



The Ointment of the Healer

Breast cancer survivor recovers through storytelling

by Chelsea Fine

Two months before a life-altering breast cancer diagnosis in 2001, Morgan Hunt stumbled upon a prophetic art print while on vacation in Vancouver, British Columbia. The distinctly Northwest-flavored piece is filled with trees, water and Native American iconography. The phrase "Storytelling is the ointment of the healer" is scripted at the bottom. Hunt fell in love with the image and carted it back to San Diego; two months later, she would need to find the storyteller within herself to begin to heal.

Hunt, a breast cancer survivor and published mystery writer, moved to Oregon in 2004 to pursue a career in creative writing. After 27 years in San Diego, the Navy veteran and technical writer relocated to the Northwest and began a new chapter in her life.

Nestled in the foothills of Ashland, the image that brought her so much inspiration is prominently juxtaposed from a window that frames the peak of Mount Ashland from Hunt's second-floor writer's retreat. This storyteller has found her

home. When Hunt decided to relocate, two different people in her life mentioned Ashland as a potential destination. When she finally made the trip on her own, it took only minutes to realize she was where she needed to be.

"My personality felt good here," says Hunt. "Most of the people that live here appreciate the culture, the arts and are progressive thinkers, plus there are lesbians everywhere!"

Sticky Fingers (Alyson Books, 2007; \$14.95 soft-cover), the first in Hunt's series of Tess Camillo mysteries, was released in May. Hunt's freshman effort introduces us to the semiautobiographical protagonist, Tess Camillo, whose close encounter with an angry reptile under her bed sparks an engaging tale of equal parts murder, sharp dialogue, loss and humor. Camillo and her hasbian, Finnish roomie Lana move through a web of interesting characters and clues, all ending in an ultimate twist. While Hunt and Camillo share hometowns (New Jersey) and some life experiences (breast cancer and a love of good coffee), Hunt doesn't overthink the character. "I have a feel for what she

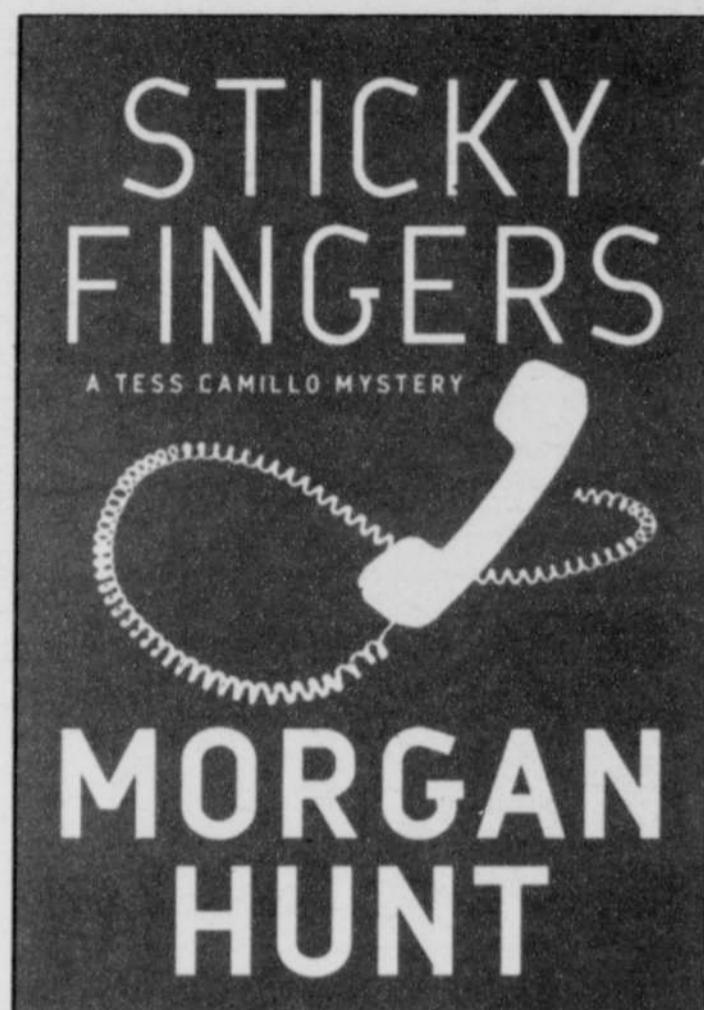
is like; she has a little more New Jersey left in her than I do," says Hunt.

Hunt began her professional creative writing career with mysteries because she loves reading them. "To some extent a mystery is formulaic, and that's OK; you can break into the genre safely, and you don't have to create your own formula your first time out," she says. Hunt sold her first two manuscripts to Alyson Books, while the third is under option.

The second book in the Tess Camillo series, *Fool on the Hill*, is scheduled to be released in spring of 2008, while the third book, *Blinded by the Light*, is due out in 2009.

"I intend my books to be fun, breezy and uplifting," says Hunt. "I don't want readers to struggle, but the content is not dumbed down at all." Cultural, scientific and mathematic references run amok but do not overwhelm the plot or characters.

Before she began writing her series, Hunt laid out three guidelines to which she adheres strongly: No murder will ever be boring, proven by the *Sticky*



While Hunt continues to pick up projects for technical writing and copy editing when her schedule allows, she is also a budding poet, garnering an honorable mention in the Oregon State Poetry Association Contest in 2006. Besides finishing her last book in the Tess Camillo mystery series, Hunt recently sold an article to *Writer's Digest* and is

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Morgan Hunt's writer's retreat window frames the peak of Mount Ashland.

Fingers plot, where the murder weapon is a snake. Her second guideline: Every one of her books will be short and enjoyable, no more than 50,000 words. Lastly, if there is going to be murder and pain, it will not be cheapened, and the loss of life will not be treated in a cavalier fashion; someone is going to feel it.

Hunt doesn't want to define herself by a disease, but she says being a cancer survivor makes her savor life, and she wants to encourage future writers. "Be fully aware of life and new experiences and opportunities," she says. "There is a certain grace that just comes to your life if you are innately a storyteller; you will find what you are looking for and find your venue."

working on a spirituality book.

"Oregon seems like a nurturing place for writers; people take the time to see what's around them," says the prolific writer. "I can only speak for Ashland, though!" 

Northwest fans can catch MORGAN HUNT in person when she begins her book tour in 2008. Meanwhile, she will be appearing 7 p.m. Sept. 13 at Bloomsbury Books, 290 E. Main St. in Ashland. For more information visit the author's award-winning Web site, www.morganhuntbooks.com.

CHELSEA FINE is a southern Oregon freelance writer and photographer.



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