

# ParsippanyLife

## Cameron shares experience with book publishing

(by Lisa Kintish - August 06, 2008)

Michelle Cameron has accomplished what some can only dream of doing; she has published a book with a major publishing house, Pocket Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster. Slated for release next fall, "Shira of Ashkenaz" is set in Europe during the Middle Ages and tells of the lives of a Jewish family through the eyes of Shira, the wife of one of Europe's most prestigious rabbis. Even more interesting, it is based on Cameron's ancestor from the 13th-century, Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenberg.

This not the first foray into the publishing world for Cameron, an employee with the Parsippany-based Interactive Media Associates. Her previous book, "In the Shadow of the Globe," is set during the time of William Shakespeare. *Parsippany Life* interviewed Cameron to learn more about her experiences writing and publishing.

### **PL: What is your writing process like and how do you manage to do it along with family and work?**

**MC:** I'm fortunate that I'm able to tune out so much of the world around me when I write. I remember the days when I used to take a laptop along while my son took karate lessons. But it's difficult to find time when you're raising a family and working 40-plus hours a week.

Then, as I was struggling to find time to complete the first draft of this novel, something amazing happened. I attended the 2006 Poetry & Prose Getaway in Cape May, taking a workshop called "Finishing Your Novel." The workshop leader, young adult novelist Carol Plum-Ucci, challenged all of us: "what's stopping you?" My answer was time, and I enumerated everything I was juggling - two sons in high school, one about to embark on his college search, a full-time job, a part-time teaching position... by the time I was finished, my fellow writers agreed that there was no solution.

But Carol refused to accept that. She looked at me and asked: "How early can you get up?" I went home and set my alarm clock for 4:30 AM. It was hard at first - but got easier as I discovered this spectacular little slice of silent time. No phones ringing, no one yelling or asking me to find something. It was heaven - and my novel just flew.

### **PL: Tell me a little about your job.**

**MC:** I've been at Interactive Media Associates, headquartered in Parsippany, for nearly nine years. I'm fortunate to work in a place where I can expend as much creativity as I do writing the novels. As Creative Director, I work on nearly all of our projects. On any given day, I might be involved in a new ecommerce application for New York City Ballet, a career Web site for C.R. Bard, or a site filled with interactive games and social networking, encouraging teens to eat right and get more exercise for the Goreyb Children's Hospital. We serve a wide array of corporate and non-profit clients, providing strategic consulting, interactive marketing, design and development, and support in the interactive realm.

**PL: Your novels are historical, how much research did you have to do prior to writing?**

**CM:** I approached researching these two books very differently. The first one, about Shakespeare, was researched more than 20 years ago, before the advent of the Internet. I spent two years in libraries, going to museums, and even took a trip to England. Only after that did I sit down and write - not the book that eventually got published - but a young adult novel that never went anywhere.

I had just had my first baby when I ran into obstacles finding an agent or publisher, so I shelved that book and my writing. When my children were older, I began to write poetry because the shorter form meant I could start and finish a complete work in a couple of days. On a whim, I wrote a few poems about Shakespeare at the Globe. Because I knew the history and the characters so well, poems just flowed out of me and started telling their own story. Depending on how you look at it, "In the Shadow of the Globe," published by Lit Pot Press in 2003, took me either 25 years or two years start to finish.

With "Shira of Ashkenaz," I needed a different approach. Rather than investing years in intense research, I spent about 2-3 months familiarizing myself with the period, creating a basic timeline, and figuring out where I could go for answers when I needed them. Then I started writing. I had to chase down specific facts mid-passage, but the fact that the Internet had been invented by this time helped tremendously. For instance, it took me 15 minutes to track down what you'd serve in a 13th-century Jewish wedding feast, rather than the two weeks of library excavation it might have taken before.

**PL: Were you a history major?**

**MC:** English lit major, history minor. I actually wanted to take a double major. But the Latin requirement at my college to qualify for a degree in history defeated me.

**PL: How did you get an agent and a publisher? How does someone break into the world of publishing when it seems a good idea is not enough?**

**MC:** Finding the right agent was key for me. To get an agent to read your work, one of the most important factors is finding best-selling books that are similar to your own - and then describing clearly how your book is different. Because the emphasis is on the bottom line in publishing these days, publishers seem to take fewer risks than in the past. So you have to prove that your book is marketable by identifying other books in your genre that have succeeded, while still showing your work is unique enough to stand out from the pack.

For me, the best models were the successful Rashi's Daughters trilogy by Maggie Anton and The Red Tent, a bestseller by Anita Diamant. Because I described how these books were successfully marketed in my agency query letter, several agents were curious to take a look.

But it still took time. It wasn't until my second agency mailing - I probably contacted about 12 agents in total - that I finally found the right one. There were a number of polite "no thank you's," a number of "almosts" and some agents that didn't even bother to respond. To find my list of agents, I consulted directories, but even more importantly, I browsed my own bookshelves, the libraries, and bookstores for novels in my genre. I checked if the author included an acknowledgement, or I did a Google search for that author + agent.

Once I had secured representation, I followed my agent's suggestions to help the marketability of the novel. Then she began talking to publishers. I was both thrilled and anxious, having heard

tales of woe from several writer friends. They had written wonderful novels, but their agents simply couldn't manage to make the sale. You're absolutely right, these days sometimes a good idea - or a good book - just isn't enough. Your manuscript has to land on the right editor's desk on the right day.

My agent sent the book to some 16 publishers and I collected a lot of rejections - most very flattering, several amusingly contradictory. The offer came just before the Fourth of July. I mailed my first agent queries right after Labor Day, so the entire process took nine months.

"Shira of Ashkenaz" - still a working title - will be published by Pocket Books in the fall of 2009. I'm eager to experience the entire process with a major publisher. "In The Shadow of the Globe" was published by a wonderful small literary house, but Lit Pot Press would be the first to admit it didn't have the marketing or distribution clout of a Simon & Schuster.

*Anyone who would like to follow Cameron through her continued adventures in publishing, can subscribe to her mailing list at [www.michelle-cameron.com](http://www.michelle-cameron.com).*