

Author returns to Valley roots in first novel

By Darcy Wallace
IVN Staff Writer

Former Illinois Valley resident Tess Hardwick might have left the Valley, but it seems the Valley never truly left Hardwick.

On Saturday, April 23, Hardwick released her first novel “Riversong”, its setting loosely based on the Illinois Valley.

Her family moved to Selma when she was just five years old. When not playing in the forest or biking up and down neighborhood streets with her brothers, Hardwick was attending the old Selma elementary school.

“This was a great place to grow up,” Hardwick said. “Everybody knew you and people took care of each other. There were no homeless people because somebody took them in. People found a way to help each other out.”

As a child, Hardwick loved school despite being chased around the playground as one of eight girls in a class of about 30. At Lorna Byrne Middle School, she met a favorite teacher, Jack Dwyer. Her own father taught in Valley schools from the 1970s to the early ‘90s.

Upon graduation, she didn’t stick around, but changed pace with college in L.A.

Hardwick said she studied drama at the University of Southern California; though she loved writing scripts and enjoyed acting, the atmosphere in L.A. wasn’t for her.

“I moved to Seattle because I was really homesick for the Northwest,” Hardwick said. “But I enjoyed the larger city and didn’t think I wanted to live anywhere too small. I got a job at a high-tech firm as a receptionist, acting on nights and weekends.”

For several years, Hardwick said she continued moving up through the professional chain, getting promoted and staying involved with theater companies when she could.

In 2000, she wrote her first full-length play called My Lady’s Hand, earning a first place award for new work at the Burien Theater near Seattle. A “voracious reader” in childhood according to her blog, Hardwick only later realized she had a talent for writing. Someday, she hoped to write a novel of her own.

After several years working as a vice president in the human resources field, there was a certain point when she realized it wasn’t the life she wanted.

“I was pretty miserable,” Hardwick said. “I was working full-time and commuting a couple hours a day. I had a little baby and hated being away from her. But when I ended up getting pregnant with my second, I didn’t go back to work.”

Hardwick said her husband and family agreed to uproot themselves from the bigger city and move to Snoqualmie, Wash., to downsize and simplify.

After 20 years

wanting to write a book, Hardwick finally had the chance to do it. She worked on the manuscript while raising her child and made a goal to finish it by her 40th birthday.

“Finally it’s coming true and we’ve worked so hard,” Hardwick said, crediting her husband for his support. “When he got married to me I was a professional and making all this money, and then I decided I need to do this writing thing. It changed everything.”

Hardwick said “Riversong” is loosely based on where she grew up but is more of a general representation of several Southern Oregon small towns. She visits her parents, who still live in Selma, about twice per year.

“We were just there [in February 2011],” she said. “The change for me is that I don’t know anyone anymore. All the young people moved away. I can’t think of anyone I know who still lives there, and it makes me sad to think of it because we loved growing up there.”

Though the scenery resembles Southern Oregon, the plot and characters are Hardwick’s own. She said the premise was an exploration of what might happen when some people decide to reinvent their town.

In the story, the protagonist Lee Tucker finds one morning that her husband has committed suicide, leaving her in debt to a loan shark. All she has is a run-down house of her

mother’s in a Southern Oregon town.

Seeking a chance to start over and bounce back from her hardships, Tucker decides to fix up her mother’s house and also open a new destination restaurant, Riversong.

“Part of the theme is kind of a love letter to these beautiful towns that are dying,” Hardwick said. “I didn’t intend it to be a love story but one character, Tommy, wanted to take over the keyboard.”

In her blog, Hardwick worries at some points on how the novel might affect those she grew up with, or those living in the Valley. Would they be offended by her descriptions? Would they read more into it than she intended?

“I gave [Tucker] a really big problem and she had to figure out how to get out of it,” Hardwick continued. “The town itself is more general, but the description of the landscape and the physical terrain, that’s all Southern Oregon.”

Hardwick now lives in Snoqualmie, Wash., a different small town than those in the Valley but with its own similarities. She walks everywhere; school, the library, the grocery store or the gym. In one of her visits to the grocery store, someone called out to Hardwick, “Oh, you’re the writer!”

“It’s a little like living in Cave Junction again where everybody knew me,” Hardwick said. “We’ve been really happy here.”



(Courtesy photo, Illinois Valley News)

Tess Hardwick’s first novel “Riversong” is loosely based on the Illinois Valley where she graduated from IVHS.

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