

An Interview with Beverly Patt, the Author of HAVEN (Blooming Tree Press, 2009)

Q: Your dedication is to “Roland who didn’t get out and to Juan, who did.” What is the story behind this?

A: Years ago, I taught children who were wards of the state of Illinois. My husband and I were certified foster parents and looking for a child to take in. Roland was one of my students and because he had no one else, he ended up spending a lot of time in our home. When we tried to get Roland as our foster child, we were denied, because Roland was black and we were white. It was heartbreaking for all of us. Juan was another of my students who needed a home. We were told the same thing about him – he couldn’t stay with us because he was Hispanic and we were not. Luckily, we were able to go through the court system instead of the Child Services agency and he was able to stay with us. He is now a very successful computer tech, husband and father.

Q: So Latonya’s story is similar to Roland’s?

A: Yes, but alluding to a more hopeful outcome. As far as I know, Roland lived out his teen years in a group home. It still makes me mad to this day!

Q: Latonya is a very strong character in this story. Why did you decide to write from Rudy’s point of view instead of Latonya’s?

A: Well, my own personal experience was from an outsider’s point of view (with Roland) and I felt that’s who I could relate to the best. When Rudy was mystified concerning the laws of foster placement, that’s how I had felt as well.

Q: So is Rudy you then?

A: Ha! Well, I DO love miniature trains and miniature stuff in general...but I have no yearning to ride an ATV or escape my home! And I am way too much of a rule-follower to do some of the things Rudy did. Maybe I’m actually more like the mom – a worry wart! And I do tend to burn the garlic bread (which, by the way, my son actually named ‘black bread’).

Q: Did you always want to be a writer?

A: Actually, no. First I wanted to be a dog. When I realized that wasn’t going to pan out, I decided on a vet. Then a psychologist. And then a special education teacher, which is what I ended up doing. Funny thing, I wasn’t all that great in English – my strong subjects were math and science. Go figure! But I always loved to read. And that is where I believe all writers start – by being avid readers. It doesn’t matter what you read – novels, comics, nonfiction, cereal boxes (you can learn some pretty darn interesting things on those I’ve discovered) – as long as it interests you. And if something comes along that is so compelling, you feel you’ve just got to share it with others, well, then you’re a writer!

Q: How does your background in teaching affect your writing?

A: Profoundly. Each of my students suffered horrendous, heart-breaking, terrifying ordeals and somehow were still able to come to school, learn and laugh. Don’t get me wrong, some of them were very troubled individuals and probably would be for life. But their capacity to adapt, adjust, survive, and even trust and hope again, has left an indelible mark on my heart. And I think this naturally comes out in the stories I tell.

Q: The ending leaves a few questions unanswered. Do you have a sequel in mind?

A: Somehow, writing a sequel would spoil this story for me, as it's all about hope and possibilities. I can say that my younger son was a tad annoyed that I didn't say exactly what happens and in all fairness, I remember being a young reader, finishing the last page and feeling that same annoyance! Looking back, however, I realized that books that were tied up in a happy bow at the end - the girl gets the dog, the boy wins the science fair, the parents get back together - those stories vanished from my mind as soon as I flipped the last page. The stories with a hopeful (but not spelled-out) ending stayed with me much longer. I'd find myself thinking about the characters from time to time the same way I'd think about old friends - wondering how they were doing, how things turned out for them, etc. If Rudy or Stark or Latonya or the Yellow-Eyed Boy flit through a reader's mind, days or weeks or even years after finishing HAVEN, I'll know I've done my job well.