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Strength of characters

Local author's heroines overcome obstacles to fashion fulfilling lives

By Frank W. Rabey
The Daily Reflector

Sometimes what you don't know can make all the difference.
Cassandra Darden Bell never really explored how the world of publishing worked. So she didn't feel bound by the first-time author's maddening cycle of package-it-up-and-submit-it, package-it-up-and-submit-it, package-it-up — and the potential pile of corresponding rejection letters that so many would-be writing titans consider the equivalent of literary dues-paying.
She had no idea how greatly the odds were stacked against her, or any fledgling author, for that matter.
None of that had ever really mattered to her. When she started out, her only concern was just to write.
After seven years working at WNCT-TV, much of that time as an anchor, Bell shelved her career five years ago to honor what her gut told her was her true calling.
She was no longer just going to dream about writing, but was going to start doing it. Because, as she likes to say, writers write.
The Winterville resident self-published her first novel, "The Color of Love," in 2002. This story of an interracial relationship wound up being added to the book list for an East Carolina University African-American-lit class, alongside seminal work by such literary giants as Frederick Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison.
On advice from friends and a former faculty adviser at ECU, from where Bell graduated in 1992, she pursued an agent through her contacts with other African-American writers.
She not only landed the agent, but the agent then landed her book deal with a media conglomerate with cultural clout and resources.
The large publishing house, a division of the BET Television network, put out Bell's next two novels under its Sepia Books imprint. Last month, BET signed Bell for another two books.

Bell's most recent novel, "After the Storm," will be formally released today at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, with a 7 p.m. book signing and a chance for the public to meet this local author.

Bell, just shy of 36, is just about as eastern North Carolina as you can get. Though born in Brooklyn, N.Y., she was raised on a farm in Falkland.
"All I've ever really known (was) the farm," Bell said via cell phone from her car, during a book-tour junket across the Triangle last week. "I actually grew up putting in tobacco, picking cucumbers, the whole nine."
But also, she read. Avidly. Widely.
"Through reading, I was able to be transported out of that mundane setting that Falkland often could be, to another world," Bell said. "That started my love for the written word."
Author Judy Blume's coming-of-age books were the beginning for her.
As she got older, Bell discovered African-American popular-fiction writer Terry McMillan, who was just starting to publish around the time Bell was graduating from J.H. Rose High School, in 1987.
The Greenville area has produced several novelists of note. ECU English faculty William Hallberg and Luke Whisnant, for example, both have critically acclaimed titles. But there isn’t mass-market fiction: You’re unlikely to find Hallberg’s “The Rub of the Green” in the Food Lion book aisle rubbing spines with the latest by Grisham or Crichton, or Whisnant’s “Watching Dinner With the Red Chinese” winking from airport racks next to Cosmo’s “Twenty Sure-Fire Ways to Ignite Your Man” issue.

Such places are more the territory of a Terry McMillan. And BET is betting it might also be the province of a Cassandra Darden Bell.

It’s only a recent phenomenon for African-American women’s fiction to really pull down mass-market success.

Novelist Toni Morrison has influenced generations of writers, as have poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove. Yet, ironically, the work of these African-American women, all major authors, remains largely within the realm of the ivory tower.

Much of that changed with Alice Walker’s “The Color Purple,” published in 1982, and then adapted into a highly successful film.

Then along came McMillan, with sexy books like “Waiting to Exhale” and “How Stella Got Her Groove Back,” and the whole dynamic shifted — stories about strong black women sold, and sold well.

And when McMillan’s novels ended up going to the big screen, it was official: There was a waiting audience for African-American mass-market fiction.

“Picking up one of her books was just like sitting down with some girls around the table,” Bell said.

McMillan is a good jumping-off point for talking about Bell. The two authors’ work has a similar “flavor,” as Bell puts it.

“Just real-life stuff (about) folks you’d have dinner with and have your daily goings-on with,” Bell said.

That was a large part of why Seodial

Frank H. Deena, co-ordinator of graduate classes in ECU’s multicultural literature program, has chosen to include Bell’s work in his African-American lit course.


Bell’s books — and Bell herself — are a good fit for his class, he said.

“Students can actually identify with situations and characters in their own families,” Deena said. “They can see resemblances. She’s right at home with these students here.”

Deena was likewise impressed with Bell’s choice of subject matter.

“She, among the more contemporary writers, is dealing with issues of restoration, reconciliation, redemption,” Deena said. “These are universal themes, but they’re particularly important to African-American studies.”

Bell’s main characters certainly have plenty to deal with, however you label it. The author focuses on women grappling with their own evolving identities, with family crises and self-fulfillment.

