

"Invisible Man" revealed: Author shares the story behind latest novel

BY BRENDAN BERUBE
Staff Writer

NEW DURHAM—For Rita Schiano, the phrase "truth is stranger than fiction" is more than just an old saying ... it is quite literally the story of her life.

In Schiano's latest novel, "Painting the Invisible Man," a keying error made on a computer leads the main character, Anna Matteo, on a heartwrenching personal journey into her family's hidden past, a journey that abounds with gangland murders, dangerous hitmen and long-buried family secrets.

The story behind the book, Schiano said during an appearance at Fox Tale Books in New Durham on April 4, is filled with just as many twists and turns as the novel itself.

And as it does for Anna, Schiano's story begins with

her hitting the wrong key. A native of Syracuse, N.Y., who now resides in Sturbridge, Mass., Schiano worked for years as a freelance writer for various clients.

Shortly after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, a Wilmington, Mass.-based company called Kids' Terrain contacted Schiano to request a children's song commemorating the lives lost during the attacks. Schiano completed the song, "Tiny Acts of Kindness," with the help of a fellow musician, who later appeared at a children's festival in upstate New York, near Syracuse.

While browsing through the archives of the Syracuse Post-Standard in search of an article about the festival for her client, Schiano accidentally clicked on the option to

purchase 10 re-printed articles for \$12.95, rather than one for \$2.95.

Not wanting to go through the hassle of trying to change her order, she began typing in the names of old friends and family members from her hometown to see what came up.

After typing in her deceased father's name, Al, Schiano found a total of 37 articles from the 1990s referencing him.

That would not have been unusual, she said, if it weren't for the fact that Al was murdered in 1976.

The articles that Schiano discovered chronicled the case of a mob enforcer who was caught on tape by the FBI confessing to his participation in her father's murder.

The enforcer, she said, was tried twice, with the first tri-

al ending in a hung jury, and the second in an acquittal.

"I knew instinctively that trouble was brewing inside," she said, explaining that with her mother dead, as well, and her brother (who was also on the hit list the night Al was killed) unwilling to talk about what had happened, she felt she had no one to turn to.

The only person Schiano felt comfortable broaching the subject with was her cousin, Terry, a situation which she said presented its own set of problems because (unbeknownst to her at the time) Terry had married the enforcer's defense attorney years earlier.

While she wasn't able to make the connection until she had read the articles, Schiano said she had always felt inexplicably distanced from Terry's husband.

"I did not know where to place this man in my life," she explained.

Eventually, Terry managed to make it out to Springfield, Mass. for a home show. Schiano agreed to meet her there, and revealed what she had found over dinner that night, asking if Terry thought the husband might allow her to read the trial transcripts.

During their conversation, Schiano said, Terry commented on the fact that "Uncle Al" had always seemed like an "invisible man" to her, a man that no one, not even his family, truly knew. Schiano would later return to that phrase as the inspiration for the book's title.

Schiano toyed with the idea of writing a book about her experiences for the next three years, but was reluctant to start work on it for fear of reprisals from the enforcer.

When he passed away in November of 2004, she began the process of reviewing the trial transcripts and interviewing some of the key people involved in the case.

What surprised her the most, she said, were the portraits that emerged, particularly of Al, who surfaced as a study in contradictions, a man who deeply loved his wife, yet kept two separate mistresses because he found himself unable to live with her; a tough, streetwise survivor with ties to the mob who performed on stage with her violin.

Her research, she said, also revealed a new side to her mother, a "classy woman" who was beloved by the community of Syracuse, and bore her husband's infidelities with dignity, going so far as to call one of his mistresses after her death and give her permission to appear at the funeral, understanding that the

mistress loved him just as deeply as she had.

Schiano originally intended to write a nonfiction account of her experience. After reading the initial manuscript, however, her best friend told her that while she felt it was "good writing," it wasn't "honest," and didn't allow her to truly "feel" the story.

At that point, Schiano said, she realized the only way to approach the book was to fictionalize the characters and the story.

Asked how much of the book was accurate, Schiano replied that 93 percent of the information contained in "Painting the Invisible Man" was true, including the newspaper articles that Anna discovers.

One of the hardest experiences for her, she said, was having Anna imagine, as she did, what must have been going through her father's mind as he was picked up, driven to a secluded area 40 miles outside of Syracuse, shot, and left there.

"I always wondered what it was like for him," she said.

Asked if writing the novel had given her a sense of closure, Schiano compared the experience to what French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre called "the essence of being and becoming," or discovering one's own identity through the experiences of others.

When she realized that by leaving Syracuse, she had left her mother behind to deal with the emotional turmoil brought on by the mob enforcer's trials, Schiano said she broke down and wept, sometimes for periods of 30 minutes or longer.

If she had one wish, she said, it would be to tell her mother how sorry she was for leaving her to deal with the pain of reliving the past alone.

While "Painting the Invisible Man" recounts a very personal story, Schiano said, it deals with universal themes, such as forgiveness, atonement and redemption.

"If this book moves someone to pick up the phone and say 'I'm sorry, then my job as a writer is done,'" she said.

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AUTHOR RITA SCHIANO explains the story behind her latest novel, "Painting the Invisible Man," during an appearance at Fox Tale Books in New Durham on April 4.

Huckins subdivision nearing approval by B'stead planners

BY BRENDAN BERUBE
Staff Writer

BARNSTEAD—With the last remaining issues cleared up, an 11-lot subdivision proposed by Stratford resident Lester Huckins at the intersection of Gray Road and Province Road moved one step closer to approval at the planning board's April 3 meeting.

Project engineer Cory Colwell, of MSC Engineering, appeared before the board asking for the resolution of what he felt were the last two issues preventing the project from moving forward.

Recently, he said, MSC applied for a permit from the state Department of Environmental Services to cross a stream with a common driveway between two of the proposed lots, and also agreed to replace the proposed box culvert beneath

the driveway with a steel arch culvert that would be set into the ground, preserving the bottom of the stream bed.

The other issue at hand, Colwell said, was Huckins' unsuccessful efforts to reach a compromise with the town Fire Wards that would have enabled him to install one cistern on the property, rather than the two required under the town's subdivision regulations.

While he and Huckins felt that the existing lots, which were created in the 1980s, should not be subject to the current regulations, and that a single cistern with sprinkler systems mandated in each home would be a "very viable alternative," Colwell said that in light of the Fire Wards' decision, Huckins would agree to two cisterns if it would enable the project to move forward.

Board member Phil Grillo explained that while the single-cistern proposal may have looked viable on paper, the board had no guarantee that houses would be built where they were shown on the plan.

Given the overall size of the lot, Grillo felt that the requirement of two cisterns was still minimal.

"We tried everything we could on this," he said, adding that the board had no personal objection to sprinkler systems, but chose instead to rely on the opinions of experts such as the Fire Wards.

Alternate Jim Fougere pointed out that the agreement was for Huckins to install one cistern now to cover the first four lots, and put in the second cistern as the development expands fur-

ther down the road. The board voted to continue Huckins' case one last time, giving the Fire Wards time to review and approve the cistern design.

DVDs come to the "Boondocks"

The board unanimously approved a site plan submitted by residents Philip and Jennifer Slater for Boondock Video, LLC, a DVD rental store, which will be located next door to the future offices of SAU 86 at the Pine Tree Storage Facility.

The proposed hours of operation, Philip said, will be 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday; and 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Sunday. The store, he said, will be

open for all major holidays except Christmas.

Murley, Evans in charge again

With no challengers, Chairman Dave Murley and Vice Chair Bill Evans were reappointed to their respective positions for another year.

Next meeting

The board will meet for a work session on Thursday, April 17, at 7 p.m. in Town Hall.

Their next regular meeting has been scheduled for Thursday, May 1, at 7 p.m., also in Town Hall.

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Bouncing away

Emily Mott was having a bouncing good time at the Little Pesaukees playgroup session held at the Alton Bay Community Center on April 3.

ABA urges residents to attend DOT hearing

ALTON—The Alton Business Association encourages local businesses and residents in the Alton community to attend the upcoming Department of Transportation educational hearing on the proposed reconstruction to the Alton traffic circle. The hearing will be held at Prospect Mountain High School at 7 p.m. on April 16.

Last year the ABA hosted an informational night with DOT as guest speaker. Several townspeople attended and raised their questions and concerns. The April 16 hearing is another opportunity for everyone in the community to gain insight, raise questions/concerns and voice their opinion.

The Alton traffic circle is a major intersection in the town of Alton, affecting traffic flow to local businesses and residences within the village of Alton and Alton Bay. For more information, call Reuben Wentworth at 875-3900.