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Bill Schlotter

UCSB WRITER FINDS AN AUDIENCE WITH TEEN READERS

Valerie Hobbs never intended to write young-adult novels, much less win awards for doing so.

Like an unexpected twist of plot in one of her stories, it just kind of turned out that way.

At work on her fiction, Hobbs, a lecturer in UCSB's Writing Program, controls all.

It rains, shines, snows or blows on her command.

Characters live and die, do good or wreak evil as she decides.

She exerts a good deal less influence over real life.

So soon after manipulating the universe of her first novel, "How Far Would You Have Gotten If I Hadn't Called You Back," to a satisfactory conclusion, Hobbs found herself struggling to get the book published.

Publishers liked her work.

But Hobbs saw the semi-autobiographical coming-of-age piece as mainstream fiction.

The book companies disagreed.

"(My agent) tried four or five of the big houses and it was pretty clear it wasn't going to go there," Hobbs said. "Then she told me she thought it should be a young-adult book."

This time, it was Hobbs who disagreed.

"I resisted for a while," she said.

"I thought, 'Hey, I didn't write a children's book.' "

She soon relented.

And before long, her agent worked a deal with Orchard Books, and Hobbs' young-adult fiction career was launched.

"I thought, 'Well, hey, I better find out what this field is all about,' " Hobbs said.

So she started reading every young-adult title she could find.

And she was impressed.

"I was amazed at the quality of what was available," Hobbs said.

"There was some really wonderful stuff that really didn't get a lot of respect in schools or anywhere else -- including from me.

And then I was very proud to be in that field."

The field was proud to have her.

Soon after publication of "How Far Would You Have Gotten If I Hadn't Called You Back?" in October 1995, several publications welcomed Hobbs with encouraging reviews.

In "How Far" Hobbs' protagonist is a teen-age girl whose family has just moved from New Jersey to rural California.

In her odyssey to maturity, 16-year-old Bron Lewis deals with an alcoholic and suicidal father, physical abuse of her best friend by a boyfriend, teen sex and her own rebelliousness.

Hobbs' next book, "Get It While It's Hot. Or Not," published by Orchard in October 1996, also deals with teen issues -- pregnancy, friendship, mother-daughter relationships -- through the eyes of a high school girl.

Her latest effort is her most celebrated.

"Carolina Crow Girl," issued by Frances Foster Books -- a branch of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. -- in March, won the 1999 PEN/Norma Klein Award, given to recognize "a superb new voice among American writers of children's fiction."

It has also been nominated for inclusion on the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults list, due out next year.

The PEN award was nice, Hobbs said.

And the royalties are helpful if not substantial.

But what keeps Hobbs writing is the joy of putting words together to express ideas -- her ideas.

"Writing, for me, is fun," she said. "You're not going to get rich writing young-adult books. You have to do it for the love of it -- and I do."

Hobbs has taught in the UCSB Writing Program since 1981, which limits the time she can spend on her own projects.

With about 75 students to serve each quarter, her schedule allows time for about one book a year.

Her fourth effort, "Charlie's Run," is due out from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. next spring.

She plans to work on a sequel to "Carolina Crow Girl" this summer. And there is an adult novel she would like to polish and send off.

Whatever might come of that adult effort, Hobbs can always return to a growing cadre of dedicated teen fans who have been affected by her work.

At a recent appearance in a high school classroom, one student asked that she autograph one of her books.

"I could hardly recognize it," Hobbs said. "It was like a sponge. She had read it so much that it was damp and it had expanded.

She had all these little yellow Post-its throughout the book.

"I could read some of them. They said, 'This is just like me' and 'This is how I feel.'

I was so touched that somebody got that much out of that book.

And I thought, 'Gosh, I'm really lucky to be writing in this

field.' "

About UC Santa Barbara

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