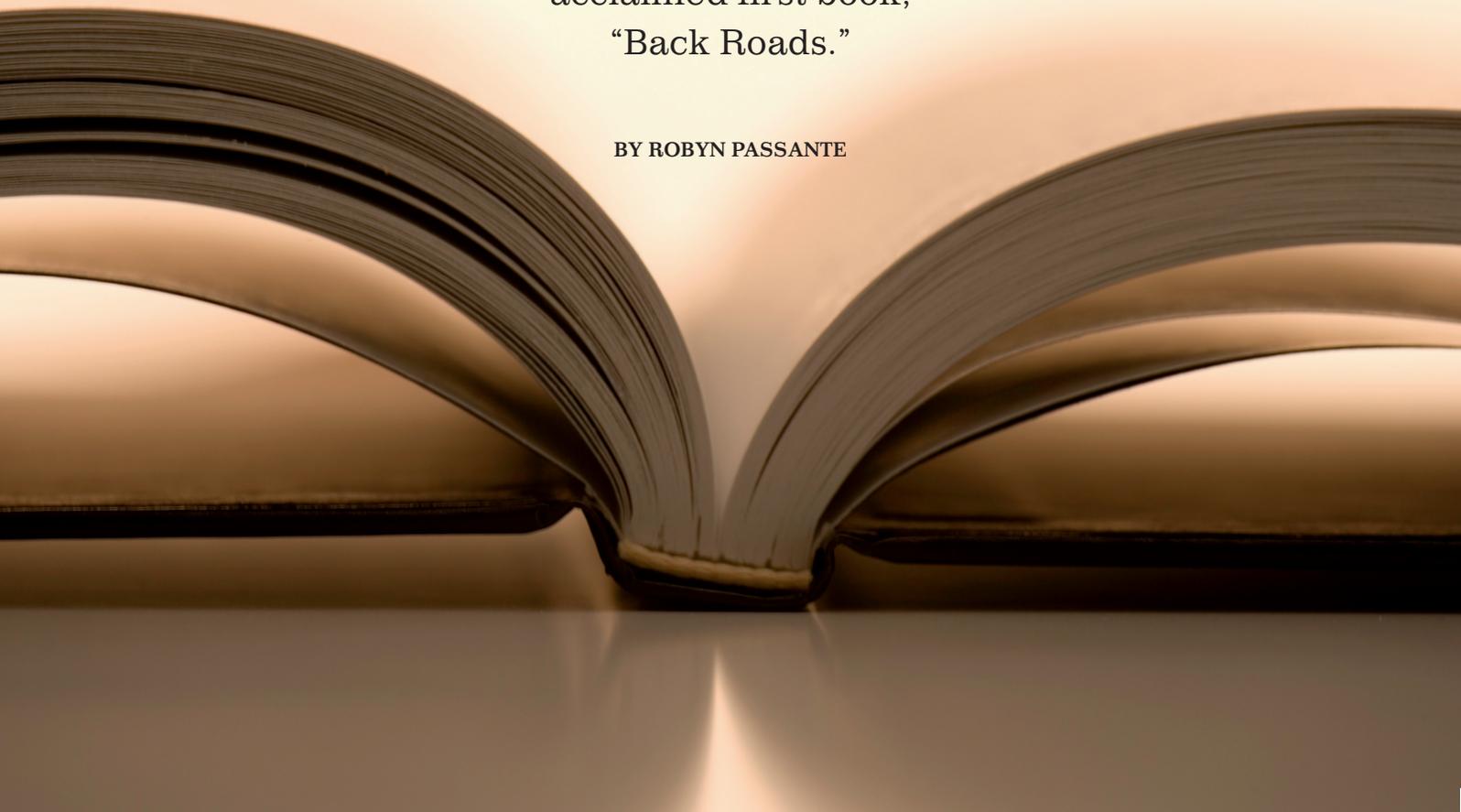


# THE WRITER'S LIFE

With her fifth novel coming out this month, local author Tawni O'Dell says she's finally coming into her own after a whirlwind 14 years since publishing her widely acclaimed first book, "Back Roads."

BY ROBYN PASSANTE



When you walk into novelist Tawni O'Dell's modest ranch in her quiet State College neighborhood, you quickly see evidence that she is a mother. There are the smiling photographs of Tirzah and Connor, two bright young adults who have flung themselves toward their dreams in New York City and California, respectively. And there's the trail of mangled stuffed animals and rubber chew toys that lead to O'Dell's 8-month-old spunky German shepherd, Truman.

What you don't see right away is evidence of her impressive career. You don't see the toil that went into each of the soon-to-be-five novels she's published or notice any souvenirs from her many book tours — including an international one that led to her second marriage. There is no prominently placed award heralding her first novel, "Back Roads," as the Oprah's Book Club selection and *New York Times* bestseller that it was. And all of the work she did to turn that novel into a screenplay when Hollywood came calling is invisible as well.

