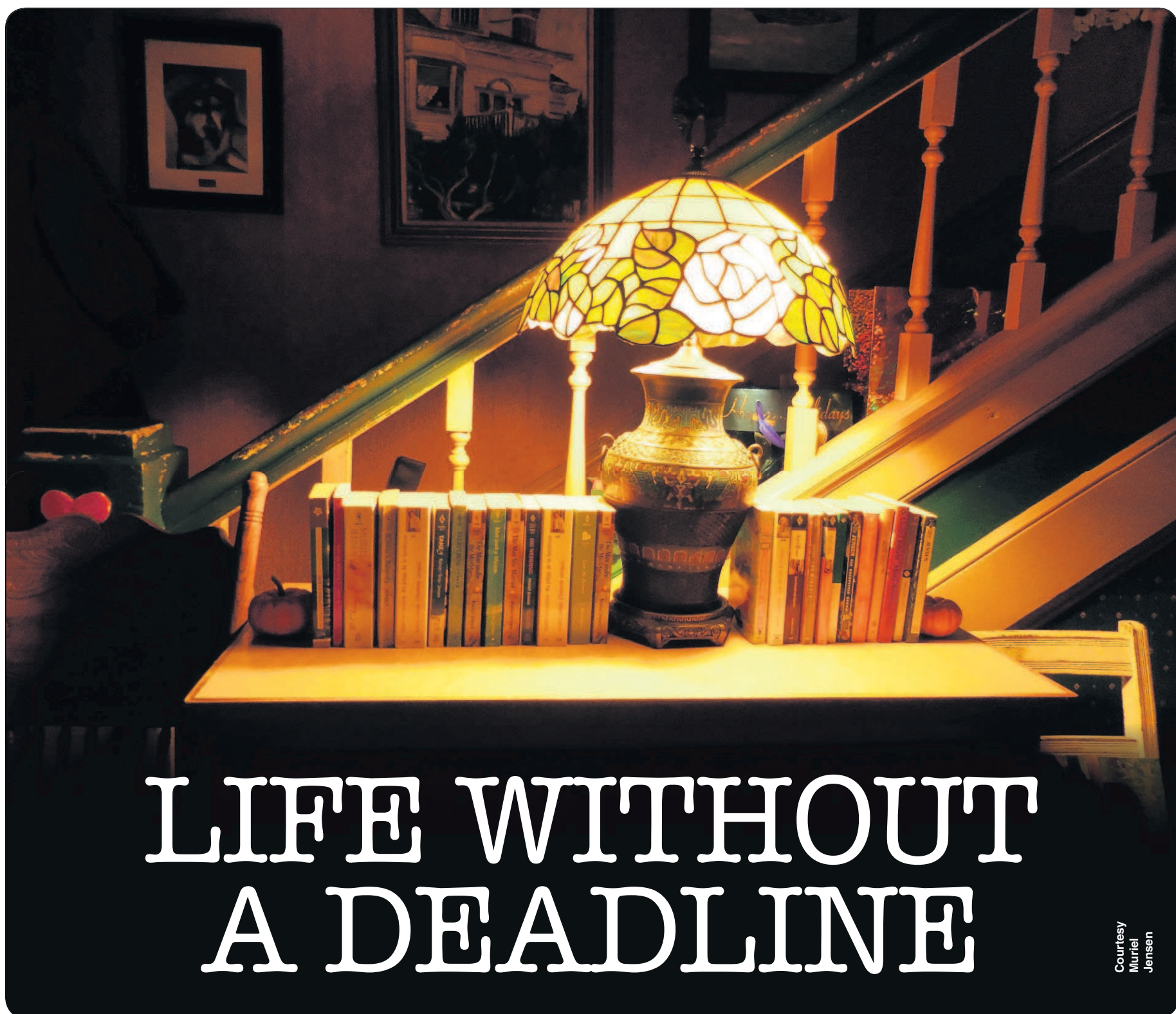


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# WEEKEND BREAK

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## LIFE WITHOUT A DEADLINE

Courtesy  
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Jensen

### An Astoria romance novelist puts down her pen

By **MURIEL JENSEN**  
 For *The Daily Astorian*

I am free. Really. Free!

No, I haven't been imprisoned, although living in the recliner while I healed from knee-replacement surgery was a sort of jail. We had lots of visitors, though, and, thanks to friends and neighbors, more food than Safeway. So, all in all, not a bad few weeks.

When physical therapists started visiting, they were sweet, charming, and encouraging, but when I had to flex and bend a knee that had had rude things done to it, I hated to see them coming. They literally got me to the point of screaming, then patted me on the back, clucked over me and told me firmly, "Now do that ten more times."

I went to the hospital for physical therapy about a month later. Same kind of people. Handsome or cute, kind and caring, but with zero concern for the fact that I was turning purple and writhing on the floor.

As though that wasn't enough torture, I had to rewrite and read page proofs on my August book. I hated that even more than I usually do.

