

The Severn Journal

'Hemingway's Girl' debuts for Spalding alumnae

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Erika Robuck

In the tropics it is hot, and it is passionate. On the Key West of the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, a young woman learns about passion in life while working in “Papa” Hemmingway’s house for his second wife, Pauline.

Archbishop Spalding High School alumnae Erika Robuck, Class of 1995, released her second novel, *Hemingway’s Girl*, in September to explore and perhaps redeem the life of famed novelist Ernest Hemmingway. Mariella Bennet, her main character, is a young Key West woman of both American and Cuban descent who is struggling to support her family after her father’s early death when Hemmingway takes an interest in her.

It was at Spalding that Robuck discovered her own love of writing. Her Advanced Placement English class sparked her life-long interest in literature.

“I was exposed to some wonderful writing,” she said. “During that time I sharpened my writing skills. It was there that I knew I wanted to do something with writing. (AP English) definitely pushed me. It was stressful but when I was finished, it was, ‘Wow – that was cool.’ I wish I had started writing novels earlier.”

For Robuck, the opportunity to write about Hemmingway was both a challenge and a passion. Her interest in him was sparked during college when she first read his novels, including *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Call to Arms*.

“I fell in love with his style of writing and his own story,” Robuck said. It was a visit to Hemmingway’s home in Key West, though, that stirred her to write about him, she said. “I had a really strong connection to the house. The tension in the house from his second marriage, to Pauline, is almost left over there. I felt that connection to him there.”

For this novel, Robuck went to Boston and the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library to research Hemmingway and read his papers, including surprisingly personal and tender letters to family and friends.

“His voice came through so strongly,” Robuck said of reading those letters. “I had an opinion like most people of him until I got to those letters. I feel like I’ve been learning so much from him, that he’s been tutoring me.”

The gritty, womanizing and tough side of Hemmingway fell away while she read, Robuck said.

“There’s a really deep and loyal side of him,” she said. “He’s very caring with his friends. The letters at that time were extremely thoughtful.”

Hemmingway expressed his condolences to friends who had recently lost a son, she said, in one letter that stood out. Rather than offering platitudes, Hemmingway explored the depth of the loss and his own sorrow with them. The letter showed Hemmingway, the man, as one who understood the human experience and embraced it.

“He had a really inflated sense of self, too, but he had a tender side,” Robuck said. “I was very touched by his character.”

Robuck said she wanted to explore this side of Hemmingway and to show him as someone who cared for others, especially those whose social class or wealth were much less than his. A photo of a dirty, poor, young girl standing beside in on the dock while Hemmingway held a marlin and the story of a young woman who had worked in his house came together for Robuck, she said, and inspired her novel and the story of Mariella.

How much of herself is in Mariella? Robuck said there is some of her but Mariella is more a product of her time and place – the 1930s Key West – than a reflection of Robuck. Their greatest similarity is a desire to be around the water; Robuck is a native of Annapolis while Mariella is a fisherwoman.

“She’s so different from me that I had to really reach inside to find her,” Robuck said of Mariella’s character. “I

haven't experienced what she has. I've always belonged; she feels like she's always on the periphery.”

Hemingway's Girl was released on Sept. 4 and is available through Amazon.com and at Barnes & Noble in Annapolis.

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