“I like to deal with women and the things that we deal with in our lives, and trying to juggle all the responsibilities,” Bell said. “It’s something I know firsthand.”

As she talks, kid noise routinely erupts from the back of Bell’s car, punctuating her every few sentences. Her children — Lauryn, Ariel and Jordan — are with her as she’s out promoting the book.

“I chose this career because I wanted to be able to spend time with my kids and have them be involved in what I’m doing,” Bell said.

“It’s hard, but I think it’s good — good for me, and good for them.”

Bell’s writing career is very much a family affair. Her husband, Larry Bell, a quality engineer at Bosch in New Bern, handles publicity.

“She usually feels like (that’s) his full-time job,” the author joked.

Bell’s main characters don’t start out as strong people; they find themselves and their hidden strengths in the journey. We get to see them grow.

“After the Storm,” set against a hurricane backdrop in Florida, gives us Jessi Andrews, overweight and out of confidence. Early in the book, Jessi discovers her husband of 10 years is doing more than just working late.

Her marriage in ruins, Jessi doesn’t see herself able to go on. But she does anyway.

“It wasn’t something that Jessi made the choice of, and she made the decision, to say, ‘Hey, I can do more than this,’” Bell explained. “She was forced to do it.”

Jessi’s family and dear friends rally around her, and she grows through their faith in her. She ultimately embraces her changed life, stronger for her trials.
“Women can find an inner strength in their own resilience, if they just look deep,” Bell said. “Through the challenges of life sometimes we’re forced to (do that). I think that for myself, having children and then still wanting to do something that was just for me, I was forced to find the writer within me, and pursue that.

“I think that with my stories, I tend to bring that in,” Bell said. “I put my characters into situations that are difficult, but at the same time, force them into self-discovery.”

That’s because Bell has a clear vision of what she’d like her fiction to accomplish. To sell, sure — she certainly wouldn’t turn down a book chat with Oprah, she joked. But also something more fundamental.

“With my characters, the reason I’m so hell-bent on showing growth is because that’s something that I want to see in women,” Bell said. “You see so many people get knocked down and find it difficult to get on their feet again. By giving these examples and situations, hopefully (I) can send a message to a woman who may be experiencing something similar.

“Other women can read (it) and say, ‘No matter what my circumstance or situation is, even if it’s not something desirable or what I want, I can still come out on top.’”

Yet Bell has no delusions about the role fiction plays in most people’s lives — it’s entertainment, a means of escape.

“But if there’s something there that can help someone,” she said, “then all the much better.”

Cassandra Darden Bell will be signing copies of her newest novel, “After the Storm,” at 7 p.m. today at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 3040 S. Evans St. Call 321-8119.

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Tom Hearn, how it ought to be

The pooh-bahs who are running the search for a new president for the University of North Carolina system can find the model for that job 90 or so miles west of the Triangle. As the fellow is retiring, he's likely not available for the post himself. But in his accomplishments, in his integrity, in his forceful yet genteel leadership lies the professional DNA of one born to be a university president.

My friend Tom Hearn has been president of Wake Forest University for 22 years. He's quite the national figure now, having taken Wake Forest to the upper level of universities, public or private. In the annual rankings compiled by U.S. News & World Report, WFU stands slightly higher than UNC-Chapel Hill.

Tall and sort of owlish, Hearn remains, however, down to earth. A few years ago, he made one of his periodic pilgrimages to the old Wake Forest campus in Wake Forest. It's been half a century since an offer from the R.J. Reynolds family moved the campus to Winston-Salem.

Hearn spoke that day at the Wake Forest Baptist Church in a down-to-earth, familiar way of that grand old place. He knew all about it, just as he knows the enclaves in North Carolina where families have sent several generations to “the college,” which is the way some of the older folks still refer to the university.

He followed another terrific president, Ralph Scales, a man of uncommon grace and quiet wisdom. Scales helped the university stretch and grow from its Baptist roots, angering a few conservative Baptist organizations along the way. Hearn kept the movement going, but like Scales never turned his back on the university's history. It was no mean feat. But he did it.

"Under his leadership," says the legend, Bill Friday, "Wake Forest has grown into real national stature by any measure of universities today." Friday, the UNC system president emeritus, spent a little time at Wake Forest as an undergraduate himself.

To understand the challenge, and the magnitude of Hearn's tenure, a bit of history is in order. Wake Forest is a small school (roughly 6,500 students), with deep roots in North Carolina and a loyal alumni base. Admission is tough, and the price is high, about $28,000 in tuition. That's a long way from the small Baptist college it used to be.

It is, in other words, a very complicated situation for even the most gifted administrator — almost like being a politician representing a thousand different constituencies.