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You see that she is a mother, simply and quietly, in a house that she admits is a bit too big now that her kids have flown the coop.

And then she starts talking, and the children she describes so vividly and speaks of so fondly are not just the two she's supporting financially on opposite sides of the country or the one begging to play fetch at her feet. There are others, many others, people she's created out of thin air over the years, characters to whom she has given names and secrets and dreams. They have lived here too, been lovingly sculpted and fretted over, revised and refined and finally, after much agonizing, set free.

It is striking how much mothering goes into novel writing.

"When you're writing a novel, it's in your mind all the time. You're always thinking about it, always. You dream about it," says O'Dell, whose latest work, a literary suspense novel titled "One Of Us" hits bookstores Aug. 19. Set in one of her signature fictitious Pennsylvania coal towns, the book focuses on a forensic psychologist with a troubled past trying to help solve a murder in his hometown.

It is already getting great reviews on Goodreads, and buzz is building for the national book tour, which will launch this month and will include a local book signing and reception at Webster's Bookstore Café on Aug. 28.

The life of a successful novelist means constantly juggling what's

coming out and what's still inside. Though she's prepping to handle the onslaught of book club invitations and interviews regarding "One Of Us," her attention is also fixed on her next novel, and that's the latest brainchild dancing behind her eyes as she speaks. It won't see a printing press until sometime next summer, but somehow it already



O'Dell at work.

feels close, familiar. Perhaps that's because the main character being written right now resembles her creator.

"For the first time ever, my protagonist is a 50-year-old woman. I am writing what I am," says O'Dell with a delighted smile. "I've never done that before. Ever. As a matter of fact, a lot of times I write from a male voice."

Her first and most famous male voice was that of Harley Altmeyer, a 19-year-old whose hardscrabble life and richly heartbreaking story seemed to make O'Dell an overnight success when Oprah Winfrey called. But like any artist, perseverance and dedication to her craft actually paved an arduous, 14-year path to "Back Roads."

"I wrote my first novel when I was 22, and I continued to write — three more — and try to sell them." She was in her mid-30s when she shopped her fifth novel, "Back Roads," to a new agent, Liza Dawson, after her previous agent announced she was leaving the business. Dawson, who still represents O'Dell, read the first 100 pages of the gritty novel and loved it.

“She said, ‘Just finish this and we’ll sell this, no problem,’” recalls O’Dell, who was more than a little skeptical. “I said, ‘You realize I have 300 rejection letters in a box. You know how many novels I’ve tried to sell?’ But ... we had 14 bids on that book.”

The winning bid was a two-book deal from Viking Press with an advance “way past anything I could have imagined,” she says. “That was an even bigger compliment than the [eventual] Oprah pick, because that was a major publishing house saying, ‘Hey, this is your first novel, but we have such faith in you that we’re going to give you all this money.’ Because publishers don’t give you big advances unless they think they’re going to earn them back. They don’t do that out of the goodness of their heart.”

That deal eventually catapulted her and Harley into the stratosphere of esteemed authors and unforgettable characters. What ensued after that 2000 literary gift was an international book tour, a divorce, a transcontinental romance and second marriage to her French translator, a move from Chicago to State College, an eventual second divorce, the challenges of single parenthood and four more published novels.

It’s been a busy 14 years.

“It’s kind of the thing I like about it, that I have incredibly glamorous moments that happen in my life. Yet at the same time, my life is completely normal,” O’Dell says. “And I think that’s a good way to live your life.”

Most of that life has centered around her kids. O’Dell says being a work-from-home mom was both a blessing and a curse.

“I think for women it’s a lot harder than men. A man will say, ‘Hey, I’m a writer, Daddy’s writing.’ And everybody would be, ‘Shh, shh, Daddy’s writing.’ But you know it’s like, ‘Mommy’s writing.’ ‘So?’ So the kids are playing in your office with you, coming in and out, asking, ‘Mom, can you give me a ride to the mall?’ It doesn’t mean anything to them when I say ‘I’m working on my book.’”

And then last summer, the full-time chauffer and cook and counselor gig abruptly ended. Her voice echoes in the living room as she recalls last August’s cross-country trip to drop off Connor, a 2013 State High graduate, at Harvey Mudd College in California. The solo drive back, she says, was awful.

“When I got home, it all of a sudden hit me. You have this feeling of ‘I have no purpose in life anymore.’ I’m this successful novelist. I have a career. But I think for moms, [parenting] is your main reason to exist. I think it’s like a real biological thing inside us, like this is our real purpose. So you feel that, and that’s what I felt,” she says. “And I didn’t want to feel that.”

