuscript, and the first published by Brown Fedora Press, which primarily publishes books available only in electronic formats. Bryant's book is available for download on the Brown Fedora Books website, though a limited number of print copies are for sale via Bryant's personal site.

Just as Bryant's career has begun to go in a new direction, the world of publishing, too, is changing. E-publishing, Bryant has recognized, is the way of the future — and she is totally onboard.

Bryant, 63, received a great deal of recognition two years ago for her nonfiction book, “While in Darkness There Is Light.” The book tells the Vietnam-era story of Charlie Dean, brother of former Vermont governor Howard Dean, and the commune that Charlie and four other men started in Australia.

Her latest book, though, strays away from the intense, historical world of her nonfiction work. Though she’s been on the literary scene for quite some time, Bryant seems to just be coming of age in her award-winning transition to fiction, much like many of the young narrators who engulf the first half of “Full Bloom.”

“I started writing short stories when I was in the MFA program at Vermont College,” said Bryant, who graduated from the program in 2000. “A lot of these stories are pretty old — I began working on some of them in 1998.”

Before “Full Bloom,” Bryant had never put her stories together as a collection. She submitted some to literary magazines and had a few published in anthologies, and her stories have often been finalists in a number of contests.

“These stories have been finalists for a couple of awards, and have come very close,” Bryant said. “They’ve sort of been, how do you say it, ‘the bridesmaid but never the bride.’”

Bryant was pleased when she was notified by the Premier Book Awards, a Texas-based organization that honors small-press publications, but she had already received the real thrill months before when she was taken on by Brown Fedora Books, the relatively new online press started by Burlington author Jim DeFilippi. Brown Fedora specializes in publishing e-books, by a handful of authors, mostly from Vermont.

Brown Fedora published “Full Bloom” online, and printed a limited number of hard copies per request of Spalding University, the Louisville, Ky., college where Bryant teaches.

Bryant was “thrilled” to be among the group of Brown Fedora authors, which also includes political writer Philip Baruth and poet Tony Magistrale.

“It’s definitely a reputable organization, even though it’s still fairly new,” she said of Brown Fedora. “I think you’re going to see more and more of this kind of thing as this goes on.” E-publishing is a trend that she sees as anything but passing.

“There’s still a lot of controversy about online publishing versus print publishing, but the trend with all of the e-readers is moving very rapidly toward e-publishing,” Bryant said.

E-PUBLISHING CATCHING ON

While she still appreciates a classically bound, print copy, Bryant confessed that she is eager to get an iPad.

“Full Bloom” — though primarily available in the cutting-edge downloadable, e-book format — remains chock full of good, old-fashioned prose. Bryant divided the book into four sections — in the first, stories are told by young narrators, though they are not at all children’s stories.

“I was trying to come up with a theme,” Bryant said. “Because I teach both fiction and writing for children, I write pretty much across the board. I had written a lot of stories that have very young narrators. They’re not necessarily children’s stories or young adult stories — I guess I’d consider them crossover stories.”

A young girl is tormented by her father’s abandonment in “Tick,” and another struggles with her approaching induction into womanhood in “Crawdads.” The stories are rapid and intense; brimming with misunderstood grief.

The thrust of the stories changes as the book progresses from young voices, to teenagers, to middle-age women and in the final section, the elderly.

“Some of the stories deal with relationships between older and younger characters,” Bryant said. “So that’s kind of how I organized it — it sort of fell into place that way.”

The stories are short — they seldom stretch beyond eight pages — but poignant.

“Some of them are pretty short, but I have a short attention span so that seemed to work for me,” Bryant said. But the brevity of her work does not result from a lack of things to say.

“I do like to write,” she added. “Sometimes I’ll write a long story, and then I’ll cut it. If I write like a 6,000-word story, I’ll challenge myself to cut it to 4,000 words or 3,500 words. I find that when I cut a story, I always make it better. I feel like the less you say, the more you involve the reader. The reader can participate in filling in the things I don’t describe, or the details I leave out.”

What Bryant does describe in her stories are characters who bear heavy emotional burdens and express them in what Bryant aimed to be a very realistic way. She often places them in a Vermont setting, though they sometimes stray to the South, where Bryant grew up.

PERSONAL HISTORY

Louella Bryant was born and raised in Virginia. She currently teaches in the Spalding University low-residency Master of Fine Arts program in Louisville for 20 days each year. For the other 345 days she calls Lincoln her home. Bryant has lived in Vermont for 35 years, and naturally, she said, some of her stories are set here.

After living in the Green Mountain State five years she said she felt like a Vermonter, but a native quickly put her in her place. “She said, ‘If you put eggs in the oven and they hatch, that doesn’t make them biscuits,’” Bryant recalled.

Still, she refuses to shy away from writing about her adopted home.

“I guess I’ll never be a Vermonter, but I think that’s good,” Bryant said. “I know Annie Proulx takes exception with the idea that you should write what you know. She says, ‘Write what you don’t know, and then learn about it.’ I can bring an outsider’s objective view to Vermont.”

Although she has come to love Lincoln, Bryant still relishes the opportunity to “eat cheese grits and fried chicken” when she returns to Louisville each May and November to teach. At Spalding, Bryant teaches courses in both fiction and writing for children — her first two novels fell within the historical young adult fiction genre.

“Just to be in that environment is so thrilling,” she said. “I just feel so blessed to be able to teach in an MFA program because I don’t ever have to graduate. They actually pay me to be there, which is crazy.”

CHANGES IN WRITING

Just as she did not hesitate to jump into e-publishing, Bryant has not blinked an eye at the changes in the craft of writing that MFA programs have brought on. She said that writers have been trending toward a greater focus on technique and skill building.

“In the old days, you’d just have a couple of drinks, smoke a couple of cigarettes, and open a vein and pour out brilliance,” she said. “But some of that stuff now is almost unreadable.” She recalled loving Betty Smith’s “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn” as a girl, a book that she now finds “unreadable.”

“I went back a few years ago and tried to read it again because I wanted that same, emotional attachment, but I could not read it,” she said. “The point of view kept shifting. And because I teach in an MFA program, I wanted to mark the book up and scribble in the margins.”

Though Bryant’s writing and thoughts on writing have continued to grow and change, she sees herself reverting to another project along the lines of “While in Darkness There Is Light,” and working, once again, in nonfiction.

“I would like to write another nonfiction book,” she said. “I’m a little afraid of nonfiction because it gets criticized much more harshly than fiction. Someone’s always offended, or someone knows a different truth.”

In writing “While in Darkness,” Bryant interviewed dozens of people who had been in the same place at the same time, each with a different story.

“They all conflicted,” she recalled. “It had been 35 years since those events happened that I wrote about, and time has a way of distorting memory. But even now, when I go back and talk to these people they say, well, it wasn’t like that. ‘It wasn’t a 60-pound Barramundi fish because they can’t get that big.’ You know, details like that.”

For Bryant, fiction is the safer option. Even so, she runs into some problems.

“My husband will say, ‘I don’t like the way you portrayed me in that book,’ and I’ll have to say, ‘It’s not you, it’s a fictional character,’” Bryant said. “Or my son will call up and say, ‘I really like that story about Dillon and me,’ and I say, ‘It wasn’t about you. It was about these characters that came out of my imagination.’”

Currently, Bryant is working on a number of projects including more short stories and another novel, but she is sure that a bit of nonfiction will eventually crop up.

“If it’s a good story, I’ll write it,” she said.

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