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Former Tulsan Nancy Pearl adds 'novelist' to her accomplishments with 'George & Lizzie'

By James D. Watts Jr. Tulsa World Sep 17, 2017 ☐ 0



Book Event

Nancy Pearl

The former Tulsan will be the guest of BookSmart Tulsa at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Central Library, Fourth Street and Denver Avenue.

She will talk about her new novel, "George & Lizzie," as well as books in general.

The event is free and open to the public.



George and Lizzie, the two people whose lives are chronicled in Nancy Pearl's first novel, just happened to show up in the former Tulsan's bedroom one night.

"I was trying to fall asleep, and these two characters just came to me," Pearl said. "I knew their names. I knew where they first met, which was in a bowling alley, and the circumstances of that meeting. They just took up residence in my life."

Over the next few years, Pearl would find herself thinking more and more about these two people, fleshing out their life stories, imagining their reactions to things Pearl encountered in her own daily life.

"They were very real to me as characters," she said. "But for the longest time, I never wrote any of these things down. It was just a series of vignettes or little stories I would tell myself."

But then, Pearl has lived her life surrounded by stories. The former Tulsa resident, who earned a master's degree in history from Oklahoma State University, is perhaps best known for her series of "Book Lust" volumes, in which Pearl, who worked for the Tulsa City-County Library and the Seattle Public Library for many years, shared her recommendations for the next thing one should read.

She continues to appear regularly on Public Radio Tulsa's "Studio Tulsa" program to discuss new books, and she hosts a monthly TV show in her current hometown of Seattle — "Book Lust with Nancy Pearl."

Pearl's image as "America's Librarian" was cemented in 2003, when she served as the model for the "Librarian Action Figure"

created by toy company Accoutrements.

But adding “novelist” to her list of accomplishments wasn’t something she considered — until she encountered a situation that can plague even the most voracious and wide-ranging readers.

“It’s something I think a lot of readers can identify with, when you can’t find the book you need to read at the time you need to read it,” Pearl said. “It happens to me periodically — and when a particular reading lull happened, I thought, ‘Why can’t I just write down these little stories about these two characters? I’ve enjoyed thinking about them, and I know I would enjoy reading about them.’”

“So that’s how the book started,” Pearl said. “I just started putting down everything I enjoy in a book — quirky characters, humor, poetry, football. By that time, I had the whole story in my head.”

That story centers around Lizzie Bultmann, the daughter of two well-known psychologists so focused on their careers that they view the daughter they did not plan on having more as a test subject than offspring, and George Goldrosen, the son of a Tulsa orthodontist.

They meet in college, when Lizzie’s errant toss of a bowling ball ruins what had been shaping up to be the best game George had ever played.

Pearl uses an episodic structure, moving back and forth in time to lay out the couple’s lives, including Lizzie’s exploits in “the Great Game” — her determination during her senior year of high school to sleep with every member of the football team.

“I’m one of those people who love asking ‘what if,’ and with these two characters, I could ‘what if’ to my heart’s content,” Pearl said. “What if one character had a horrible childhood and the other had

a great childhood? What if two people who see the world in such opposite ways come together, and how would they stay together?

“I guess I should also say up front that there’s nothing autobiographical about this book,” Pearl said, laughing. “For one thing, I don’t think my high school even had a football team. But that part of Lizzie’s life was there from the start. We all do some stupid things when we’re 17 — Lizzie makes some very bad choices and has to live with that.”

Pearl also did the recording for the audiobook of “George & Lizzie.”

“It just seemed clear to me that the narrator of the book was me, telling this story about these people,” she said. “Reading your book aloud can make you discover some unusual things. For example, I realized I use a lot of words that I have only a vague idea how to pronounce, like Scylla and Charybdis.

“But the other thing was, sometimes I found myself moved — very unexpectedly — by what was happening in the story,” Pearl said. “I would have thought, having been so close to this story for so long, I would be hardened to that, but reading some scenes out loud really got to me. That was a surprise.”

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