It would be easy, in such a job, to fall into the habit of trying to please everyone by never saying anything, by pandering to faculty and students and alumni and telling them what they all want to hear. Yet Hearn has retained a refreshingly candid throughout his time there.

A couple of my conversations with him come to mind. Once, I asked him if it was true that university presidents were first and foremost fund-raisers and had time for little else. He said no, that a president ought to who's going to give money and who's not and shouldn't waste time going after those in the latter category because there were more important tasks at hand. (In his tenure, Wake's endowment went from $125 million to $812 million.) On another occasion, he talked about the difficulty of admission to Wake Forest but emphasized that the university must remember the sons and daughters of alums who want to go there.

Hearn also has been pretty gutsy when it comes to that which has brought other university presidents down — big-time sports. Oh, it's true that Wake Forest doesn't have the megafacilities and huge revenues that some schools in its athletic conference have had. But there have been times when some boosters craved more. Hearn was steadfast, writing to them some years ago that "winning at the cost of our integrity has never been a goal and will not be." Lots of presidents and chancellors say that; Hearn's record speaks for itself.

Two years ago, he was struck with a malignant brain tumor. Typically, he approached that challenge with the methodical planning of the philosophy professor that he was. He has been back in office for some time now, but as is the case with many people who have battled cancer, he seeks positives and lessons in the experience.

Tomorrow, Hearn is slated to turn his office over to new president Nathan O. Hatch, the former provost of Notre Dame, who looks like yet another winner for Wake Forest. How do they do it? Let's hope they're asking that question in Chapel Hill. And that they're smart enough to ask some questions of Tom Hearn as well.

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NCSU guilty of sex bias, judge says

The Associated Press

RALEIGH – Sexual discrimination resulted in a denied pay increase and a reassignment to night patrol for a former campus police sergeant at N.C. State, an administrative law judge has ruled.

Ann Trochum, who now works for the State Capitol Police, should have been paid the same amount as eight male sergeants working at the university, Administrative Law Judge Augustus B. Elkins II ruled.

In his decision, Elkins said Trochum’s claims of sexual discrimination were legitimate based in part on several comments made to her by her former supervisor, Lt. Richard Potts. In one case, he reportedly told her she was nothing more than a secretary and in another case he taunted her after a disagreement about a rape investigation.

Potts denied making either statement.

Assistant Attorney General Katherine Galvin, who is representing the university, argued the comments aren’t germane to the case because Potts did not set Trochum’s salary.

Elkins’ decision, which was released in May, must still be approved by the State Personnel Commission.

Trochum’s back pay would total about $28,000. The university would also be responsible for other costs such as retirement benefits and attorney fees. A hearing before the personnel commission is expected in July.

Trochum became a law enforcement officer in 1999 and was hired by the NCSU Campus Police Department in March 2000 as a patrol officer. Before that, she worked for the State Bureau of Investigation for 24 years. Her duties included supervision of a clerical unit. She did not supervise officers.

She was promoted to sergeant at NCSU in May 2001, the only female sergeant on the force.
Duke to update patients on fluid

The Associated Press

RALEIGH — Thousands of patients whose surgical instruments were mistakenly washed in hydraulic fluid at two hospitals should soon be receiving more information on potential risks and an offer of help from Duke University Health System.

Carol Svec, who said she has suffered lingering pain after rotator-cuff surgery last fall, provided copies of e-mails from a top Duke official promising to reach out to nearly 4,000 affected patients.

“We are sending a letter to all 4,000 patients, updating them of the situation and informing of a center that we have established with physician experts in environmental health to provide consultation to all those who remain concerned of their health status,” Dr. Victor Dzau, chief executive officer of Duke University Health System, said in an e-mail exchange with Svec.

Dzau said in a later e-mail on Monday that “the physician and staff at the center want to be completely prepared to serve those who call or to see the patients.”

A health system spokesman did not return calls seeking comment on Monday.

The exchange comes a week after the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services issued a report saying the hospitals put patients in “immediate jeopardy” by not detecting the problem, despite concerns from medical staff about slick tools.

Patients who were exposed to the surgical instruments have reported lingering health problems ranging from fatigue and joint pain to conditions requiring hospitalization.

The health system owns the two hospitals, Duke Health Raleigh Hospital and Durham Regional Hospital, where the mistake occurred last year.

Elevator workers had drained hydraulic fluid into empty soap containers and capped them without changing the labels. It was not until January that patients learned their surgeons had, for two months, unknowingly used instruments washed in the slippery fluid instead of in soap.

The instruments also had been run through a steam bath for sterilization.