

Novelist Heidi Boehringer: Characterizing Women in Crisis

BY SUSAN F. DAVIS

Heidi Boehringer loves to swim, because it brings her both pleasure and relief from her day. Do the main characters in her novels share this hobby? Absolutely not!

Boehringer writes of women who are forced to fight their way through a turbulent, unforgiving world. These women are thrust into society's worst nightmares and must learn somehow to deal, to cope and, most importantly, to get on with the business of living. The story is found in the way these characters handle the aftereffects of life's most horrendous moments.

For example, Boehringer's first novel is called *Chasing Jordan*. The title is deceptive in its simplicity, although this novel is anything but. As this story opens, Meg O'Hara is driving with her infant daughter in the car. As she nears her home, she spots her husband ogling their neighbor, a sexy young woman, who is working outside in short shorts. Meg watches her husband; her husband watches the neighbor; and Meg accidentally hits and kills her two-year old son, named Jordan.

As Meg tries to save herself from depression, her life skitters into a crazy pursuit of normalcy as her marriage fails and she sinks into an abyss of self-pity. She becomes totally obsessed with a neighbor who has also experienced a loss. Meg spies on the neighbor surreptitiously and breaks into her home. All of this is indicative of how desperately Meg seeks to learn how to handle her own grief.

The characters in this novel are not perfect – in fact, they are flawed. Yet they are believable. “I just have to



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write what's in me,” Boehringer explains. “Sometimes it's gritty, or dark, but I'd feel dishonest to look away. I have to write what these characters feel and do.” And so she does.

“I remember thinking when I was younger that the world was harder for women. I railed against that during my 20s, but now I understand that women simply have a different struggle. I just refuse to live in a world that keeps women from living freely,” she continues. The characters in her second novel, which will be released in July 2007, clearly epitomize this. This novel, *Screw Box*, is a story about a divorced female policewoman, Mona, whose 13-year-old daughter Perdita is abducted and held as a sex slave. Mona is able to rescue her daughter, but nothing is easy after that as the characters deal both with each other and with the judgments of their society. There is indeed a “different struggle.”

Boehringer will quickly admit that her own life has had some difficult paths, as well. Growing up in rural Pennsylvania, she lived a simple and happy life until she lost her father when she was 10 years old. Later, one of her three sisters nearly drowned,

and finally the family relocated to South Florida. Boehringer was 15 at the time, and she has remained happily in South Florida ever since.

In 1979, she left home to attend the University of Florida in Gainesville. There, with no intention at all of becoming an English major...she became an English major. It was then that she met Harry Crews, an author and teacher who became her mentor. “He loved words,” she shares, “and his ‘in your face’ style of teaching influenced me greatly.” When she graduated from college in 1983, she was prepared to go to law school.

“Not being accepted,” she reveals, “ended up being a gift for me.” It provided a gift to all of us, as well, as she continues to write novels that are out there on the cutting edge, showing real people in real struggles.

Her writing process is as interesting as she. Working in a demanding full-time job, Heidi Boehringer often “steals” the time to write. She does not hold herself to any deadline, but just lets the story flow forth in its own good time. According to Boehringer, “Somewhere along writing the first four chapters of both novels, the last sentence of the book came to me.” Even though she knows the last sentence, she doesn't know any of the details on how to get there. Most of the time, her characters lead her as she gives them a voice – some characters developing into bigger roles than originally imagined and others fading into the background.

She is quick to credit the Broward County area for its wonderful writers' community. Of particular

help is Joyce Sweeney, who facilitates a workshop for writers called simply the Thursday Night Writers Group. "Joyce is so artful in bringing people together. She provides a network for us, and her support is unconditional," Boehringer states. "Providing referrals to agents and making connections for us is one of her greatest gifts."

Membership in the group is by invitation only as each writer must submit something. Pieces are read, critiqued and admired by group members. "Listening and watching other people grow is an unexpected reward as – through this process – you yourself grow," Boehringer adds. In the decade during which this group has grown and flourished in Fort Lauderdale, 18 of its writers have been published.

This past year has been a good one for Heidi Boehringer, as she appeared on NPR's *The Spoken Word* on June 18, 2006. She was named "Best New Novelist" on the *Broward-Palm Beach New Times*' 2006 "Best of" list. In the spring, she participated in a "New Voices" panel at the Broward County Library with members of the Thursday Night Writers Group, Brenda Serotte and Mel Taylor. Coming up, she will be a presenter at the Coral Springs Festival of the Arts on March 18, a speaker at the Sunny Isles Beach Library and at the South Miami Branch Library in March 2007 during the Miami-Dade Library's Women's History Month observance and will be leading a Writers Workshop for the Florida Center of the Book on April 28.

With her second novel *Screw Box* being released in July 2007, Boehringer states emphatically that she is not impatient for its arrival. Instead, she wakes up every morning thinking, "I'm really an author now. That's so cool! I am doing just what I wanted to do, and I couldn't be happier." And, frankly, neither could we. ★

Susan F. Davis is a writer, avid reader and retired teacher.



Excerpt: *Chasing Jordan*

I lie with my forehead pressed against the cool tile. If I hit my head on the floor hard enough, maybe I'll put Paul and myself out of our collective misery.

I wonder how hard I'd have to crash my head against the lovely Italian tile to get the job done. If I did kill myself, Paul would be the first likely suspect. If he were accused of my murder, then where would Maddie be? A kid should have at least one parent. On the other hand, if I only knock myself unconscious, I'll end up with a hell of a headache, and worse, Paul will be mad and may start to think I'm not fit to be a mother....

I raise my head up, arch my neck back as far as it will flex. If I'm going to kill myself, I have to go the distance. Like to the top of the Sears Tower. Once I got to the top, I know I'd be able to jump. Any time I get around heights, like the top of Pike's Peak, tall bridges or even a balcony, I always have the compulsion to jump. Paul says that's because I really have a fear of heights. ...

I swivel my head to the side, eyeball the kitchen clock. It's 10:35 AM and I'm still in my nightgown. What's wrong with me? I used to be up, dressed in running clothes by 6:30. By 10:30, I would have showered, had a half-hour of playtime with Jordan and Maddie in Jordan's bedroom – I like my kids to wake up softly. I would have dressed both kids and made a family breakfast. Jordan loves, loved pancakes...

I'm going to get up. I'm absolutely committed to rising from this floor and being productive. I'll just lay here for five more minutes. I bang my head against the tile to remind myself I'm alive.

"Ouch," I say out loud, but there's no one to hear me...I've cried more in these last five months than I've cried my whole life. The scary thing is, I haven't cried nearly enough.

I look at the clock. Ok, when it's 11:00 even I'll get up...

I think how lovely a glass of wine would be, but my muscles don't even respond to that. My mouth, however, starts to water. Maybe I shouldn't; I don't know when Paul will walk in. Of course, I could go to the park with my bottle of wine. Listen to me. I sound like some sterno bum, drinking wine in the park.

Excerpted from *Chasing Jordan* © 2005.

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Visit Heidi's website at www.HeidiWBoehringer.com.