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PRINTERS ROW PREVIEW

Libby Fischer Hellmann follows suspenseful new paths

Chicago author makes it her business to take chances, embrace technology

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Libby Fischer Hellman, an acclaimed mystery writer and author of "A Bitter Veil" (Keri Wiginton, Chicago Tribune / December 16, 2012)



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Story by Robert McCoppin

4:20 p.m. CST, December 28, 2012

Early in her career as an author, Libby Fischer Hellmann had written three unpublished novels, and thought she was hot stuff.

Then her agent told her she needed to change her writing, her characters and her voice, and while she was at it, she needed to change her agent.

Hellmann cried. She considered quitting. Instead, she picked herself up and wrote an award-winning short story — which led to her first published book.

This piece first ran in Printers Row Journal, delivered to Printers Row members with the Sunday Chicago Tribune and by digital edition via email. Click [here](#) to learn about joining Printers Row.

Now Hellmann has published 10 books, and has followed mentor Sara Paretsky in becoming a successful Chicago mystery writer. What sets her apart is her willingness to break from that success, strike out in a new direction and embrace the changes that are sweeping through her industry.

While she has kept crime as a central plot element of her stories, she has broadened her scope from straight mystery to historical thriller.

Hellmann's latest novel, "A Bitter Veil," tells the story of a University of Chicago student who marries an Iranian and moves to Iran just as the Islamic Revolution breaks out in 1978. It's the second book in a trilogy, of sorts, about revolution.

Hellmann's previous work, "Set the Night on Fire," explored the countercultural revolution of the 1960s, while her next book, due out next year, will be set largely in revolutionary Cuba.

Though Hellmann made a name for herself with two highly praised mystery series, her defining characteristic has been to venture in new directions, just as she has with her current series, each time bringing renewed success.

"I was an overnight success years in the making," she said. "It really took me that long to learn the craft of writing fiction. It's the hardest thing I've ever done."

Hellmann gained plenty of experience in other fields before she became a writer. After growing up in the Washington, D.C., area, she received a degree in history from the University of Pennsylvania, then got a master's in film production from New York University, hoping to be a filmmaker.

She started work as an assistant film editor for NBC News in New York, then switched to public television in Washington, where she helped produce the broadcast of the Watergate hearings. At various times, she worked with reporters Robin MacNeil, Jim Lehrer, Charles Gibson and Charlie Rose.

In 1978 she moved to Chicago to work for the large public relations firm Burson-Marsteller,

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before starting her own communications firm.

She read plenty of mysteries, but it wasn't until 1996, after the death of her father, that she began writing. She says it had nothing to do with mourning but everything to do with being glued to the O.J. Simpson murder trial the previous year. It introduced her to a world of DNA, blood splatter, stab angles, shoe prints and bloody gloves.

After writing "the worst mystery novel ever," she said, the short story form helped her focus her writing.

"The best advice I can give any aspiring writer is to write short stories, because they are an incredible way to hone your craft, to explore different voices, characters, time periods and styles" she said.

That short story led her to write the Ellie Foreman mystery series, based on a single-mom video producer with a teenage daughter living in Chicago's north suburbs — all of which matched Hellmann at one point or another. Though successful, Hellmann came to feel restricted by the series, because it was based on an amateur sleuth, which required manufacturing a reason for her heroine to get involved with solving a murder in each book.

So Hellmann switched gears and began writing about a spinoff character, a private investigator named Georgia Davis — which spawned another successful series. Still, feeling there were other stories in her, Hellmann rebooted and began what she now calls her "revolution trilogy." Still, she kept one crucial element of her previous writing: a dead body.

"I don't feel comfortable without a crime," she said. "Crime puts a structure around a novel. I've come to realize that structure doesn't have to be from a crime, but when I started out it seemed simpler.

"Now I'm so vested in the crime-writing community, it just seems second nature to me."

Hellmann, 63, lives in Northbrook. She started The Outfit blog of local authors several years ago, when blogs were just taking off, which brought together established writers like Paretsky and new writers like Sean Chercov. She now shares industry advice and general musings on Twitter and at libbyhellmann.com, and works with the Top Suspense group of writers.

Paretsky knows Hellmann's situation well. Though Paretsky has written occasional stand-alone novels, she says publishers are only interested in another installment in her popular V.I. Warshawski detective series. So she admires Hellmann for breaking away from her successful mystery series to map out a new path — and to control her own fate.

For instance, Hellmann is among a minority of writers who have the rights to their e-books. She also offers one-day seminars to aspiring writers on subjects like dialogue, plot and setting, and using language to help establish character.

"She's much more energetic, and takes chances and tries new things," Paretsky said. "That's what I admire and would like to learn from her."

Mystery writer and cable television host Marcus Sakey also praised Hellmann as a leader in adapting to new technology through blogs and e-books.

"Chicago has a tight writing community, and she's right at the center of it," Sakey said. "She knows everybody in town and has helped most of them."

Throughout it all, Hellmann's secret weapon has been an "intense" writing group that meets every week. Over the years she's become a mentor instead of a mentee, but she says the group still "keeps me honest."

One common thread in Hellmann's work is using conflict — be it a murder or a revolution — to explore social, political and cultural issues. In particular, she zeroes in on what women do when their choices are taken away.

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Her goal is to create characters so real that she doesn't know whodunit herself until near the end of each book. Recently faced with just such a situation, she had a trusted friend act as a sounding board while she considered and eliminated potential perpetrators until one naturally emerged.

"I just want to write stories that people cannot put down," she said. "The suspense is so intense, they have to read on. Because those are the books I love to read."

Robert McCoppin is a Tribune reporter.

"A Bitter Veil"

By Libby Fischer Hellmann, Allium Press, 316 pages, \$16.99 (paperback)

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