

Notbohm's debut novel confronts star-crossed love, mental illness

Portland writer Ellen Notbohm is well-known for her bestselling guides to understanding the needs and potential of people on the autism spectrum, and also for her writings on family history and genealogy.

But with her new book she has turned to full-length fiction for the first time.

"The River by Starlight" started out as another historical research project. Notbohm was mesmerized by a true story she came across about an ill-fated Montana romance.

But after spending more than a decade tracking down leads in more than 40 archives and libraries across a dozen states and provinces, Notbohm realized that, while she had the tantalizing bones of a story, there were still too many unknown pieces for her to write the book as a work of nonfiction.

So she plumbed the scholarship that she'd already amassed and fleshed out details where needed to create this early 20th century story of Analiese Rushton. Annie is a bright young woman whose first marriage shatters when she gives birth to a healthy baby girl, but finds herself afflicted with a severe case of postpartum depression.

Her husband, bewildered and embarrassed, cannot understand his wife's lack of maternal instinct. Not only is she unable to tend to her baby, Annie succumbs to increasingly wild flights of rage and resentment. And in Iowa in 1910, there are no resources to help her cope with the oppression she feels

will crush her.

Eventually her husband files for divorce and sole custody of their daughter, and Annie flees to Montana to try to start a new life on her brother's homestead.



Ellen Notbohm

Once released from the strains of motherhood, she regains her emotional stability, but she still feels plenty of guilt. She has no intention of marrying ever again.

But intentions prove to be no match for chemistry — and sparks fly when she meets Adam Fielding, her brother's business associate.

Within months, these two — "ladyfriend" and "big fella" to each other — tie the knot and, with her brother's blessing, take over the homestead.

This second marriage for Annie is driven by passion

and hard work. She and her husband combine their talents to foster a successful agricultural enterprise.

But when Annie becomes pregnant again — and then again — she seems to be cursed with bad luck, and the bitter emotional and physical tolls of these experiences corrode this marriage, too.

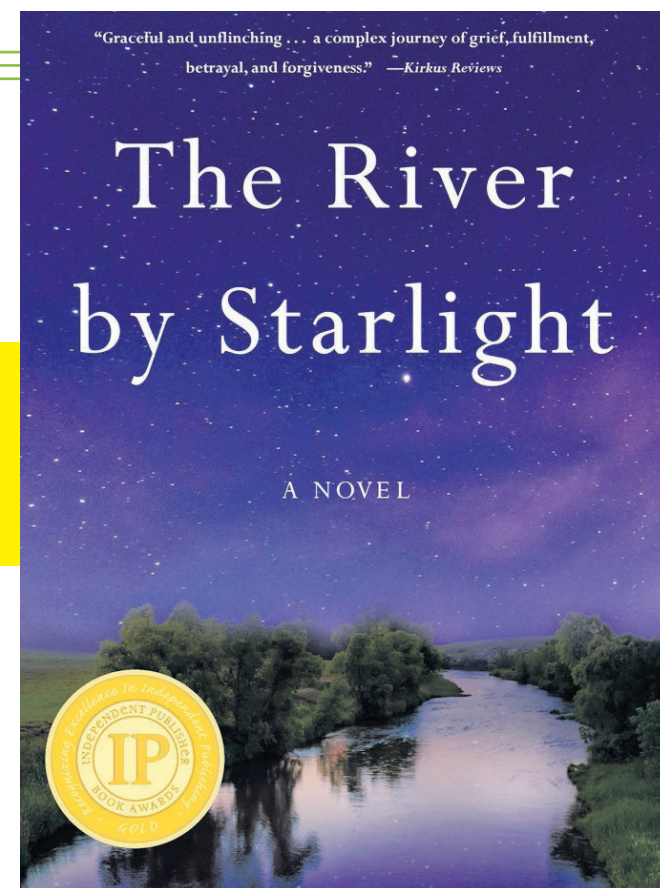
Notbohm writes a richly detailed story, exploring themes that hew closely to the issues she uncovered in her research, and challenging us to empathize with someone whose emotional equilibrium is repeatedly assailed by heartbreaking loss and physical pain. The tale also exposes the limited capacity that society in the early 1900s had for dealing with mental illness, and the stigmas that prevailed.

But Annie is a fiercely determined woman who fights through her own maladies and shortcomings, as well as

"The River by Starlight"
By Ellen Notbohm
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the insufficiencies of the era. "The River by Starlight" is a wrenching tale, but it is not without glimmers of equanimity.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.



PHOTOS COURTESY ELLEN NOTBOHM

The cover of 'The River by Starlight' by Ellen Notbohm

Crossword Answers

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