But, I was soon walking the dog, going to town and blown away by the fact that my right knee was no longer a source of pain. Physical Therapy does know what they're doing. I've lost about 5 percent flexibility, but I'm fine with it. I doubt I'll be dancing the Hopak anytime soon, anyway.

And, for the first time since fall of 1983, I'm not on a deadline because I've decided to retire. Writing romance novels has been a wonderful career, but more character-building than ego-building. A real plus was being able to set my own work schedule, or as Jean Auel ("Clan of the Cave Bear") loved to say, "Working for yourself means only that you can decide which 18 hours of the day you want to write."

I've worked long, lazy days on the porch in the summer, long, cozy days in my toasty office in the winter, but for every workday that fit comfortably into my life's schedule, many of them did not.

I've written in doctors' and hospital waiting rooms, with baseball or football games blaring in the next room, or in the middle of the night because it's quiet. I'm not saying that's harder than anyone else's 9-to-5, just that the pressure to get the day's quota done to meet the terms of a contract is there all day long — or all night long.

#### Going off script

And characters seldom perform according to the outline you provide an editor to sell a book.

The best and worst that can happen to a writer is that characters take on a life of their own. Even for an experienced novelist, a certain panic takes over when hero and heroine go off script because it's never certain if you're experiencing creative genius or lack of discipline.

Either way, you could end up having to delete a week's writing to take another run at it when the departure doesn't



Muriel Jensen

work. And that small failure underlies the new effort and challenges your confidence. Creativity is such a fragile thing.

When things go well and you discover connections you didn't realize were there and the plot comes together — never seamlessly, but like an irregular patchwork that somehow makes a pleasing pattern — there are still a hundred little details about the plot to track down. Weirdly, they do their best to hide from you, but a reader somewhere will know that detail and not hesitate to call you out on it.

Before we could look up everything on Google, the detail search required at least a week spent in the Astoria Library. (Belated thanks to Bruce Berney, a former librarian, who always hovered around me to offer assistance.)

Following that is the tedious reading and rereading in search of typos, grammatical errors and stupid mistakes that somehow escaped attention. Such a mistake happened to me with my first book, "Winter's Bounty" — unfortunately, after publication.

I named the small-town setting after Meriwether Lewis's dog, Seaman. Only, in my book, his name is Scannon. That's because, in my diligence to get my facts right, I went to Fort Clatsop. Seaman appears on the company's roster, but the handwriting had a tendency to close the loops on the Es and widen the Ms, so that "Seaman" looked to me like "Scannon." I trusted myself because I'd gone to the source without giving a second thought

to early 19th century penmanship. Aaagghh! Another belated thank-you to the sensitivity of all the knowledgeable students of history in Astoria who knew better and never pointed out my major error.

#### In a rare, wonderful place

In honor of my new freedom, I have a teal streak in my hair. I considered the pros and cons of such a move at my age and was on the fence.

But a dear friend, always eager to provide comfort and support whatever the occasion, said firmly, "Do it!" So I did. I bask in the praise of those who claim to love it, and shrug off the occasional "What were you thinking?!"

Also, in my new freedom, I've begun the great purge of 659 15th St. — two floors and a basement of 800 square feet each. Not an enormous house, but we've been here 41 years, and I've dreamed for so long of having the time to do this.

There is some archaeology involved. In boxes I haven't opened since our first move from L.A. to McMinnville in 1972, I found all kinds of kitchen things we'd received for our wedding. Remember serving platters in olive green and harvest gold? Fondue forks and chip-and-dip bowls? Sword-shaped appetizer picks and a giant drip-style 30-cup coffeemaker? We have them all.

I bought plastic totes for what I'm saving, leaf bags for what I'm throwing away, and cleared a spot to put things I'm saving for some future front-porch sale. In the meantime, I'm in a rare and wonderful place in my life with time to slow down and enjoy the simplicity of every day.

We have a dining room window with a wonderful view of the Columbia River, and I can stop to watch the ships or birds, or see what Greg Newenhof is up to with the Flavel mansion next door, and my conscience isn't saying, "You should be writing." I can walk Claire, a Westie mix with murderous tendencies, and go a few extra blocks because she's having such a good time, and be relaxed about it because I don't have to write ten pages that day. I can sit on the porch with someone else's book instead of my laptop and not worry about how much time I'm taking because it doesn't matter — I'm free!

The period in my life when I was work-obsessed was such an exciting time for me. Now that I have to be home-obsessed, I'm fine with it. I will always be a writer, even if I'm not writing, and nothing seems to turn off the "that-would-make-a-great-story factor," but I love the knowledge that every day is mine.

It's possible this course I've taken will change one day, but for now, I'm hearing music in my head rather than words. It's Louis Armstrong, singing "What a Wonderful World."

*Jensen has written for Harlequin since 1984. She's published 93 books in the American Romance line, Superromance and Harlequin Historicals. She lives in Astoria with her husband, Ron, a Westie mix named Claire, and a pair of Tabby cats. She has three children, nine grandchildren, and the great-grands are still coming.*