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# WEEKEND BREAK

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Peninsula author Jan Bono poses with her newest book release, "Pen Pals."

Photos by Lissa Brewer/The Astorian

## Mysteries abound

Peninsula author pens latest book, switching genres and aiming high

By PATRICK WEBB  
For The Astorian

After writing poetry, newspaper columns, mysteries and now a darker novel, author Jan Bono's latest goal is to draft a screenplay for a Hallmark movie, ideally one with a Christmas theme.

Amid taking online screenwriting courses, the Long Beach, Washington, author recently released her 17th book.

"I don't want to stop creating," Bono said. "I have story ideas from here until I am 99."

Bono was a teacher for 30 years, most of that time spent working with the Ocean Beach School District on the Long Beach Peninsula.

She retired in 2006, and in the 16 years that followed she produced 17 books, as well as a beloved series of humor columns for the Chinook Observer. Her first published books were compilations of columns, poetry and other writing. She then became one of the busiest contributors to the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series.

When she won a Coast Weekend mystery writing contest a decade ago, the support inspired her to write what became the Sylvia Avery Mystery Series — six "cozy mystery" novels set in the thinly disguised peninsula area. "Cozy mysteries" are a genre that may involve murder, but leaves the unsavory material off the page.

However, Bono said she had long hankered for a change of pace, writing in the third person and on a more serious topic.

"Pen Pals" meets both criteria. It is a fictional work about a Lincoln City woman who corresponds with a prison inmate, with almost inevitable consequences when he becomes eligible for parole.

The work is not autobiographical, although Bono recalls many years ago placing an advertisement for potential dating partners in the 1990s and



LEFT: Mystery author and retired educator Jan Bono keeps stacks of her published books in the back of the car she calls the "bookmobile." RIGHT: "Pen pals" is Jan Bono's 17th published book. BELOW: Author Jan Bono is inspired by resting along the Astoria Riverwalk, brewing up ideas from the water's edge.



*'ANYBODY WHO THINKS THAT WRITING FICTION IS EASY HASN'T A CLUE ABOUT HOW MUCH RESEARCH GOES INTO IT.'*

Jan Bono | author

received multiple responses, including one from a prisoner.

She said she focused on other projects until the time was right. "I was not ready to write a suspenseful, gripping novel," she said. "Everyone has an opus. I had looked forward to writing that book for 28 years."

Novel writers vary in style from what Bono teases are "pantsers" (who write "by the seats of their pants") and "plotters." For example, Lee Child, who writes the modern "Reacher" series about a retired military policeman's cross-country adventures, apparently

starts with a blank slate and claims he does not know where it will lead.

In contrast, Agatha Christie, who penned 80 murder novels, used to plot back from the denouement, first adding rich detail and then red herrings. Bono's preferred strategy is closer to the latter, first typing 20 to 40 single-spaced page summaries then fleshing out the details.

But she admitted that at one point that the novel had four options for an ending. There was research involved, too, involving police procedures and prison rules. "Anybody who thinks that writing fiction is easy hasn't a clue about how



much research goes into it," she said. "It has to be accurate — and that's hard."

In between coursework and writing, Bono is busy pursuing her books. Her sales strategy is hands-on. She appears in person at bazaars and other North Coast events. "For some local buyers, she can deliver. "They are always in my trunk," she said. "If you see me in the grocery store, you can buy a book."

Patrick Webb is a former managing editor of The Astorian.