

ARTS COMMENTARY

The rich, abundant books of Sena Jeter Naslund

Historical novels bring meaning from past to present



NancySTETSON

nstetson@floridaweekly.com

Too many books these days are the literary equivalent of junk food: Pop Tarts and Twinkies bound between two covers.

For those starving for good writing, Sena Jeter Naslund's novels are a feast.

Like a gourmet chef, she creates succulent sentences, meaty paragraphs, tasty morsels of descriptions sprinkled here and there like unusual flavorings.

Reading one of her books, you delight in Ms. Naslund's word choice and willingly give yourself over to her mastery.

Her most recent book, "Abundance: A Novel of Marie Antoinette," is a reading experience as sensual as the lush gowns and jewels and yes, lavish meals she describes in its pages. You want to read slowly, to savor every word. It is a book that seduces even those who think they don't like historical novels.

"Most of the novels that I loved when I was growing up had been named for individual people," Ms. Naslund says in her honeyed southern accent. "That's kind of an indicator of how the novels are character-centered as well as plot-centered." She rattles off a list: Charles Dickens's "David Copperfield." Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina." Flaubert's "Madame Bovary." George Elliot's "Adam Bede." And Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway."

In her novels, she says, she wants "to make the characters live, and in a way, the characters are perhaps more interesting to hold in the reader's mind than exactly what happened to them."

As the keynote speaker at this year's Sanibel Island Writers Conference, scheduled for Nov. 6-9, Ms. Naslund will speak about her work at BIG Arts (900 Dunlop Road, Sanibel) from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Friday, Nov. 7. The cost is \$5.

Ms. Naslund is writer in residence at the University of Louisville, program director of the Spalding University brief-residency MFA in writing, and the current Kentucky

Poet Laureate. She's also cofounder of The Louisville Review and the Fleur-de-Lis Press.

In her previous novel, "Ahab's Wife," she constructed an entire epic about a woman who is only mentioned briefly in Herman Melville's "Moby Dick."

"'Ahab's Wife' is a novel that I felt was needed in the American literary landscape, because there was no great quest story starring a strong woman character," she says. It took her four years to write.

"In a way I felt that a novel about Marie Antoinette was needed because she had been portrayed so negatively. Part

of this negative portrayal, I think, was that historians, largely male, used her as a kind of scapegoat, someone to blame all their problems on. I thought she was treated unjustly and demonized, partly because she was a foreigner — she was from Austria — and partly because she was a woman."

The queen's reputation for being haughty and unfeeling — and for declaring, "Let them eat cake" when the people were starving — is erroneous. "There's no evidence she ever said it," Ms. Naslund says.

In fact, the reverse is true: Marie Antoinette was known for her graciousness, and she cared greatly about the people she ruled.

"When she became queen, after having been the dauphin, and she met this courtier, whom she'd had a little tiff with, she went up to him and said, 'The queen does not remember the quarrels of the dauphin,'" Ms. Naslund says. "And many people heard her say this. It was in a public situation," she adds. "So we can take that as a genuine indicator of the not just courteous, but gracious and considerate sort of person she was."

Needful things
The author says she tries to write books that "somehow are needed" — either for the sake of women or for the sake of justice, or for the sake of accuracy. Both "Ahab's Wife" and "Abundance" fit into that category.

When she read about Marie Antoinette and how even her critics greatly admired the way she faced her death, Ms. Naslund wondered where the queen had gotten the courage and the sense of self to meet death with such dignity.

"So I wanted to explore this partly for my own benefit," she says. "We're all, as I say, cheerfully looking at the Great Guillotine in the sky. And how does one confront one's own mortality? There were a number of reasons why I was interested in her story."

Ms. Naslund says she was puzzled that Sofia Coppola's 2006 movie, "Marie Antoinette," ended with the royal family being forced to move from Versailles to Paris. "To me, the most interesting part of the story is the last part," after Marie Antoinette leaves Versailles. The known historical plotline helped Ms. Naslund move through her story in "Abundance."

"It wasn't up to me to change the story," she explains. "It was up to me to highlight certain points of it."

But she had to tell the whole story. "I could've stopped it before she died. But I find the endgame of her life, to use a metaphor from chess, the most interesting part of her life."

She divided the book into five acts, structuring her novel the same way a Shakespearean tragedy is structured. "There are five acts in 'Hamlet,' and five acts in 'King Lear,'" she says. "And we all know what's going to happen in the last act of the tragedy: The main characters are going to die."

She wanted her story of Marie Antoinette to have a tragic-like effect in that, when the characters die in Shakespeare, "It's sad, but at the same time, it's somewhat inspiring," she says. "You feel uplifted by watching a great performance of 'Lear' or 'Hamlet,' because in the process of the play, the author has been able to suggest that this is a person whose loss counts."

"I wanted readers to feel that way about Marie Antoinette, just as they might have felt about Hamlet or Lear. In these deaths,

humanity has suffered a genuine loss of someone of great value.

"And when we see a person of great value, it uplifts us all to possibilities for our own character."

The past is present

Ms. Naslund feels that her books, though set in the past, have relevance for today.

"I think we have seen in our own national politics, suspicion of women or suspicion of people who are 'other,' in some way," she says. "Another parallel

I see: in France, the people who had the money were the aristocrats and the church. The aristocrats refused any greater taxation on them, while the poor people were heavily burdened with taxes. Sometimes I think in our own country, the rich and corporations find ways not to bear their fair share of the tax burden.

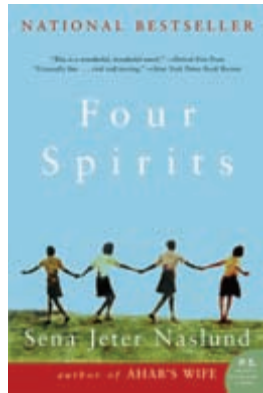
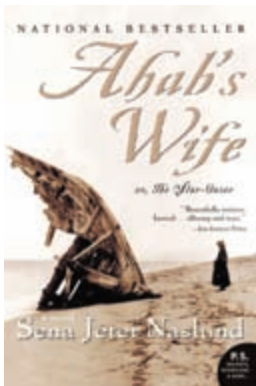
"It made for a revolution in France."

Her novel "Four Spirits" is particularly interesting to read now, Ms. Naslund believes, because the current political situation... "is the fruit of the Civil Rights Movement. That an African-American is a viable candidate for the presidency is possible because of the stance people took in the 1960s," she said just prior to Election Day.

The new novel she's working on, "Adam and Eve," is set in the near future of 2020, though, she hastens to clarify, it's not science fiction. "It's about how we relate to sacred text, including the book of Genesis, obviously," she says. "But also, I count as sacred text the starry sky, and how we read our sense of our place in the universe. And I also consider as another kind of sacred text the prehistoric cave paintings in the south of France, where I visited last summer. They date back, some of them, 36,000 years."

Ms. Naslund looks forward to the conference on Sanibel.

"I love meeting my readers and hearing their comments," she says. "It's always interesting to me to know which of my books they liked and why, and which part of the books especially spoke to them. It's very helpful to me, as I continue to write, to have in mind and to learn from my readers how the books have worked for them." ■



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