

Creativity comes into ?full bloom? for debut novelist Rachel Stone



The last thing Rachel Stone wanted to do was sit down and write a novel, but when a chance writing prompt at a Toronto workshop got the creative juices flowing, the Aurora resident decided to reluctantly follow the path to see where it took her. The result is *The Blue Iris*, Stone's debut novel set to be published next Tuesday, October 3, by Koehler Books.

?Tessa Lewis is set to embark on a big-time career and marry Toronto's fastest-rising lawyer, who loves her to pieces. But when a visit to a flower market from her childhood sparks memories of the mother she lost too soon, Tessa puts her bright future on hold to work there, determined to come to terms with her past,? say publishers of *The Blue Iris*.

?At the Blue Iris Flower Market, everything is blossoming, except the rag-tag crew, each hiding deep scars of their own. When Sam, the beloved but troubled man in charge, takes off and leaves the market reeling, Tessa and her unlikely new friends come face-to-face with their most uncomfortable truths, uprooting lives carefully cultivated ? and just maybe, unearthing everything they've ever wanted.?

The Blue Iris is six years in the making, says Stone, and stemmed from a writing prompt she got in a creative writing program at the University of Toronto where she and her fellow-writers were asked to build on the idea of what their character would do if they received a gift they didn't want.

?All of a sudden it was taking shape in my mind and there I was yelling these voice notes into my phone and I don't even know how to do voice notes!? says Stone with a laugh, noting the prompt led to a scene that transpires in the second half of the book, leading the author on a path to fill in the journey.

?I spent seven summers in my 20s working in a flower market and I knew it would be a gorgeous setting for a novel. It is a very raw, gritty, gruelling place to work and, at the same time, it's also so beautiful. [Sitting down with my instructor] changed everything. She said it was like driving at night; you don't need to see from here to where you are going, you don't need to see from here to your destination. You just need to see to the end of your headlights and keep going. It's okay if you don't see every twist and turn along the way. Just follow the headlights, keep going, and when you finish you'll have something. At that point it was just a leap of faith of whether I was going to believe her or not, and a very long six years of just refusing to quit.?

This was, in many ways, the path that led Stone to her writing journey in the first place.

The path began, she says, when she was diagnosed with a benign brain tumour.

When she had it removed, she thought the challenge was in the rear-view mirror ? but that wasn't quite the case.

?I thought I had it all behind me; in my Bay Street career, I did reasonably well but I didn't particularly love it, and then this thing just came and reared its head again out of nowhere. Doctors didn't know why it had come back, all signs pointed to me being done with this issue forever, and it really shook everything up. I thought, ?I put off this writing dream long enough and that's what I really want to do. If I don't do it now, who knows what the future holds?' I just dove in.?

She started out with the goal of writing personal essays, creative non-fiction, ?anything but a novel.?

?I just fell in love with the process, the stories, the characters just took over my heart, and then this even crazier thing happened, which freaked my doctors out even more: a few months into that, the tumour started getting smaller; the MRI came back and they were all saying, ?That's not possible, it looks smaller, but there's no explanation.' I knew at that point in my heart that was possible and it was happening because I was doing the thing that fulfilled me inside. I changed my whole life and I believe that translated into better health. It's very ?woo,' but I think the whole thing happened because it was time for me to get on a different path.?

Now, *The Blue Iris* is set to begin a path of its own, and Stone is eager to send it on its way to readers.

?It would be wonderful if this book finds readers who love it and however long they spend in that world with me is a gift; they're giving me that gift of that time. There are a bajillion books out there and to pick up mine and stay with me to the end is a beautiful gift. The idea that someone would be willing to do that and they're happy they did is absolutely thrilling to me.

?I hope people [finish the book] with the idea that you don't have to have it all figured out all at once, your past is going to find you, and it's all going to be okay. None of us have it all figured out and I hope the book, in an uplifting way, helps people understand that's cool, that's okay, we're all figuring it out? and that's what the journey of life is.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter