

FRONTMATTER

PHENOM FATALE

Has an unknown author from B.C. written this summer's biggest blockbuster?



Chevy Stevens

"I'm a nice girl, I don't bite. Ask me anything," says Chevy Stevens.

I want to trust the friendly, first-time author; she seems sincere, even if her real name, Rene Unischewski, is less catchy than the market-ready pseudonym. Yet it's hard to square this genial, unassum-

ing personality with *Still Missing*, Stevens' brutal, often violent, psychological thriller about a kidnapped realtor and what she must endure to survive.

One question that leaps to mind is how Stevens, an unpublished author – and former real estate agent – managed to land a lu-

crative three-book deal with U.S. publisher St. Martin's Press (distributed in Canada by H.B. Fenn and Company). Given that I'm meeting the Vancouver Island-based author on that rarest of occasions – a pre-publication tour, some four months before the July release of her novel – it's obvious that big things are expected from her. *Still Missing*'s initial North American print run is 150,000 copies, and the book has already been sold to 11 other territories.

Stevens relates the story behind her book deal in a matter-of-fact way, as though the path to success is a series of simple steps that anyone can follow. First, develop your story (nine drafts over five years), seek criticism (from your aunt and from online forums), and attend writers' conferences (such as the Surrey International Writers' Conference). In addition, read how-to books on the craft and hire the co-author of your favourite instructional tome (Renni Browne, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*) to critique your work.

Of course, Stevens also required connections to get where she is. "At a certain point, it really is all about contacts," she says. In 2008, Browne placed *Still Missing* in the hands of New York literary agent Mel Berger of William Morris Endeavor Entertainment; within four days, he took Stevens on. Berger placed the book with Jennifer Enderlin, vice-president and associate publisher at St. Martin's, who signed with similar alacrity. Stevens confirms that she approached only one agency and one publishing house, neither of which was Canadian.

On the ask-me-anything side of things, it's impossible to overlook the themes of self-loathing and misogyny that animate *Still Missing*. The book follows a year in the life of abductee Annie O'Sullivan, who is sequestered in a remote cabin with her male kidnapper, whom she secretly calls The Freak. In one of many unnerving moments, the heroine realizes that "I was going to have to help him rape me."

Clearly, Stevens does not pull her pun-

ches. Neither does she flinch when asked about some of the novel's more troubling themes: "No, I don't hate myself. No, I'm not a misogynist. And I am not Annie in any respect, save the real estate connection," she says. "I have never experienced anything she experiences."

In fact, Stevens says, she never set out to write a disturbing book, let alone a violent one. The story was originally going to examine the aftermath of a kidnapping. "My first idea was: What if someone was to not come home?" Stevens says. "What happens to everything that was around that life? What happens to their house, their car, their pet?" The focus shifted from absence to the absentee when, after several months spent mulling over the original premise, Stevens realized that even *she* wanted to know the victim's fate. "Once I decided to follow Annie and put her in those close confines – well, [violence] almost had to happen."

The question also remains as to whether the untested author can live up to all the hype. Enderlin, who says she was drawn to the immediacy and self-awareness of the novel's first-person voice, downplays the pre-pub push, citing "genuine excitement from booksellers and other authors" as a major contributing factor to the big North American marketing plan. Enderlin is referring in part to a boatload of quotable praise from name-brand thriller writers, including Kathy Reichs and Karin Slaughter. Beyond providing glowing blurbs, many of those authors "just started recommending my book to their friends and even their readers," says Stevens.

Suffice it to say that *Still Missing* is an exciting, genuinely disturbing thriller – too literary (not to mention too horrific) to qualify as an "airport" novel, yet too mainstream for CanLit – placing Stevens somewhere between Linwood Barclay and Anne-Marie MacDonald. If the novel is to become the hotcake that St. Martin's is hoping for, though, mainstream thriller readers will have to get on board. Will it be too much for them? "It's not my job to be a censor or to protect people's sensibilities in fiction," says Enderlin, who adds that "the typical airport-thriller reader" is not in her crosshairs.

As our interview wraps, Stevens mentions that she's looking forward to getting home – she misses her dog. The contrast between Stevens' bright exterior and her dark subject matter is still unsettling. But really, isn't that the best possible recommendation for a thriller writer? – Gary Butler

LOCAL BUZZ

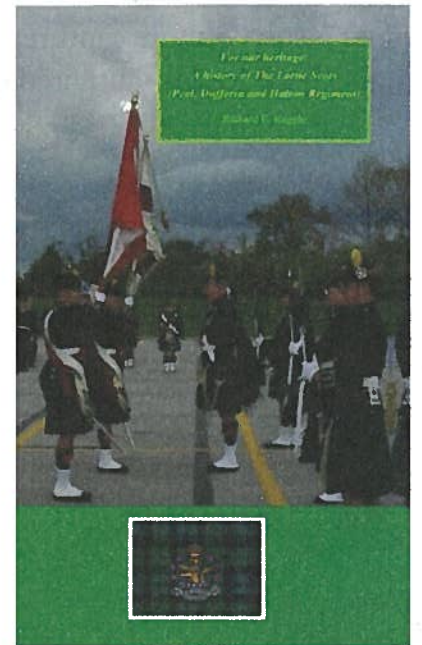
SCOTCH PRIDE

The Freckled Lion in Georgetown, Ontario, may be a children's bookstore, but owner Kate Murray says parents have been keen to pick up one particular book for themselves. Local historian Richard E. Ruggle's *For Our Heritage: A History of the Lorne Scots (Peel, Dufferin and Halton Regiment)* is a retelling, complete with colour photos, of that infantry's major battles in past wars and its efforts in Afghanistan.

Ruggle himself was a chaplain of the regiment for nearly 20 years and is now committee chairman of the Regimental Museum. On top of that, he owns the Shepherd's Crook, a traditional pub in Georgetown built in 1879, which is just down the street from the Freckled Lion.

According to Murray, many of the town's residents are of Scottish ancestry and are eager to read tales of forefathers who went to war with the Lorne Scots. "Word of mouth is sending the book around," she says.

For Our Heritage: A History of the Lorne Scots (Peel, Dufferin and Halton Regiment), Richard E. Ruggle; \$15 pa, The Lorne Scots Regimental Museum, 978097843101, April 2008



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