

Navigating her way to publication

Evanston author Lynn Sloan explores the dissolution of a marriage in her debut novel

BY DONALD LIEBENSON

'Pinciples of Navigation," Evanston resident Lynn Sloan's debut novel, is something of a time capsule. She completed it in 1999, but the novel sat in her desk drawer for more than a decade after her New York agent abruptly quit the business six days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks..

Sloan turned her attention to short fiction. Her stories were published in such journals as *American Literary Review* and *The Literary Review*.

A photographer, she taught at Columbia College Chicago. But three years ago, she was compelled to revisit the novel.

"A lot had changed," Sloan said in a phone interview. "What was contemporary when I wrote it was now locked in a specific historical moment."

That moment was the millennium, when concerns were rife about the computer bug, Y2K. Some kind of virus is infecting the union of Alice, a reporter, and Rolly, an artist and college professor. After three years of trying, she longs to have a baby, while he is feeling increasingly constrained in small-town Indiana, "stuck with the dull and second rate at a backwater liberal arts college." "Principles of Navigation" charts the dissolution of their eight-year marriage.

The book was inspired by a young married couple Sloan observed at an art exhibition.

"They seemed so unlike each other," she said. "The questions in my mind were, what ever brought those two together and would their marriage last? I suspected it wouldn't. I thought about what drives couples — who think they are made for each other — apart. First, of course, is grief, but the other thing is when you come down to the hard ques-



Principles of Navigation

By Lynn Sloan, Fomite, 284 pages, \$15

tion of what really matters (to each spouse). You have to examine that or you may find one day that your mate might have something very different in his or her heart."

The general arc of the published novel is the same, said Sloan, who reshaped her novel at Ragdale, the Lake Forest-based artists' retreat. She did not introduce any new characters. She added but one chapter. What had changed in the intervening years was her style of writing. In particular, she said, she was influenced by one of Elmore Leonard's oft-quoted rules of writing: "Try to leave out all the parts readers skip." She cut 40,000 words.

Sloan began the process of shopping the book to agents, who, she said, offered variations on the theme, "beautifully written but I don't think I can sell it."

After what she called "a crushing num-



Jeff Rosen photo

ber of those," she submitted her work to independent publisher Fomite Press, based in Burlington, Vt.

"Lynn's novel came across my screen, and immediately struck me with the intelligence of the writing, so it went into my READ pile," said Marc Estrin, Fomite Press editor, said in an email. "As I proceeded, its story-intensity grew, as did its insight into both its particular characters and situational issues, and into the general problem of human opacity. It was a natural for Fomite."

And now, Sloan is basking in the "quite wonderful emotional experience" of having her first novel published. She has left teaching to concentrate on her writing and is working on a second book.

With deference to spoilers, "Principles of Navigation" seems poised for a sequel as one of the characters embarks on a new life. But Sloan said she is going to let the book's characters go.

"I took them as far as I wanted," she said. "If readers follow them to the end, they can imagine how they wish the next chapter would be."

Donald Liebenson is a frequent Printers Row Journal contributor.

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