

LIVING HERE BOOKS & M

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In Generals ...

Two old friends who make up the Generals are rocking along with change.
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Ann Littlewood

She puts the zoo in mystery writing

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Sacramento native Ann Littlewood spent years caring for animals at a zoo and, it turns out, gathering material for a late-blooming career as a novelist.

Littlewood grew up in the River Park neighborhood of Sacramento and graduated from Sacramento High School in 1964, when she was known as Elizabeth Ann Parker. She left for Reed College in Portland, Ore., and made a life there, enjoying a career as a zookeeper.

When Littlewood, 62, retired, she began chasing her dream of writing a novel. "Night Kill," a murder mystery set at a zoo, is her first book in a series. Published by Poisoned Pen Press, it sells for \$24.95 in hardcover.

GIMM

AS THE ELECTION RESULTS NETWORKS WILL TRY TO



Finding a publisher was the only writer's block for Littlewood. It took years.

Poisoned Pen Press says it receives about 400 submissions a year and accepts five or six new authors annually.

"We're looking for mysteries that are appealing to a wide group of readers but shed new light on something. 'Night Kill' had a good story and an interesting setting at the zoo," said Jessica Tribble, associate publisher at Poisoned Pen. "The zoo setting was one we hadn't traversed before."

Littlewood recently chatted by phone about being a zookeeper, life as a writer and what it takes to make it in a competitive business.

Did anything in your early life suggest you would be a writer?

I wrote poetry and stories. My first story in elementary school was creative nonfiction about a beaver and a dam and a coyote. Then I moved on to stories about wild horses escaping fires and evil people. But I didn't really write fiction seriously until recently.

What does a zookeeper do?

It's the person responsible for the health and well-being of a particular group of animals at the zoo. It's physically fairly strenuous. I was at the nursery, so I dealt with a lot of baby animals. I also did wildlife rehabilitation.

Some people are against zoos. Where do you stand?

Well, zoos keep getting better and the wild keeps getting more dangerous. It's one of our better tools to educate people, and it's a way to preserve a gene pool.

You switched careers and moved into health care.

There were some financial pressures, and I moved over to Kaiser and did business writing for them. I retired in December 2006 and now I write fiction.

Did you have writing as part of your retirement plan?

Oh yes. I had already

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Littlewood: Never has writer's block

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written my first mystery and was trying to sell it.

How long did it take to get published?

I wrote it and finished it and tried to find an agent and failed. Then I wrote the second in the series, which is a little bit of a leap of faith. Then I went back and did a pretty thorough rewrite on the first one. Then it did get picked up. That took five years.

It's unusual to set a murder mystery at a zoo. How did you get the idea? Was it long hours working at the zoo when you thought up stories?

That, plus I missed the zoo. It takes a year or more to write a novel and your head is in that place. ... It was very wonderful to go back in my mind and be at a zoo. And I got to make up my zoo and put the animals I like in it.

Like what?

There's this wonderful old tiger, Raja, who is an aging old guy who Iris Oakley just loves. They have a complicated relationship. There are lions and penguins. I love birds, so I could just go to town.

How hard is it to write a book?

The first full-length novel is quite the juggling act. You have so much to learn - character, plot, themes, your setting.

How did you learn it?

You just do it, and there are workshops. You try to analyze what you like about what you read.

What's the biggest mistake a new writer makes?

Not focusing on moving the plot forward.

Can you describe what a good day writing is like and what a bad day is like?

A bad day writing is when I don't get to. It's a constant battle to carve out the time.

Do you ever sit at your desk and nothing comes out?

I never have that problem.

Really?

I never have writer's block.

How do you explain that?

When I stop writing, it's at a point where I know what the very next thing is, so it's easy to get rolling.

That's a Hemingway tip, actually.

Yes, you stop and think, what's the coolest thing that could happen next?

You don't find writing frustrating, trying to make a sentence beautiful?

That comes the next day.

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