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Astoria writer sparks with first novel

By **PATRICK WEBB**
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Jennifer Nightingale had a spark. She had always written poetry, and her family's Welsh heritage engendered a deep appreciation of words spoken aloud or sung.

But she wanted to go one step further.

She accomplished that dream this spring by publishing her first full-length novel, "Alberta and the Spark," a coming-of-age story about a teenage girl in the Pacific Northwest.

"It's always been a dream of mine to write a full-blown story," said Nightingale, who lived most of her life in Seattle and moved to Astoria about three years ago.

She attended a writing workshop and open mic sessions, gaining confidence and skills. Another participant was Diana Gulley.

"She would kind of nudge me and read through the rough manuscripts," Nightingale said.

Support has extended beyond publication because — to the great amusement of both

— the novel is on sale at Gulley's Butcher Shop in Astoria.

Nightingale's day job has been working on health plan administration. The opportunity to telecommute led her and husband Holt Moore to move to Astoria.

"We went through that process of thinking, 'Where would you live if you could live anywhere?'"

Her mother had enjoyed Long Beach, Wash., decades earlier and Nightingale pined for Astoria.

"I love it here."

Local setting

Her main character's home village of Oyster Bay affords many similarities with the upper reaches of Washington's Long Beach Peninsula and Willapa Bay.

"As for Oyster Bay, I made up the name," she said. "It's Bay Center, Oysterville and Ray-



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Jennifer Nightingale's Astoria home, as might be expected from an author and voracious reader, is filled with books in cabinets, on shelves and every available surface.

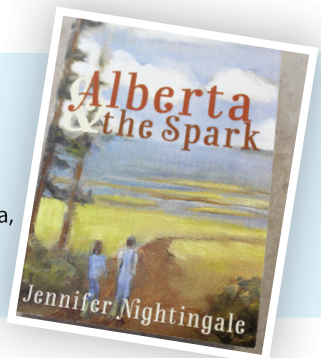
"Alberta & the Spark"

By Jennifer Nightingale

Paperback, \$20

Available at Gulley's Butcher Shop, Astoria,
Cannon Beach Books and

www.nestuccaspitpress.com



mond-South Bend. It's all of those little towns mashed together. That way the town can become a character."

The heroine, 13-year-old Alberta — called Bert — travels over the Megler Bridge, visiting places in Astoria, including Josephson's Smokehouse and the Custard King, all against a backdrop of oyster farming in the 1970s.

"I am so happy when I hear people say that they know the characters and know the places," Nightingale said. "That's a pretty terrific feeling. One lady said she fell in love with Bert,

and that touched my heart deeply."

The coast's blustery, often dangerous weather, is almost a character, too. A scene in which she is

pulled into the surf by an undertow is a reminder of nature's raw power.

The era is a deliberate choice — fast-paced technology is absent.

"I wanted it to be authentic. I don't know the world of social media today. I grew up in that time and I know that world."

Is Alberta autobiographical?

"Everybody seems to think so! I identify a lot with her. I had a sister who was a bully — I climbed

trees to avoid her. Science did fascinate me. Alberta and my characters feel strangely real to me. I have worried about them."

Deceptive tranquility

The "Spark" is Alberta's new friend, Felix, who is a couple of years older and approaches life almost as a science experiment.

Amid deceptive rural tranquil-

ity, danger lurks in the form of racism, led by a cowardly, bullying family.

Their targets are immigrant families of Polish and Vietnamese heritage whose values shine demonstratively brighter than their intolerant American neighbors. All is condoned by a do-nothing sheriff, a character whose dialogue oozes evil.

In retaliation for embracing the immigrants, Alberta is violently attacked by two brothers who cut off her hair.

While others exhort revenge, she and those closest to her confound her attackers by performing acts of kindness for their irascible but wounded father.

"I like to believe that it does not matter if you are in your 70s or 40s, the human condition is still the same," she said. "The things that sink people or keep them buoyant are still the same."

A ferry ride to British Columbia and a private boat return to Bellingham, Wash., form the centerpiece of Alberta's later adventures, allowing her to embrace her extended family's

Canadian links, savor outdoor discoveries and ask questions about her relatives' churchgoing.

"One person took out a chart and followed the route," Nightingale said. "I never dreamed that somebody would do that."


The book is likely to appear on "local author" or "young reader" bookshelves.

It appears suitable for all ages, although parents of younger children might be advised to read it first because of swearing.

Like many authors, Nightingale has mixed feelings when asked what's next.

"A lot of people have given their opinions on what happens to characters."

But a sequel is not necessarily in view, she said.

"I want to keep writing and see what happens." 

'THE THINGS THAT SINK PEOPLE OR KEEP THEM BUOYANT ARE STILL THE SAME.'

— Jennifer Nightingale explaining setting her novel in the 1970s.