

# 'Not your usual boy meets girl'

Wilmington writer explores relationship between disabled couple

BY GARY SOULSMAN • THE NEWS JOURNAL • JANUARY 23, 2011



Rachel Simon

If there's a Wilmington writer with a shot at landing a national bestseller this spring, some bets are on Rachel Simon for "The Story of Beautiful Girl."

On the face of it you might not think so, given that her sixth book is literary fiction about an improbable love affair set in 1968. It's a relationship between Homan, a deaf African-American man, and Lynn, a young woman who's a gifted artist but developmentally disabled.

"What I love about the novel is how moving the story is and how Rachel creates a world that many of us don't know about," says Deb Futter, editor in chief at Grand Central publishing, a house with bestselling authors such as James Patterson and Malcolm Gladwell.

"I was born to work on this book," Futter says. "I didn't have to buy it."

Futter says there is an audience for a sweeping 40-year tale about a couple who run from the School for the Incurable and Feebleminded -- and are forced apart.

"Rachel has drawn heart-felt characters, and this is not your usual boy meets girl, boy loses girl story," Futter says.

The 51-year-old Simon is probably best known for "Riding the Bus With My Sister," a 2002 memoir about her family and how she builds a relationship with her developmentally disabled sister.

With her new book, Simon is ecstatic that Grand Central is sending her on an eight-city presale tour. (It's a "presale" tour because "Beautiful Girl" publishes May 4.)

"When we have a book that can do quite well we try to give it every advantage," Futter says.

Simon knows some writers would be horrified by the idea of flying to Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, Ann Arbor, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee and Denver for dinners with booksellers. But she is an energetic networker as much as an introvert who loves to be alone.

So for Simon, who is about to start the tour on Monday, it sounds fun.

"It helps to love what you wrote so much that you want to communicate that love," she says.

Friends says the curly-haired Simon, who is also a writing teacher and coach, has been preparing for the tour much of her life.

Years ago, Simon worked in retail setting up author events for Barnes & Noble. So she knows what a challenge writers have in connecting with readers.

Her early books of fiction and short stories had tepid sales, despite good reviews and her wearing humorous costumes for promotions. (She sometimes gave out sweets from a dress draped with candy bars.)

"I've seen writers that no matter how hard they tried, what they did, or how good their books were or how many awards they won -- basically didn't exist to a national audience," she says.



Since then she's learned to never say no to networking.

"What I appreciate about Rachel is that she has a clear-eyed view of what's necessary in publishing," says freelance consultant Anne Dubuissou Anderson, who edited the new novel with Simon. "Rachel is willing to do whatever it takes."

And while wary of jumping into social media, she now posts regularly on Facebook and Twitter. Each robs her of some quiet needed for writing, but she gets it back by writing on planes and in hotel rooms. She now believes even 20 minutes a day with social media pays dividends with potential readers.

So, if someone mentions her in a positive tweet, she might tweet back, saying in effect: "Glad you've heard of me."

She's learned that Tweeters can't believe their good fortune.

"A friend told me, 'you love to go to parties and you love to network, well, this is just another tool for doing that,' " she says.

### **'Try different things'**

In March, Simon took the advice of media colleagues, such as Joe del Tufo of Mobius, to start a blog. Mobius is a Wilmington media company that designs her website ([rachelsimon.com](http://rachelsimon.com)).

"I think Rachel understands that the blog brings her in touch with a bigger audience -- with people who want to know more about her as a storyteller," del Tufo says.

He's encouraging her to blog as she travels for "Beautiful Girl," a process that began on Thursday when she attended the winter institute of the American Booksellers Association in Arlington, Va. She had dinner with 22 booksellers and O.J. Simpson prosecutor Marcia Clark, who has written a new mystery called "Guilt By Association."

"It was so wonderful it feels like a dream," says Simon.

A few weeks before all this, she dropped by Mobius offices to work on a redesign of her website, one that will highlight the novel.

With that in mind, she recorded a 90-second video that will soon be posted.

"Hi, I'm Rachel Simon, here to introduce you to my newest book -- 'The Story of Beautiful Girl,' " she says, standing in front of a green screen and reading from an iPad held as a teleprompter.

It requires a few takes and during a pause, she says with so many forms of media you never know what will grab a potential reader.

"So you try different things," she says.

Back at the camera, she explains that years ago she came across a book that told the true story of a deaf African-American teenager found wandering the Illinois streets in 1945.

No one could identify him because no one understood his sign language, she says, and "a judge declared him feeble-minded and sent him to an institution where he remained until he died 50 years later.

"The man they called John Doe 24 haunted me for years.

"Then one day I sat down to write and 'The Story of Beautiful Girl' burst out of me like nothing I've ever written."

In the story she imagines a happier life for him.

Off-camera, Simon says, a psychic friend told her that John Doe 24 guided the writing.

"I like to think, if such things are possible, it's true," she says.

### **Connecting with readers**

When it comes to marketing, Simon knows it's helpful to think outside the box.

That's how she connected with readers for her best-known book -- "Riding the Bus with my Sister."

It tells about her sister Beth, who has a developmental disability.

"Riding the Bus" is a true story about how Simon got to know her sister by joining Beth in her favorite pastime -- riding city buses.

Once the nonfiction book was accepted for publication, Simon imagined who would want to read about Beth -- and that led her to think about the disability community.

Months before the book came out, she got on the phone and sent hundreds of letters to disability groups.

"I knew that the book system wasn't set up to make 'Riding the Bus' a success," she says. "So I asked for their support in helping the book find an audience."

In time, the calls and letters made the book a bestseller. They also brought scores of speaking requests that continue to this day.

Then came a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie on CBS in 2005. It starred Rosie O'Donnell and Andie MacDowell.

"People think 'Riding the Bus' was so successful because of the movie," Simon says. "No, the movie was icing on the cake."

With "Beautiful Girl" Simon plans similar networking. She's set up meetings with people in the disability community in places she's going on the tour.

She's also sent galley to friends such as Renee Pietrangelo, CEO of ANCOR (American Network of Community Options and Resources), an association that advocates on behalf of service providers to Americans with disabilities.

"I was very moved by the book," says Pietrangelo. "Many themes resonate with what we're engaged in and advocate for every day."

She says Simon's sad portrayal of institutional life -- and the hope that compassionate caregivers give residents -- is relevant.

"Around the world there are people incarcerated, like Linnie and Homan, and hidden away," Pietrangelo says.

She's encouraging friends to read the novel and believes it will find an audience beyond professionals like her.

If "Eat Pray Love" can be a bestseller, this will be one, too, Pietrangelo says.

"This is a better book."

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