Luckily Dawson had played up the new stage in the author’s life for what it would contain, not what would be missing. “Liza said, ‘You’ll be amazed at the amount of creative energy that will all of a sudden burst forth from you when your kids are gone.’ That whole empty nest thing doesn’t have to be gloom and doom, and ‘I have no purpose,’” O’Dell recalls. “Instead, it’s like now I can focus.”



O’Dell at her daughter Tirezah’s college graduation in 2013 with son, Connor.

It took a little time, but she has realized the beauty of a novelist’s nest is that it never is truly empty. There is simply more room for more characters — like the 50-year-old, female police chief she’s writing about now. And she is relishing in that.

“I’m just loving this character and book. This is the first time since ‘Back Roads’ when a book is really flowing for me. My other books were so hard for me, a lot of rewriting and rewriting,” she says. “But this book, I just started it only a couple months ago and my editor wants it by September so we can publish it next summer. That’s a new thing for me, for there to be two books within a year of each other.”

O’Dell always has had a gift for character development: “In three sentences she can bring somebody to life,” Dawson says. But for a woman who says turning 50 in February was “liberating,” it’s no wonder her latest female protagonist is flying off her fingertips.

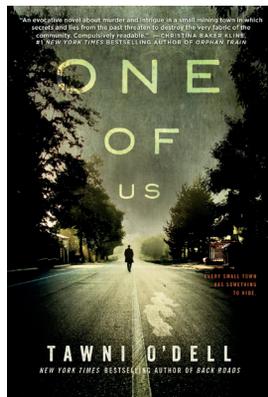
“Turning 50 made me realize this is actually a great time in my life. I’ve done the mom thing, my kids are fairly launched, this is a time I can now focus on me and my writing, which are intertwined. I can put all my effort into that.”

Local friend John Mark Rafacz marvels at O’Dell’s prowess as a storyteller, which might have something to do with the fact that she herself is rich with character.

“She’s beautiful and talented and kind of mysterious and has that big shock of curly hair,” says Rafacz, a part-time photographer who shot O’Dell’s latest book cover photo. “I think because of the hair, she comes off as being taller than she is. You definitely notice Tawni when she comes in a room.”

The gorgeous hair and easy smile are definitely noteworthy, but what’s more subtly appealing is the confidence she exudes. That, too, has come with time.

“I really don’t care anymore about the way I look at all. I know in our society this is actually the worst time ever to be a woman in your 50s. You’re supposed to be doing Botox and all that stuff to keep



up, and for me, I decided you know what? I've lived for 50 years, and I'm done. I'm just done," she says. "I feel like I'm set and not in a bad way. I'm not brittle — that'll be in my 80s. But I feel like I'm formed. And I'm happy with it. What you see is what you get. And if you don't like this, I am not changing at all for you."

Of course, even the most confident woman is vulnerable to dark imaginings, and that goes double for a mother and triple for a writer. She has spent all of her adult life willing novels into existence through her mind and her fingertips, dreaming of what they will become, wanting to keep them close forever while desperately needing to shoo them out of her mind and out of her computer and into the world. In each case, worrying about a novel's success is worrying

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about her own future as well.

“There is no job security at all, and at the age I am, it's a terrifying thing. I have moments of absolute terror when I think, 'What's going to happen to me?'" she says. "Am I going to write a book every year between now and when I'm 85? I would like to be able to continue to write as long as I want to. But to feel that pressure ... I worry about it quite a bit."

Dawson agrees that a literary novelist's financial security is sketchy at best. "It's scary," she says. "With each book you're kind of launching a new business."

To take some of that pressure of the unknown off, Dawson has encouraged O'Dell to think about doing a series. The author has

always dismissed that idea — until now.

“Nowadays people are obsessed with series, whether it's 'The Hunger Games' or a crime suspense series, people want a bunch of books. They want to depend on that next book coming out," O'Dell says. "People have asked me, 'Why don't you write a series?' The answer has always been, 'I don't have a series in me.'"

But O'Dell sees a glimmer of hope for the longevity of her current leading lady. "This new book that I'm writing I hope will be a series, so I'll really be coming back to the same protagonist, the same town. I'm feeling like maybe that could be a comfort zone for me," she says. "And maybe it's time for me to have a comfort zone, instead of having to come up with the latest novel that has nothing to do with the one before."



Though she jokes about "selling out" in order to pursue the series dream, Rafacz says that his friend's commercial success always has been second to the integrity of her work and dedication to her literary roots.

"I realize 'literary' and 'commercial' don't often intersect, but it can happen," he says. "I think she's protective of her writing. She definitely cares about the quality and cares about her characters."

The development of those character "children" takes about 12 hours of her day, every day — between rounds of fetch with Truman, that is. And she wouldn't have it any other way.

They say a mother's work is never finished. And they're right. •SCM

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