

Messages of Hope

Acclaimed local author weaves hardship and humor in her novels

By Toni Garrard Clay

Beth Fehlbaum is a Mabank resident and Athens teacher who turned her hand to writing young adult novels several years ago. “Courage in Patience,” her debut novel, was published in 2008 to great acclaim. Her second book, “Hope in Patience,” was named a 2011 YALSA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers. And her most recent book, “Big Fat Disaster,” was just published as an e-book and in hardback and received a starred review from Kirkus.

“Big Fat Disaster” centers on Colby Denton, a teen who fits like a square peg in the round hole of her limelight-loving family. When her father’s bad decisions come home to roost, her family is torn apart, prompting Colby to face some hard truths about her family, herself and the destruction caused by the eating disorder she uses as a coping mechanism. To learn more about the acclaimed author, we asked her a few questions.

Q: You have been a school teacher for 16 years as well as having written four books and published three. Do you identify yourself as a teacher who writes or a writer who teaches?

A: I identify myself as a person who has the best of both worlds. I teach during the school year and write full-time in the summer. I write on the weekends as much as possible, but during the school year, my “day job” takes everything I’ve got.

Q: Your books have received sterling reviews, and they grapple with gritty topics like childhood sexual abuse and eating disorders. What led you to write about those topics as opposed to, say, vampires, super powers or post-apocalyptic battles?

A: My own experience of recovery from childhood sexual abuse and an eating disorder led me to explore those issues through the eyes of someone else. My books are NOT autobiographical, though.

Q: What would you say to readers — young or old — who might be hesitant to dive into a book featuring some pretty serious issues? Do you provide levity?

A: I definitely weave humor throughout the story, and while that may seem odd to hear in light of the fact that I write “gritty” novels, that’s the way that many people



cope, isn’t it? With respect to my books dealing with serious issues, I am simply reflecting the real world, and I have too much respect for my readers and the issues themselves to shy away from the tough parts. At the same time, my mission, if you want to call it that, is always to shout it from the mountaintops: there is HOPE. Always. HOPE is the opposite of fear.

Q: What’s the typical age of your readers?

A: There doesn’t seem to be a typical age. While my books are considered YA (young adult) because of the age of the protagonist, I have readers of all ages.

Q: Have your books led people to reach out to you for support or understanding?

A: Definitely. I have had young women come up to me and tell me their stories. I always, always recommend that hurting people seek help from a qualified mental health professional.

Q: Have you had a student (past or present) read your books? If so, how do they respond?

A: Yes, former students have read my books, and they have had a very positive reaction to them. They especially like the setting being in a small, rural East Texas town.

Q: Do you have the story for another book in mind now?

A: Yes. It’s in its very early formative stages, but the next book will be a companion to “Big Fat Disaster.” Its protagonist will be Kimmie Schuler, who was a background character in “Big Fat Disaster.” So, those of you who read “Big Fat Disaster,” watch out for Kimmie, because she’s about to star in her own story!

Q: How can someone purchase your books?

A: They’re available at any bookstore, both physical stores and online.

To learn more about Fehlbaum’s own story, her books or her blog, visit bethfehlbaumbooks.com.



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